Unequal Opportunities for Citizenship Learning? Diverse Student Experiences Completing Ontario’s Community Involvement Requirement

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
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Abstract

This thesis examined diverse students’ experiences completing Ontario’s community involvement requirement. An analysis of quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups among 50 current and recently graduated secondary school students from widely contrasting socio-economic settings showed ways in which diverse participants perceived their community involvement activities, the support for community involvement in their schools, and their associated opportunities to develop capacity to make changes toward a more socially just world. Results indicated that low-income participants reported dissimilar experiences from high-income participants, in relation to the support for community involvement provided by school staffs, participants’ direct or distant relationships with service recipients, and their sense of individual and collective agency to effect change. Thus, this study challenges the assumption that all students in Ontario have equal access to the citizenship education learning opportunities embedded in meaningful community involvement activities.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Study Rationale

Both in historical conception and current trend, young people’s opportunities to participate in community involvement activities may be moderated by their socio-economic status. Specifically, privileged students may have disproportionate access to community-based avenues for citizenship learning based on their greater access to resources and social networks. Even in mandated, school-based community involvement programs, where all students are required to complete an equal number of community involvement hours in order to graduate, diverse students’ resulting experiences may not be similar. In particular, low-income students may have limited access to the types of ‘quality’ community involvement placements that research has associated with measures of civic engagement (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Thus, this thesis focused on the role of social class—a powerful factor influencing young people’s civic engagement—in relation to community-based citizenship education such as community involvement.

In this study, I investigated diverse students’ perspectives of their experiences completing the 40-hour community involvement requirement for secondary school graduation in Ontario, Canada. Based on an analysis of quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups among 50 current and recently graduated secondary school students (about half affluent and about half economically marginalized), this thesis describes the ways participants reported their school staff members’ support (or lack thereof) for community involvement activities, participants’ direct or distant
relationships with service recipients, and participants’ sense of their own individual and collective agency to effect social change.

Currently, there is a dearth of Canadian research on community involvement activities as an instance of citizenship education in secondary school contexts. According to Sears (2004), there has been no systematic, large-scale attempt by academic or policy researchers to evaluate the character and consequences of citizenship education in Canada for over four decades. While this sparse literature base provides little precedent for formulating theory about, or understanding current practice of, community involvement activities in the Ontario context, it also signals an opportunity for this study to contribute to the knowledge base.

American author and social activist bell hooks (1994) contends that there exists an “intense silence about the realities of class differences” within academia (p. 177). Young people’s civic identities and learning opportunities may be quite disparate for those differently positioned along the social ladder, because economic disparity is “a social filter and a key mechanism individuals utilise in placing themselves and others” (Reay, 1997b, p. 226). However, in Canadian and United States scholarship on K-12 education, social class analysis has received less attention than either ethnicity or gender (Van Galen, 2002). In particular, some existing research literature questions whether school-based citizenship education programs have diminished or ignored the potential mediating influences of social inequality (Tupper, 2005; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). I see class dynamics as fundamental to analysis of mandated community involvement learning opportunities, and in writing this thesis, I endeavoured to create space for less-advantaged voices within academic research.
When I began working as an educator in marginalized and privileged communities, I began to think more about the role of young peoples’ personal contexts in relation to their active community engagement and broader citizenship education. Through my ongoing conversions with high- and low-income youth, I gradually came to believe that “social class membership locates one in a web of circumstances, relations, biases and achievement expectations that are closely linked with citizenship knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes” (Parker, 2001, p.7). Throughout this thesis, I use the term ‘diverse students’ to refer specifically to participants’ widely contrasting socio-economic statuses. However, I also chose this term to recognize that social class is not the only way in which students are diverse: young people differ on a number of demographic dimensions, all of which may be important to their individual identity formation.

In this thesis, my goal was to investigate how Ontario’s community involvement requirement might (or might not) present opportunities for diverse students to learn about other people within their communities, about wider social problems, and about their own abilities to help facilitate change toward a more socially just world. In addition, I hope this study will inform policy and classroom practice in Ontario, and provide a springboard for future research.

1.2 Research Questions

The primary research question that framed this study was: How did diverse participants interpret their experiences completing Ontario’s community involvement requirement? The sub-questions I explored were:
1) What types of community involvement activities did diverse participants complete to fulfill their mandated community involvement hours? Did these activities involve opportunities for students to directly interact with service recipients?

2) How did participants speak about social problems in relation to their community involvement activities?

3) How did these community involvement experiences compare for students of different socio-economic status?

1.3 Research Expectations

Before attending graduate school, I had not considered that diverse students would not have equitable opportunities for citizenship education, perhaps because I had not experienced marginalization myself or encountered significant impediments locating or completing my own non-mandated community involvement endeavours. However, as I learned more about diverse students’ disparate experiences completing community involvement activities (through my ongoing professional experiences and my exploration of the research literature), my understanding of young peoples’ opportunities for community-based citizenship education required continual adjustment. I now recognize, and wish to highlight in this thesis, that students’ opportunities for citizenship-related learning are not distributed equally among high- and low-income youths (Conover & Searing, 2000; Rubin, 2007). For example, drawing on the IEA Civic Education Study, Kahne and Middaugh (2008) additionally surveyed 2,500 secondary school students in California and found that a school’s socio-economic status determined the availability of school-based civic learning opportunities: low-
income students all received far fewer classroom-based civic learning opportunities. In this study, my broad expectation was that, throughout the survey and focus groups, differences would emerge among participants’ responses, based in part on their socio-economic status.

1.4 Personal Context

I entered secondary school as member of the ‘double cohort year,’ a term that was used to describe the convergence of two graduating secondary school classes during Ontario’s 2002-2003 school year. The ‘double cohort’ was the result of then-Premier Mike Harris’ policy decision to phase out students’ OAC year (Ontario Academic Credit, or grade 13) in favour of a four-year secondary school diploma. This restructuring was one part of a series of secondary school reforms (colloquially referred to as ‘the new curriculum’), which also involved a number of changes to students’ diploma requirements, including the addition of a 40-hour community involvement requirement. I was grouped in the elder half of the ‘double cohort,’ and consequently, I experienced Ontario’s educational reforms from an interesting vantage point: I witnessed the changes unfold during their seminal year, but was not personally affected by the incoming policies.

Initially, I approached the concept of a community involvement requirement for secondary school students with great enthusiasm. When the policy was first announced, I applauded the Ministry of Education’s interest in young peoples’ active engagement, based on my own (largely positive) experiences participating in school councils and community youth organizations. In my view at the time, the 40-hour
community involvement requirement would provide a refreshing modification to the traditionally academic focus of some formal school systems, and serve as a pathway to connect students with the social world beyond their classroom. My interest in young people’s active community engagement remained strong throughout my undergraduate degree (community involvement was the subject of many academic papers, one independent research project, and two co-op placements), so I chose to pursue graduate study in order to further explore Ontario’s community involvement requirement as one instance of community-based citizenship education.

1.5 Thesis Preview

In the pages that follow, I situate this study in existing scholarship within the broad field of citizenship education, in particular, community-based experiential learning activities such as community involvement. Next, I describe my research methodology, including the sources of data (quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups), the participants included and the procedures for their recruitment, as well as the approach to data analysis. The overarching themes with which I categorized and analyzed the data are presented in three analysis chapters: support for community involvement provided by school staff, participants’ direct or distant interactions with service recipients, and participants’ perceived sense of individual and collective agency to effect social change. Finally, I conclude by summarizing the main study findings and their implications. I also present my interpretations of this study’s strengths and limitations, its potential contributions to the field of citizenship education, and areas for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Citizenship Education

International citizenship education discourse makes widespread (at times, even panicked) reference to a ‘crisis’ in citizenship among youth: it commonly describes young citizens as ignorant of basic civic knowledge, alienated from political participation and skeptical of the values of democratic citizenship (Hébert & Sears, 2002). The normative assumption is that civic engagement is a ‘marker of maturity,’ such that civic inactivity is attributed to youth’s neophyte lack of interest, knowledge, or cognitive sophistication (Condor & Gibson, 2007). If adolescent populations are interpreted to have withdrawn from their civic duties (for example, by not voting in elections), these actions (or lack thereof) may be considered an indicator of young people’s indifference or ‘bankrupt sense of citizenship’ (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996).

In response to these fears about young people’s supposedly waning commitment to the community sphere, many educators believe that the school can serve as society’s repair organ, capable of restoring a fragmented society and its detached relationships. The theory that formal education can (and should) support community endeavours is often attributed to the American educational philosopher John Dewey (1907), who urged that the school “shall be made a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons” (p. 27). Based on such an understanding, educators may deploy citizenship education in schools to ‘fix’ the shortcomings of students’ western individualist upbringing by inspiring a commitment to community life. This theory presumes that social problems can be mitigated by imbuing students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to participate in a vibrant democracy.
The mere presence of school-based citizenship education initiatives does not automatically spur students' development of democratic citizenship, and in some instances, these activities may function to impede the goals of social change. Showing that institutional racism in English society was left intact in spite of England's recently adopted citizenship education requirement, Gillborn (2006) argues that such educational programs can be considered 'placebos.' Gillborn shows how policy memorandums may pay lip service to democratic change, yet distract the electorate from acknowledging ongoing social problems, and by consequence, fail to alter the status quo. Thus, citizenship education policies and programming may provide educators with an easy-to-swallow solution—a 'sugar-coated pill'—decorated with flowery idioms but only feigning commitment to systemic improvements. Likewise, Canadian neo-Marxist educator Ken Osborne (2001) views shallow attempts to redress (or deny) societal inequities as simply the 'legitimizing facade' of a dominant politic that is complicit in capitalist marginalization. In this way, citizenship education initiatives, as Canadian scholar Alan Sears (2004) argues, may be stirred more by hype than informed analysis. Thus, the mere existence of citizenship education policies in educational settings may implicitly deny the need for further government intervention, even though underlying social problems remain intact.

There is no consensus regarding either the goals or the processes of achieving democratic citizenship; instead, these goals engender continual debate that shifts with tides of history, culture, social context, and political philosophy (Nelson & Kerr, 2006; Sears, Clarke, & Hughes, 1999). Much of the rhetoric surrounding citizenship education in North America focuses on fostering the personal characteristics presumably needed
to ‘build a better world’ (Wade, 2001). However, researchers do not agree on what facets of knowledge, skill and ability citizens must develop in order to realize this lofty goal (Sears, 2004). Broad strokes cannot be swept across international contexts: notions of citizenship are rooted in precedents, moulded through experience, and nurtured within each socio-political climate. Accordingly, approaches to citizenship education vary considerably between and within countries, as different values, beliefs and behaviours are expected of the ‘good citizen’ within each cultural milieu (Sears, 2004; Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Within-country diversity may be especially pronounced where legislation is decided at provincial or state levels (rather than national or federal), as is the case in Canada, Australia and the United States (Nelson & Kerr, 2006). Additionally, citizenship education in such pluralist nations addresses multiple layers of identity in relation to the local, national, and global contexts (Osler & Starkey, 2003; Sears, 2004).

Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne’s (2004) study entitled “What Kind of Citizen?: The Politics of Educating for Democracy” provides a particularly useful conceptual framework with which to examine educators’ approaches to implementing citizenship education. The authors argue that decisions to implement citizenship education strategies are largely dependent upon the ‘type’ of citizen educators imagine or desire. Westheimer and Kahne labelled these kinds of citizenship ‘personally responsible,’ ‘participatory,’ and ‘justice oriented,’ representing a continuum from individual responsibility for oneself and one’s family, to collective responsibility for community improvement, to democratic engagement in redressing the underlying causes of injustice. Westheimer and Kahne argue that educators’ preferences toward
personally responsible citizenship (based on the politically conservative tradition that emphasizes the citizens’ rights and responsibilities, and prioritizes the development of individual character traits and adoption of pro-social behaviours) are most widespread among contemporary educational policies. For example, Davies et al.’s (1999) questionnaire survey of over 700 teachers in the United Kingdom showed a preference among the majority of these educators for personally responsible citizenship: practitioners most commonly suggested that the path to ‘good citizenship’ was paved with classroom punctuality, esprit de corps, and compliance with institutional regulations. Westheimer and Kahne, on the other hand, view the development of justice oriented citizenship as the most fundamental, though least often pursued, course for citizenship education.

The goals of justice oriented citizenship are comparable to critical pedagogy, as both emphasize action for social change and encourage students to decipher, deliberate and debate established norms and previously held understandings. Often associated with the works of Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire (1970), critical pedagogy deliberately illuminates the historical and socio-political contexts that shape societies, and provides a critique and counter-narrative to essentialist and depoliticized visions of education (McLaren, 1998). By questioning, challenging and resisting the structures that allow social problems to flourish, both critical pedagogy and justice oriented citizenship education urge students to become accountable for their individual conduct as well as for the system in which they participate (McLaren, 1998). However, Freire (1970) argues that, when isolated from action, there is a risk that critical thinking would remain confined to the individual and academic practices of pontificating and
may fail to motivate or inform students to develop a more socially just world. Thus, this thesis explores community involvement as a potential opportunity for diverse students to develop critical and active justice oriented citizenship.

### 2.2 Diverse Students’ Participation in Community Involvement

Community involvement is one example of citizenship education that is experiential and community-based. Burns (1998) broadly defines community involvement (Burns uses the specific term ‘community service’) as: “an activity performed by individuals aimed to benefit another person or organization within the community” (p. 38). Volunteer Canada (2010), a national organization dedicated to the promotion of volunteerism across Canada, states that when community involvement is freely given, it is “…the most fundamental act of citizenship and philanthropy in [Canadian] society” and “an extension of being a good neighbour.” Scholars argue that community involvement activities can decrease young people’s so-called democratic deficit by “advancing reengagement in the community” (Hepburn, 1997, p. 140). Furthermore, student activities involving active engagement in the local community are hypothesized to have a ‘trickle-up’ effect, whereby students’ community involvement is generalized into a greater sense of duty towards the national and global communities (Condor & Gibson, 2007).

Throughout this thesis, I use the term ‘community involvement’ broadly to encompass an array of similar community-based civic endeavours, including volunteering, community service, and other forms of community participation mandated or arranged by school systems as citizenship learning opportunities.
Throughout my readings, community involvement activities (both mandated and voluntary) were described as dual-purposed: benefiting both the individual server as well as the larger community. For example, Volunteer Canada (2010) notes that engaging in community involvement is advantageous for servers, their neighbourhoods, and perhaps wider society: “By caring and contributing to change, volunteers decrease suffering and disparity, while they gain skills, self-esteem and change their lives. People work to improve the lives of their neighbours and, in return, enhance their own.” In tandem, school-based community involvement initiatives may entail multiple beneficiaries, potentially addressing the needs of individual students and beyond.

Previous research has largely sought to identify the positive outcomes of community involvement experiences for the students who volunteer. Conrad and Hedin’s (1989) oft-cited review of community involvement research in K-12 educational settings (including their own US-wide survey of nearly 4,000 students involved in service and other experiential programs) provides evidence that such educational programming is associated with students’ civic-related learning outcomes; notably, self-esteem, appreciation for diversity, responsibility toward the community, political efficacy, understanding of socio-historical contexts, and willingness to volunteer in future. Recent research (conducted almost entirely in the United States context) has further substantiated these positive outcome claims, based on surveys of diverse samples of elementary, secondary school and undergraduate students (Astin & Sax, 1998; Blyth, Saito, & Berkas, 1997; McLennan & Youniss, 2003; Metz, Reinders, & Youniss, 2006; Niemi et al., 2000; Wade & Saxe, 1996; Yates & Youniss, 1999).
Not all of the research literature I reviewed on community involvement initiatives was a testament to students’ profound personal transformation (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Metz, McLennan, & Youniss, 2003). For example, in the United States, Melchior and Bailis (2002) surveyed 2,900 youth participants from three national service programs and did not find a significant impact on participants’ measures of leadership potential, social responsibility or attitudes toward diversity. The authors attribute their null findings to the broad range of service types and associated educational programming that were accepted in these initiatives. Similarly, much of the literature on community involvement initiatives has not collected sufficiently detailed data to assess the relationships between the various types of community involvement programming and civic engagement (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007).

According to Volunteer Canada (2010), “Canada relies on its volunteers” to play a “crucial role” in strengthening the fabric of Canadian society. Similar statements were typical among other community involvement advocacy websites I looked at from Canada and the United States. While these organizations reflect the ‘need’ for volunteerism positively, reliance on citizens to donate their time and energy to helping others could also signal the ongoing maintenance of social inequity and a deficit in government support for reducing social problems. In liberal individualist countries that rely heavily on private philanthropy, community involvement may be pursued in educational settings because it “coexists as well as substitutes for the restricted services that government offers” (Yates & Youniss, 1999, p. 8). Defending the limited presence of community involvement participation among German youth (and particularly in formerly communist East Germany), Hofer (1999) postulates that students’ sense of
assurance in the government safety net makes community involvement seem
unnecessary to them. In a survey of more than 5,600 teenagers from seven countries
(Russia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Sweden, Australia and the United States),
Flanagan et al. (1998) found the lowest levels of volunteerism in Sweden (20% of
youth), a country where citizens enjoy a high standard of living and a strong social
welfare system. Thus, national political context shapes the meaning of, and presumed
necessity for, young peoples’ participation in community involvement activities.

Based on the assumption that all young people and their communities would
benefit from students’ active participation in community endeavours, some Canadian
provinces and US states have mandated completion of community involvement
activities as a condition of secondary school graduation. British Columbia, for example,
has required secondary school students to participate in at least 30 hours of work
experience and/or community involvement as a condition of their ‘Graduate
Transitions Program’ since 1995 (British Colombia Ministry of Education, 2008). The
state of Maryland has required secondary school students to perform 75 hours of
community involvement as a condition of graduation since 1992 (National Service-
Learning Clearinghouse, 2008). This thesis will focus on the 40-hour community
involvement requirement that was adopted as a secondary school graduation
requirement in the province of Ontario in 1999.

Particularly in the United States, ‘service-learning’ is often heralded as the ‘best
practice’ of citizenship education initiatives in schools. This is most recently evidenced
by the expansion of The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, which received final
approval by the House in March, 2009 (Kittredge, 2009). As of 2008, eight states (AR,
CT, DE, IA, MN, OK, RI, WI) provide secondary school credits for students who complete service-learning activities, and Maryland (as previously mentioned) has made service-learning a requirement of graduation (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2008). Unlike other forms of community involvement initiatives, ‘service-learning’ refers to programs whose paramount concern is furthering students’ understanding of social problems through community-based and classroom learning opportunities. In addition to the service experience itself, such programs incorporate preparatory orientation (such as researching the problem or conducting a needs-analysis) and follow-up activities (such as self-assessing the work completed or arranging future programming) directly into classroom curriculum (Niemi, Hepburn, & Chapman, 2000). Additionally, service-learning diverges from other community involvement initiatives in educational settings by incorporating structured reflection (often in the form of journals, short papers and/or discussion groups) as a foundational element of this ‘interdisciplinary instructional strategy’ (Burns, 1998). Thus, a growing theory and research base is beginning to show that community involvement activities may be more effective as a learning opportunity when accompanied by thoughtful and structured classroom activities; such is the case with service-learning activities (Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009).

Throughout my readings of the research literature, when school systems did not incorporate structured preparation or teacher-guided reflection into students’ community involvement activities, it appeared as though a number of assumptions were made about community involvement’s ‘benefit’ and potential as a citizenship education strategy in schools. However, it is possible that community involvement only
arouses positive civic outcomes if undertaken in optimal programming conditions (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005). In addition, I have noticed that many of the positive outcome claims either diminished or ignored the potential influence of social class differences in shaping diverse students’ community involvement experiences.

Much of the published research on community involvement relies on samples of high-income students. This disproportionate focus on privileged students may reflect the reality that participation in ‘free’ activities, such as community involvement, ultimately requires an expenditure of the servers’ time and resources. Kahne and Middaugh’s (2008) two-year study of over 5,000 nationally representative United States secondary school students found that students attending affluent schools (“…those who are college bound, and white”) had greater exposure to civic learning opportunities than less advantaged students (p. 3). In particular, high-income participants in this study were 1.89 times more likely to report having participated in service activities than low-income participants. The 2005 Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement Survey of 3,178 American youth between twelve and eighteen found that adolescents from affluent families were most likely to participate in community involvement activities (Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, 2007). Likewise, in the National Household Education Survey of 4,306 nationally representative secondary school students across the United States, students of European descent who were enrolled in private schools and whose parents had high levels of education were significantly more likely than other demographic groups to have completed either required or voluntary community involvement activities (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007). Statistics Canada’s most recent installation of the “Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and
Participating” surveyed almost 22,000 nationally representative Canadians aged 15 and older and found that individuals in households with an annual income of more than $100,000 were most likely to volunteer (60%), while those with annual incomes of $20,000 or less were least likely to volunteer (31%) (Hall et al., 2006). Thus, an exploration of school-based community involvement programming in Ontario may also highlight divisions among students of disparate socio-economic status.

Traditional notions of community involvement are premised on the assumption that the server is privileged. For example, Barber (1992) notes that prevailing notions of service focus on helping ‘different’ others with ‘their’ problems. This frames community involvement as unidirectional—those who have resources tend to the needs of those who lack resources. Service recipients, on the other hand, may be positioned as ‘clients’ whose desires are devalued and whose resources are ignored (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996; Maybach, 1996; Purpel, 1995; Weah, Simmons, & Hall, 2000). Also, some supporters of school-based community involvement activities argue that opportunities to directly interact with marginalized social groups can help adolescents to ‘step into another’s shoes’ and learn about various people’s contexts and experiences, thereby encouraging youths’ increased empathy, awareness of diversity, and recognition of pre-existing stereotypes (Einfield & Collins, 2008; Emerson, Kimbro, & Yancey, 2002; Hunter & Brisbin, 2000; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Turpin & Elias, 2000). However, this claim that community involvement may ‘open one’s eyes’ to previously unknown existences implies that the server is irreconcilably distanced from those social groups to begin with.
Scholarly criticism of community involvement activities as a citizenship learning opportunity also tend to assume that the providers of service are privileged. For example, Battistoni (1997) and Cipolle (2004) argue that the norm of social responsibility that surrounds students’ community involvement activities is one that stems from a desire to compensate less fortunate ‘others.’ Here, community involvement learning opportunities are viewed as a potential remedy to the consumptive nature of western practices and as an outlet for young people to ‘give back’ to their communities. However, the presumption that servers do (or should) feel a sense of pressure to ‘balance the scales’ of inequity assumes that the server possesses the relative resources to distribute upon less-fortunate populations. Furthermore, Schmidt, Shumow and Kackar (2007) argue that many school-based community involvement initiatives rely exclusively on charitable activities in which students are not directly exposed to marginalized groups. Such disconnected interactions would be unlikely to humanize the nameless and faceless populations being served. When community involvement is framed as a detached beneficence, it implies that the server is capable of distancing themself from the communities they serve and are not already exposed to (or a member of) marginalized groups. Thus, both support for, and criticism of, school-based community involvement activities tend to assume and implicitly reinforce the idea that servers are of relative affluence, living apart from the social groups they are serving.

While most of the literature promoting community involvement in education captures the experiences of middle- and high-income students (because, as discussed above, these students are more likely to volunteer), surveys of low-income youth who
have had opportunities to participate in community involvement initiatives have reported increased democratic attitudes and behaviours (Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, 2007). For example, a national survey of 1,799 principals in the United States showed the principals leading urban, non-white and high-poverty schools were significantly more likely than principals in white and wealthy neighbourhoods to judge community involvement activities as having a ‘very positive’ impact on students’ attendance, school engagement and academic achievement (Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, & Kielsmeier, 2006). Kahne and Sporte’s (2008) study of 4,057 primarily low-income students from 52 secondary schools in Chicago found that undertaking service-learning projects was a highly efficacious means of fostering students’ commitments to civic participation, and such school-based citizenship learning opportunities more than offset the impact of students’ neighbourhood or home contexts (which were deemed to be relatively inattentive to civic and political issues). Thus, there is some research to suggest that participating in community involvement activities may be beneficial for young people, regardless of their socio-economic background.

However, low-income youth may experience significant barriers in locating and completing community involvement activities. Privileged youth who are well-connected (for example, through the business associates of their parents, or via their own participation in extra-curricular clubs) might have greater access to service venues that are not readily available to ‘regular citizens’ (McLellan & Youniss, 2003). Students without strong contacts would be particularly reliant on the school itself to provide entrée to their community involvement opportunities. Otherwise, students’ community involvement initiatives may consist of menial, less-than-educative activities, such as
filing paperwork for secretaries during recess, scoring a high school basketball game, or handing out flyers during a parent-teacher interview night. Such community involvement activities may be viewed as ‘busywork’ and provide opportunities for only superficial amounts of do-gooding (Billig, 2002; Hollis, 2002; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). Although ‘helpful,’ these activities offer students little opportunity to engage with different groups of people, practice critical thinking skills, or build their sense of agency to ‘make a difference’ in the world.

In addition, students from lower income brackets (especially those living in rural areas) may lack the funds to subsidize transportation to and from service locations, and may live in neighbourhoods where safety issues mean that after-school (and especially after-dark) community involvement activities could be dangerous. Such obstacles surfaced in Roker, Player and Coleman’s (1999) 1,165 surveys and 95 interviews with youths at three different schools in the United Kingdom. In the qualitative portion of their study, low-income students living in a rural town in northern England described the barriers brought on by their location and lack of capital: even the small cost of a bus ride became prohibitive of their participation in meaningful community involvement opportunities. Thus, low-income students’ geographic location and shortage of financial resources may impede their opportunities to participate in meaningful community involvement activities.

Teachers and other school staff members may play a central role in the success of community involvement initiatives. A number of studies have shown that adult role models can help to encourage community involvement among youth (Bennet, 2006; Hamilton, 1981; Janoski & Wilson, 1995; Reed & Selbee, 2000; Shumer & Belbas, 1996;
Wilson, 2000). Beyond facilitating reflection activities (which is one function that is frequently mentioned in service-learning research literature), teachers and other school staff members can also connect students to organizational contacts, which may be especially important for low-income youth who may have less access to social networks through their immediate social circles. School staff members may also be involved in initiating and facilitating their students’ community involvement activities: rather than sending students into the community alone, school staff members may work with (or on behalf of) their students to identify and organize a community involvement project. Not least, school staff members’ endorsement of community involvement may provide encouragement and inspiration to student learners as developing citizens. By acting as positive ambassadors for community involvement, school staff members may implicitly and explicitly communicate the importance of this experiential learning opportunity.

2.3 **Ontario’s 40-Hour Community Involvement Requirement**

In September 1999, the Government of Ontario instituted a community involvement requirement, whereby all students who began secondary school from that school year onwards would be required to complete 40 hours of community involvement in order to graduate. Ushered in during the Progressive Conservative era of Premier Mike Harris, the policy language surrounding the community involvement requirement suggested that it was primarily designed to build personal responsibility and to strengthen the qualities assumed to drive individual success: “the requirement will benefit communities, but its primary purpose is to contribute to students’ development” (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999). The rationale for
this community involvement mandate reflects a ‘personally responsible’ citizenship goal, reasoning that social problems could be remedied if citizens were more responsible for both themselves and others. In such policy discourse, students are framed as independent individuals who are responsible for, and capable of, making beneficial contributions within their neighbourhoods and beyond.

Community involvement that is mandated by an authority is not necessarily equivalent (in process or in outcome) to voluntary service that is willingly initiated and intrinsically motivated—debates continue over whether students should be ‘forced’ to volunteer (Conrad & Hedin, 1989; Henderson et al., 2007). Some educators argue that such policies engage the students who would not have volunteered on their own accord (Barber, 1992; Henderson et al., 2007; Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007). This was found to be the case in Ontario: Henderson, Brown, Pancer and Ellis-Hale (2007) found that, on average, students who had recently graduated from an Ontario secondary school did not harbour negative attitudes toward the compulsory nature of the community involvement requirement, and that the program had been successful in mobilizing students who otherwise would not have volunteered. Perhaps paradoxically, while such mandatory community involvement programs reduce student autonomy over this component of their education, they may simultaneously expand opportunity by providing low-income students with a means of entry to the pedagogical avenues that are typically available to relatively privileged students.

The mandatory nature of Ontario’s community involvement requirement provides an opportunity, through this thesis research, to learn about the relationship between social class and community-based citizenship learning opportunities.
However, though mandatory community involvement may require all students to donate equal amounts of their time, it cannot guarantee equal access to meaningful community involvement placements for members of disparate socio-economic backgrounds. Differential access to time, resources and social networks may markedly influence the types of community involvement activities in which low-income students participate.

A second reason why Ontario’s community involvement requirement provides an especially interesting case study is the level of autonomy it affords to students during the selection and completion of community involvement projects. In Ontario schools, students are given the freedom to choose how they will complete their community involvement hours, provided their proposed placement type is listed on the school board’s catalogue of approved activities. Students may choose to complete all 40 hours at one location or to accumulate hours through a smorgasbord of activity. Students may also choose to spread their community involvement activities over the four-year span of secondary school, or they may hurry through the bulk of their requirement in a few weekends. Accounting for students’ community involvement hours runs somewhat on the honour system, as activities are performed outside of school hours without teacher supervision. When students finish their contracts at each community involvement placement, they are required to fill out their school board’s prescribed completion form and provide verifying signatures from placement supervisors. Finally, these forms are submitted to the school’s principal or designate, who decides whether the student has met the requirements, and notes the number of
hours completed on the student’s file (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999).

On the surface, flexible choice would seem to be responsive to individual needs. However, downloading the responsibility for securing community involvement placements onto students may actually exacerbate educational inequalities. Students’ choices, after all, are constrained by their awareness of, and access to, desired volunteer placements as well as other social, cultural, educational and economic factors. For example, in profiling two classroom-based service projects from their wider study of two dozen K-12 teachers, Kahne and Westheimer (1996) found that when students were allowed to ‘choose’ their own service activities, the focus and quality of projects varied enormously. While some students played a vital role within an established organization, others performed superficial busywork or chores for elderly grandparents. Similarly, Vibert and Shields (2003) found that when students in the elementary schools they studied were encouraged to choose curriculum-linked projects in line with their own interests, none used the (theoretically available) opportunity to question official knowledge. For example, students created models of Haida villages without investigating (much less debating) the issues of First Nations land claims. Students make choices from the reservoir of what they believe to be available, and “interrupting discourses of official knowledge is not an option for students who are left alone to choose” (Vibert & Shields, 2003). Thus, all students (perhaps especially those of less privileged background) may benefit from structured and/or teacher-guided community involvement activities, compared with identifying and following their (available) ‘preferences’ alone.
2.4 Conclusion

In the decade since its inception, Ontario’s community involvement requirement apparently has not been subject to any large-scale published evaluation. Many questions remain to be answered. What types of community involvement activities are students in Ontario completing? Do these activities involve opportunities for students to directly interact with service recipients? To what extent are students’ placements related to social problems? How do these experiences differ for students of different socio-economic status?

Based on a critical pedagogy theoretical perspective, I would like to challenge the ‘common sense’ conception that community involvement learning opportunities are always ‘good’ for individuals, communities and wider society. While some evidence (cited above) suggests that some community involvement activities may develop students’ civic-mindedness, mere compliance with completing a few hours of mandated community involvement is, by itself, unlikely to represent or foster active student engagement. Ontario students may complete their community involvement requirements without once interacting with people from other social groups, questioning the status quo, or honestly assessing the purpose or ‘benefit’ of their work.

In keeping with my interest in justice oriented citizenship education, this thesis research is intended to dismantle assumptions and provide several realistic views into actual students’ experiences completing Ontario’s community involvement requirement. This investigation of school-mandated community involvement will dive beneath the surface of the (apparently pro-social) 40-hour community involvement
requirement in order to highlight the considerable tensions involved when educating for citizenship.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Overview

This study employed a mixed methods approach of quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups among a sample of 50 current and recently graduated secondary school students of either high or low socio-economic status. Through focus groups and surveys, I sought to describe how diverse participants interpreted their experiences completing Ontario's community involvement requirement. I also wanted to explore the types of community involvement activities diverse participants completed to fulfill their required community involvement hours, whether these activities involved opportunities for participants to directly interact with service recipients, how participants spoke about social problems in relation to their community involvement activities, and how these community involvement experiences compared for students of disparate socio-economic status.

3.2 Sources of Data

This study employed a mixed methods approach, merging and integrating elements of quantitative and qualitative data collection. Both of these research traditions have distinct advantages: quantitative research allows the researcher to describe the frequency and magnitude of trends, while qualitative research allows the researcher to probe participant's reflections deeply and respond to new developments that arise during the research process itself (Creswell, 2008). Furthermore, Green, Caracelli and Graham (1989) report that merging different research instruments enhances the consistency of findings through the triangulation of data, and clarifies the
results of one method with the use of another. I chose to pursue a mixed methods approach because I wanted to combine the strengths of two research approaches to help me understand the complex picture of diverse participants’ community involvement experiences.

Mixed methods have been used successfully in previous studies of community involvement. For example, when Reams and Twale (2008) sought to uncover the factors that facilitated or hindered the implementation of service-learning into the curriculum of a small, Midwestern college in the United States, the authors described their use of mixed methods to have provided them with ‘serendipitous’ findings. In isolation, the data Reams and Twale collected through document analysis, Likert scale surveys and semi-structured interviews told inconsistent stories. In the document analysis, the college’s mission strongly supported community involvement. In the surveys, college administrators reported that they were supportive of service-learning practices. However, in the interviews, faculty members (those charged with implementing such strategies) were predominantly unsure of what service-learning even was. Reams and Twale reflected that, had they not employed a variety of research methods, the dissonance that emerged between the college’s official communication, the administrators, and the faculty members might have been overlooked. Thus, mixed methods may enrich academic inquiry with complexity and depth by multiplying the angles from which the researcher approaches their investigation.

In this study, the purpose of the individual paper and pencil survey was to prime participants for the focus group discussions by drawing detailed recollections of participants’ community involvement activities to the forefront. Also, the survey was
used to gather comparable data (in a confidential manner) from each participant. The survey primarily sought to learn about 1) participant demographics, 2) the types of community involvement activities that participants completed to fulfil their 40-hour requirement, and 3) whether participants had encountered opportunities to directly interact with service recipients during their community involvement experiences.

Survey questions (see Appendix D) were pre-tested among a small sample of current secondary school students with whom I had professional relationships, as well as vetted by the research design consultant at the University of Toronto.

In my earliest conception of this study, I had proposed undertaking one-on-one interviews with a small number of participants to learn about their experiences completing community involvement activities. However, my exploration of the research literature reminded me that group discussion can be a powerful way to elicit thinking and verbal responses that might not arise through one-way questioning. Also, because students in Ontario are not required to (and may not have had the opportunity to) formally reflect on their community involvement activities in their classes, I came to believe that conducting semi-structured focus groups could provide a venue for participants to share and reflect upon their experiences, perhaps for the first time. Thus, in choosing to conduct semi-structured focus groups, I wanted my strategy for inquiry to be a reciprocally beneficial learning opportunity for both myself and the participants.

Focus groups are an effective research strategy because they elicit information from several individuals in one data-collection session (Creswell, 2008). Drawing critically on their own experiences conducting focus groups among student union
groups in the United Kingdom, Parker and Tritter (2006) argue that focus groups should be distinguished from ‘group interviews,’ which tend to involve a number of one-way conversations between the researcher and participants. Focus groups, on the other hand, explicitly rely on participant interaction as an integral part of the research process. In focus groups, participants have the opportunity to evaluate several viewpoints, and the interactive nature of these discussions may encourage new insights to unfold. Focus groups profit from what Carey (1994) calls ‘group effect’: participants may make connections that may not have surfaced without the interaction that occurs within a group. When participants are stimulated by each other’s ideas, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) refer to this as “a kind of ‘chaining’ or ‘cascading’ effect; talk links to, or tumbles out of, the topics and expressions preceding it” (p. 182). Thus, focus groups may serve an educative function by encouraging participants to articulate their own attitudes and opinions, while also providing a platform to further inform (and perhaps modify) these perceptions in light of discussions with their peers.

The purpose of the focus groups was to learn about 1) participants’ interpretations of their distant or direct interactions with service recipients, 2) participants’ sense of their own civic agency, and 3) participants’ perceptions of the wider social problems they may (or may not) have encountered during their community involvement activities. However, I also chose to conduct focus groups in a semi-structured fashion because this technique would allow me as the researcher, as well as the participants, the flexibility to elaborate on a topic beyond the scope of the research questions. The focus group questions are provided in Appendix E.
3.3 Data Collection Process

Data collection took place on ten separate occasions at mutually convenient times and locations, as negotiated between myself and the participants. All participants signed participant consent forms (Appendix B) before engaging in the survey or focus group portion of this study. In addition, participants under the age of 18 were required to provide a consent form signed by a parent or guardian (Appendix C). Before beginning the data-collection session, I reaffirmed notions of confidentiality. For transcription purposes, I audio-recorded the focus groups with the permission of research participants. In order to aid the transcription process, I asked participants to state a name (real or otherwise) at the beginning of the discussion, so that I could attribute specific names to specific voices. Participants were reminded that they were not bound to the research project and that there would be no negative consequences as a result of non-participation or withdrawal from the study. While participants were encouraged to speak openly and to take turns making contributions, participants were also asked to refrain from answering any question that made them feel uncomfortable. None of the study participants chose to withdraw their data.

Each data-collection session had between one and nine participants in attendance. All but two of the focus groups I conducted were considered ‘optimal size’ according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002) (who advocate six to twelve participants) and Creswell (2008) (who suggests four to six participants). While four individuals were scheduled to participate in Focus Group 7, only one participant was present at the data-collection site. Also, during Focus Group 8, two interested individuals arrived at the
conclusion of the data-collection session and the decision was made to run a separate focus group discussion (Focus Group 9).

Upon obtaining consent, I began the data-collection session. Participants spent approximately ten minutes individually completing the anonymous survey. Immediately following, participants were invited to take part in the focus group discussion session, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants who completed the survey and focus group portions of the study were thanked with a $10 gift certificate for use at a large coffee chain.

3.4 Sampling Criteria

This study sought to elucidate diverse students’ experiences completing Ontario’s community involvement requirement. As such, the primary criterion for participation was necessarily that interested individuals had taken part in Ontario’s community involvement requirement as a condition of their graduation. In order to fulfill this condition, candidates for study participation must have begun attending an Ontario secondary school from September, 1999 and onwards.

A second criterion was that potential participants be at least 16 years of age. Participants over the age of 16 were thought to be more likely to have completed some (or all) of their required community involvement hours, thus providing an increased breadth of experience from which to draw upon during data collection. Participants in the final sample reported a considerable range in the length of community involvement hours they had performed: some participants had not completed a single community involvement hour, while others reported that they had completed hundreds. In this
study, participants’ ages ranged from 16-24, thus representing the entire span of the 40-hour requirement’s history; from the seminal class of ‘double cohort’ graduates to currently enrolled secondary school students.

Finally, I sampled purposively to involve participants with widely contrasting socio-economic statuses. Participants’ socio-economic status was not a ‘criterion’ per se (participants were not explicitly asked to disclose their socio-economic background), however, I made inferences about participants’ socio-economic status, and grouped them accordingly (as high- or low-income) based on known demographics of participants’ geographic location as well as the typical populations served by the schools and organizations through which I contacted them.

I choose to pursue a sample with widely contrasting socio-economic statuses in line with my personal interest in privilege and access to civic-related educational opportunities. My goal was to draw some comparison between diverse students’ experiences completing community involvement activities. In addition, existing research on community involvement activities tends to highlight the experiences of middle to upper class students (who are typically more involved in community involvement activities, as discussed in the literature review), thus, I endeavoured to showcase a more diverse range of student experiences in my own work.

I originally sought a sample of 20-25 individuals, including roughly equal numbers of high- and low-income participants. I believed this sample size would provide a feasible amount of data to analyse, and include adequate feedback on aspects of students’ community involvement experiences. I proposed conducting four separate
data-collection sessions, two with participants identified as low-income, and two with participants identified as high-income. Each data-collection session was to include five or six participants.

3.5 Sampling Method

To locate my sample, I targeted independent (private) secondary schools, alternative secondary schools in priority neighbourhoods, and youth-oriented community organizations, whose catchment populations included the disparate socio-economic demographics of interest. I chose not pursue research within the public school system because I thought I could more easily access groups of students with this distinctive demographic profile outside of the ‘mainstream’ system.

With the exception of scholarship students, enrolment in Canadian independent schools is limited to those students whose families are sufficiently wealthy to cover the costs associated with a private education (Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995). For example, the three independent schools that I visited during this study had an average annual tuition and boarding fee of $36,156 CAD. Thus, a sample of independent school students can be assumed to represent an upper echelon of affluence. Conversely, the two alternative schools that I visited during this study were located in urban ‘priority neighbourhoods’ that have concentrated levels of poverty, and consequently, have received targeted government and charitable funding. Many of the students attending these alternative schools were young adults who had returned to complete secondary school credits after a hiatus from the formal education system.
I chose a snowball sampling method because, having a professional background in youth development, I had gathered a strong personal network of ‘gatekeepers’ who would be willing and able to lead me to other potential participants. Creswell (2008) defines gatekeepers as “individuals who have an official or unofficial role at the site, provide entrance to a site, help researchers locate people, and assist in the identification of places to study” (p. 640). To begin the snowball, I first approached personal contacts known to me through previous work and voluntary associations. These contacts included community organizations and award programs providing targeted programming for either high- or low-income adolescents. These community organizations and award programs granted me access to a wider group of educators via their e-mail LISTSERV. In addition, having worked in both the alternative and independent school sectors as an educator, I also contacted colleagues whom I knew had access to potential participants bearing the demographics of interest. These contacts were extended a written invitation to participate in the study via e-mail (Appendix A) and were requested to forward the information to potential participants. The written invitation included detailed information about the goals of the project and the criteria for participant inclusion. I informed all organizational contacts that the sample would be confidential and that I would not be able to confirm whether recommended participants had agreed to participate or not.

In the original invitation to participate, potential participants were offered their choice of a predetermined data-collection session, scheduled to take place at the University of Toronto. Potential participants in the high- and low-income samples were each provided two dates to choose from, totalling four data-collection sessions. I
included the caveat that, should a potential participant be unable to attend one of the prescribed sessions, I was willing to accommodate with a mutually convenient time and location. This latter option (of tailoring specific dates and locations) was chosen in every instance.

I had expected potential study participants to sign up individually for one of four data-collection sessions, and therefore, it was assumed that participants would have been strangers among other participants attending the same session. However, in every instance, my organizational contacts took an interest in the research project and offered to gather a group of young adults to participate, as well as to host the data-collection session on their own (school or other) premises. Thus, the final focus groups included small assemblies of peers sharing a common unifying factor (enrolment in the same school, award program, voluntary group, or community organization).

In the end, 50 volunteer participants were recruited, including 26 high-income participants and 24 low-income participants. This sample was double the size that had been originally proposed. The snowball sampling method gained considerable momentum, perhaps having ‘struck a chord’ (as one teacher told me during an informal conversation) with educators and organizational contacts interested in improving the community involvement requirement. I decided to extend the sample and conduct ten data-collection sessions, five among high-income participants and five among low-income participants. The abundance of eager participants far outweighed my singular resources, and I was forced to decline additional requests for data-collection sessions. While I found it tempting to pursue a larger sample, I chose to close the study when I reached 50 participants in order to keep the data analysis portion feasible for the
parameters of a master’s thesis. The final sample was closely balanced for socio-economic background, gender distribution, and presence of visible minorities (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Gender distribution</th>
<th>Number of visible minorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>26 female, 24 male</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total high-income</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17 female, 9 male</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total low-income</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9 female, 15 male</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.6 Participants

This study consisted of 50 participants across ten data-collection sessions. All participants were current or recently graduated secondary school students drawn from a large, metropolitan area in Southern Ontario. Detailed information regarding the characteristics of individual data-collection groups can be found in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

*Characteristics of Data Collection Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Income grouping</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Additional characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early leavers of the public school system, students required to complete court-mandated service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Income Level</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>High-Income</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Current university students, alumni of overseas volunteer programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>High-Income</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Independent school students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>High-Income</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Independent school students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
<td>Female and Male</td>
<td>Adults returning to the alternative school system, living within a priority neighbourhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>High-Income</td>
<td>Female and Male</td>
<td>Current university students, members of a prestigious community organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>High-Income</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Independent school student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early-leavers of post-secondary institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Low-Income and High-Income</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early-leaver of post-secondary institution/Current university student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Adults returning to the alternative school system, living within a priority neighbourhood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Focus Group 1 consisted of five adult males, three of whom were early school leavers and two of whom were required to complete additional community involvement hours as a condition of their sentencing through the criminal justice system. This was a peer group assembled by a former colleague of mine who has worked as a teacher and consultant in the public school system for the past three decades.

Focus Group 2 consisted of six current university students who had recently participated in an organized international volunteer excursion (traveling to either Africa or South America), both requiring a personal financial expense of $2,000-$3,000 CAD. This group was assembled through two colleagues known to me through two separate community organizations. One of these colleagues had facilitated the volunteer excursion to South America and the other colleague had attended the volunteer excursion to Africa as a participant.

Focus Group 3 consisted of nine students attending an all-girls independent school, located in an affluent suburb of a large, urban city. I was contacted by a teacher at this institution who expressed interest in providing a sample of high-income participants after receiving the recruitment letter through a LISTSERV e-mail.

Focus Group 4 consisted of four students attending an all-boys independent school, located in an affluent suburb of a large, urban city. I was contacted by a teacher at this institution who expressed interest in providing a sample of high-income participants after receiving the recruitment letter through a LISTSERV e-mail.
Focus Group 5 consisted of eight adult males and females attending an alternative school located within a priority neighbourhood of a large, urban city. These participants were returning to complete secondary school credits after a hiatus from the formal school system. I was contacted by a teacher at this institution who expressed interest in providing a sample of low-income participants after receiving the recruitment letter through a LISTSERV e-mail.

Focus Group 6 consisted of five current university students who were all members of a prestigious award program as well as a community organization focused on volunteerism. In order to participate in this community organization, participants were required to pay an annual fee of $600 CAD. I was contacted by a leader within this community organization who expressed interest in providing a sample of high-income participants after receiving the recruitment letter through a LISTSERV e-mail.

Focus Group 7 (interview) consisted of one male student attending a co-educational independent school, located in an affluent suburb of a large, urban city. I was contacted by a teacher at this institution who expressed interest in providing a sample of high-income participants after receiving the recruitment letter through a LISTSERV e-mail. Although four participants were scheduled to take part in this session, only one participant arrived at the data-collection site. I decided to proceed with a single-person interview.

Focus Group 8 consisted of four male adults, most of whom were early-leavers of post-secondary education. This group was assembled through a colleague who was
also an early-leaver of post-secondary school and familiar with the demographics of this group.

Focus Group 9 took place one hour after the conclusion of Focus Group 8. The two young males in this session both intended to participate in Focus Group 8, but were scheduled for shifts at their respective workplaces and were therefore unable to join their peers for the discussion. Somewhat impromptu, both of these participants arrived at the data-collection site just as Focus Group 8 had concluded. It was mutually decided that I would stay to accommodate a separate session. This was the only focus group in which one of the members was identified as low-income while the other was identified as high-income.

Focus Group 10 consisted of six adult females attending an alternative school located within a priority neighbourhood of a large, urban city. These participants were returning to complete secondary school credits after a hiatus from the formal school system. I was contacted by a teacher at this institution who expressed interest in providing a sample of low-income participants after receiving the recruitment letter through a LISTSERV e-mail.

To maintain confidentiality, participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms. In addition, the analysis of data has been stripped of identifying information such as references to individual cities, schools or community organizations.

### 3.7 Data Analysis

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe the researcher (and specifically, the qualitative researcher) as a ‘bricoleur,’ or quilt maker, to invoke the interpretive
experience of assembling various pieces of data together into a cohesive whole. Like a quilter, the researcher “...stitches, edits, and puts slices of reality together” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). As I fastened together my own ‘patchwork’ of research, my personal biases were inevitably woven into the placement and presentation of the data. After all, “no method, no matter how clearly it is represented in a Handbook, can free researchers from their preconceptions or deliver them an incontestable truth” (Wallace & Louden, 1997, p. 321). As researcher, I had the authority to interpret the data and accord it weight based on my own theories and priorities. For example, I was interested in social class as a lens for interpreting diverse students’ experiences, and as such, did not adopt a gendered or racialized approach to the analysis of this data. While I recognize that each participant’s identity is formed of many intersecting identities, and that these factors may be significant in my data, they are nonetheless not the focus of my analyses.

To begin the data analysis, quantitative survey data was inputted into a spreadsheet, coded, and descriptively analyzed for frequency of occurrence and measures of central tendency (means). Next, I grouped survey data by high- and low-income samples and conducted a separate analysis to determine differences between group responses. Next, my analysis of focus group transcripts and qualitative comments on surveys consisted of my developing a general sense of the data, manually organizing and coding the data for themes (chunking), and then synthesizing these codes into the three overarching themes that later became analysis chapters. A total of 144 pages of single-spaced text were generated from ten focus groups. I first analyzed transcriptions from each focus group individually, and then compared and contrasted
participants’ responses across high- and low-income groups to explore the ways in which the two sub-groups reflected similarly or differently upon the various themes. While I had developed some analytic categories prior to conducting the research (based on my research questions and review of literature), I was also open to emergent themes. For example, I had not anticipated the various roles school staff members might (or might not) play in supporting participants’ community involvement experiences to emerge so strongly within the data. This analysis was also an ongoing process, beginning at the time of data collection and continuing through my several readings of transcriptions, during which I evolved several new understandings and thematic categories.

After conducting ten data-collection sessions, I found a considerable echo among participants’ responses. While each focus group I conducted contributed uniquely to my analysis, the primary coding that emerged was consistent throughout all of the data-collection sessions. While this data is not ‘representative’ or ‘generalizable’ to all students in Ontario, it does suggest that there was some overlap in this study within subgroups’ interpretations of their experiences completing Ontario’s community involvement requirement.

3.8 Reflections on Method

I feel deeply indebted to the participants in this study for their candour during the focus group discussions. Recently, a colleague who was familiar with my findings expressed his surprise that the study participants had so openly expressed their attitudes and opinions (occasionally riddled with expletives) regarding their
experiences completing Ontario’s community involvement requirement. Admittedly, I had also been caught off-guard. Because the sample was self-selecting, I had assumed that the majority of participants would have chosen to participate because they had experienced mainly meaningful community involvement activities, and would contribute largely complimentary commentary. Additionally, the focus group portion of this study necessarily involved a degree of ‘public’ dialogue, in that participant identities were known (in peer groups, sometimes intimately) to other participants. Thus, I had expected a number of participants’ responses to conform to social desirability biases. Although the focus group questions were not intended to be overly probing, I anticipated participant responses to be somewhat guarded in relation to the survey data, which was collected privately. However, many study participants chose to voice both laudatory and critical remarks toward their own community involvement activities as well as the 40-hour requirement in general, and seemed genuinely concerned with the future direction of the program. In hindsight, shifting the focus group sessions from discussions among groups of individuals to discussions among groups of peers may have provided a ‘comfort zone’ in which participants were willing to share openly about their experiences.

3.9 Conclusion

In this study, 50 volunteer participants were recruited purposively to reflect demographic differences (either high- or low-income background) within participants’ experiences completing Ontario’s 40-hour community involvement requirement. All participants were current or recently graduated secondary school students living in a large, metropolitan area in Southern Ontario. The use of both quantitative surveys and
qualitative focus groups allowed me to compare multiple perspectives and gain insight into participants’ perceptions of their experiences completing Ontario’s community involvement requirement with particular relation to participants’ socio-economic status.
Chapter 4: Introduction to Analysis Chapters

4.1 Overview

Through quantitative and qualitative methods, I investigated diverse students’ perceptions of their experiences completing Ontario’s community involvement requirement. The following chapters result from surveys and focus groups according to three broad analytical themes: support for community involvement provided by school staff, participants’ direct or distant interactions with service recipients, and participants’ perceived sense of individual and collective agency to effect social change.

Collectively, these analysis chapters seek to answer planned and emergent research questions. The primary research question that framed this study was: how did diverse participants interpret their experiences completing Ontario’s community involvement requirement? The sub-questions I explored were:

1) What types of community involvement activities did diverse participants complete to fulfill their mandated community involvement hours? Did these activities involve opportunities for students to directly interact with service recipients?

2) How did participants speak about social problems in relation to their community involvement activities?

3) How did these community involvement experiences compare for students of different socio-economic status?
In addition, the first analysis chapter will describe an emergent research question: what roles did school staff members play (if any) in supporting diverse participants’ community involvement activities?

4.2 Types and Locations of Participants’ Community Involvement Activities

As a necessary context for the chapters that follow, an overview of participants’ community involvement activities is provided in Table 4.1. Based on the survey data, I categorized participants’ community involvement activities according to seven types: peer mentorship, assisting a community organization, one-time events, physical labour, fundraising, administration and self-initiated projects. I asked participants to list all of the community involvement activities they had completed in fulfillment of their hours, hence, some participants checked more than one type of activity, and consequently, totals in each column exceed 100%. Table 4.1 is organized in descending order of the overall prevalence of reported community involvement activities among the entire sample, and divided to show the differences between high- and low-income participants. In this study, high-income participants most frequently reported participating in peer mentorship activities (69%) and one-time events (65%). Low-income participants most frequently reported participating in peer mentorship (38%) and assisting a community organization (38%).

This survey data shows that high-income participants completed a more diverse range of community involvement activities than low-income participants. Despite having roughly equal sized samples of high- and low-income participants, high-income participants reported having had more community involvement experience in every
category except one. High-income participants more frequently reported peer mentorship, one-time events, physical labour, fundraising and self-initiated projects than low-income participants. Low-income participants more often reported having completed administrative tasks than high-income participants. High- and low-income participants reported assisting community organizations at equal frequency.

Table 4.1

*Types of Community Involvement Activities Completed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of community involvement</th>
<th>Mentions among high-income participants</th>
<th>Mentions among low-income participants</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer mentorship</td>
<td>18 (69%)</td>
<td>9 (38%)</td>
<td>Assisting an elementary school teacher; tutoring; teaching a special skill (music, sports, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting a community organization</td>
<td>10 (38%)</td>
<td>9 (38%)</td>
<td>Preparing meals for people with disabilities; visiting with senior citizens; sorting canned goods at a food bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-time events</td>
<td>17 (65%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>Staffing a booth during a school-run event; performing in a concert band at a community festival; participating in a charity walk-a-thon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Low-income</td>
<td>High-income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical labour</strong></td>
<td>8 (31%)</td>
<td>Low-income participants: building a deck for a neighbour; shovelling the driveway for a family member; performing yard work for a community member; cleaning chairs at a local church</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
<td>High-income participants: restoring cabins at a summer camp; cleaning up a local river; planting trees; constructing a school during an overseas volunteer excursion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fundraising</strong></td>
<td>8 (31%)</td>
<td>Canvassing the neighbourhood for donations; selling daffodils for charity; wrapping gifts at the shopping mall in exchange for a donation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administration</strong></td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
<td>Assisting a school secretary; filing paperwork at a medical office; taking inventory of a coach’s athletic equipment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 (29%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-initiated projects</strong></td>
<td>5 (19%)</td>
<td>Organizing an anti-poverty campaign; participating in a student-run ‘community involvement council’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the survey, I found considerable overlap between high- and low-income participants’ reported examples of community involvement activities within each ‘type,’
with the exception of one category. When high- and low-income participants gave examples of physical labour, there appeared to be little similarity between the activities each subgroup reported completing. High-income participants reported examples such as restoring cabins at a summer camp, cleaning up a local river, planting trees, or constructing a school during an overseas volunteer excursion. These tasks appeared to be largely communal activities aimed toward the wider goals of environmental sustainability or the improvement of educational facilities. In contrast, low-income participants reported examples such as building a deck for a neighbour, shovelling the driveway for a family member, performing yard work for a community member, or cleaning chairs at a local church. These tasks appeared to be independently completed and served chore-like functions. Thus, in Table 4.1, I have separated high- and low-income participants’ physical labour examples to reflect the discrepancy between the community involvement activities these different groups reported.

In this study, 28 participants (56%) viewed their community involvement activities as having addressed social problems at least to some extent. High-income participants were more likely to report having addressed a social problem (77%) than low-income participants (42%). The 56% of study participants who believed that they had addressed a social problem during their community involvement hours were asked to identify that social problem. This survey question was open-ended, and therefore, study participants would have interpreted the term ‘social problem’ subjectively. In descending order of prevalence, participants identified the social problems they had encountered as: poverty (16 mentions), the environment (eight mentions), mistreatment of the elderly (six mentions), equality (six mentions), healthcare/disease...
(three mentions), access to education (two mentions), violence (two mentions), and sexual abuse (one mention). The duration or depth to which study participants had explored these social problems during their community involvement activities was not addressed on the survey.

A summary of the locations of participants’ community involvement activities is presented in Table 4.2. I categorized the community involvement locations reported on the survey under ten headings: non-profit organization, school, public institution, church, summer camp, local community centre, international service trip, family/friends/neighbours, sports team and for-profit business. Again, I asked participants to list all of the locations where they had completed community involvement activities: some participants reported multiple locations, bringing totals in each column above 100%. Table 4.2 is organized in descending order of the overall frequency with which each type of community involvement location was reported among the entire sample, and divided to show the differences between the locations listed by high- and low-income participants. In this study, high-income participants most frequently reported completing community involvement activities at non-profit organizations (88%) and their school (77%). Low-income participants most frequently reported completing their community involvement activities at school (33%), non-profit organizations (29%), and local community centres (29%).
Table 4.2

Locations of Community Involvement Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Mentions among high-income participants</th>
<th>Mentions among low-income participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit organization*</td>
<td>23 (88%)</td>
<td>7 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>20 (77%)</td>
<td>8 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public institution*</td>
<td>9 (35%)</td>
<td>3 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>4 (15%)</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer camp</td>
<td>6 (23%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local community centre</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>7 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International service trip</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/friends/neighbours</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports team</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For-profit business</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. ‘Non-profit organization’ refers to community organizations (YMCA, The Lion’s Club), youth organizations (Royal Canadian Air Cadets, Scouts Canada) or charitable organizations (Terry Fox Run, Heart and Stroke Foundation). ‘Public institution’ refers to cities, libraries, or hospitals.

This survey data shows that high-income participants completed community involvement activities at a greater variety of locations than low-income participants. High-income participants completed community involvement activities at non-profit organizations, schools, public institutions, summer camps, and sports teams more frequently than low-income participants. Low-income participants completed their community involvement hours at local community centres, for-profit businesses (their part-time employer in all instances) or worked for family, friends or neighbours more often than high-income participants.
Taken together, the survey data suggest that, on average, high- and low-income participants completed different types of community involvement activities at different types of locations. In particular, high-income participants reported a much wider breadth of community involvement experiences. For example, one high-income participant reported having completed four different types of community involvement activities at three different locations. Study participants’ differing types and locations of community involvement experiences form the context for their reflections, reported in the subsequent analysis chapters.

4.3 Analysis Chapters Preview

The goal of the following analysis chapters is primarily to report the ways diverse participants described their varied experiences completing Ontario’s 40-hour community involvement requirement. While this study design does not support broad or predictive generalizations, my results with the 50 participants in this study show that high- and low-income participants differed in the ways they spoke about virtually every aspect of their experiences completing the Ontario community involvement requirement, including the perceived level of school staff support they received, their opportunities to directly interact with service recipients, and the ways they envisioned their individual and communal agency to effect social change.

Each participant is identified by an assigned pseudonym. To identify participants’ contextual information, I use the coding ‘FG’ to refer to participants’ focus group number, and ‘HI’ or ‘LI’ to refer to whether that focus group was high-income or low-income (based on participants’ geographic location and the catchment populations
of the schools and organizations I visited). During the focus groups, not all participants chose to answer every question. Thus, when I report that one-third or one-quarter made an explicit mention of something, this reflected far more prominence than the statistic may suggest. The findings reported in the following analysis chapters are those that were articulated strongly among participants, with voiced disagreements or exceptions noted. I also tried to incorporate participants’ body language and silences into my impressions.

Combining the focus group and survey data, this study is able to illuminate some of the ways in which Ontario’s community involvement requirement was experienced in practice by 50 diverse young people, and assesses the potential implications of these findings for participants’ citizenship learning.

Chapter 5: Support for Community Involvement Provided by School Staff. The first analysis chapter reports the ways diverse participants described the roles (if any) of school staff members in relation to their community involvement activities.

Chapter 6: Participants’ Direct or Distant Interactions with Service Recipients. The second analysis chapter reports the ways diverse participants described their opportunities to directly or distantly interact with service recipients during the completion of community involvement activities.

Chapter 7: Participants’ Perceived Sense of Individual and Collective Agency to Effect Change. The third analysis chapter reports the ways diverse participants described their sense of agency to ‘make a difference’ individually and work to eliminate social problems collectively through their community involvement activities.
The order of these chapters was chosen to move in rough chronological order through participants’ experiences locating, completing, and reflecting on their community involvement activities. For example, participants’ support from school staff members was often described as having been provided in advance of the community involvement activity itself, whereas participants’ perceived sense of individual and collective agency to effect social change was largely described as personal reflections in hindsight of completed community involvement activities.
Chapter 5: Support for Community Involvement Provided by School Staff

5.1 Introduction

In the United States, there is an extensive literature base attesting to the importance of social bonding between a young person and one or more adults (Dryfoos, 1998). According to Sandler (2001), social support from an adult mentor is fundamental during the secondary school years because these relationships are associated with adolescents’ opportunities to develop self-esteem, coping skills, and sense of personal competence. Zirkel (2002) found that middle school students in the United States who had at least one race- and gender-matched role model displayed higher academic performance, listed more achievement-oriented goals, projected more about their futures, and held adults in higher esteem than students without such role models. Yancey, Siegel and McDaniel (2002) found that adolescents who personally knew an adult role model demonstrated greater academic performance, stronger ethnic identity and higher self-esteem than adolescents with either no role model or a symbolic role model (such as a celebrity). Finally, one of the most widely reported predictors of a young person’s psychological resilience—functioning ‘healthfully’ in the face of many stressors—is a relationship with a caring, pro-social adult (Hill, Soriano, Chen, & LaFromboise, 1995). Thus, sustained positive encounters with an adult mentor may positively impact a young person on a number of dimensions.

Even though schools are the venues where young people spend the majority of their daytime hours, the potential influence of adult mentorship on citizenship-related learning has not been well documented. A few studies have addressed the impact of families, friends and community networks on adolescent volunteer behaviour. For
example, McLennon and Youniss’ (2003) study of 783 students from two private, Catholic secondary schools in Washington, DC found that the best predictor of a young person’s level of volunteering was whether another family member also volunteered. Jeffrey Bennett’s (2006) doctoral thesis researched 1,741 graduating seniors from 18 Midwestern United States secondary schools about their experiences completing an internship program, and found that forms of social support (being encouraged, having a mentor, and receiving feedback from school staff and worksite supervisors) enhanced these students’ occupational and citizenship engagement orientations beyond the influence of the programmatic components of the internship itself. It is not yet known what influence adult mentorship might have on specific citizenship education pedagogies; namely, programs in which students’ community involvement participation is mandated.

The literature I reviewed provided little information on the specific roles of school staff members in supporting students’ community involvement experiences. I use the term ‘school staff members’ to encompass teachers, guidance counsellors, and ancillary staff such as community involvement coordinators. Due to this sparsity in the literature, I had not expected the importance of school staff members’ roles to emerge as such a strong finding in my study. My original research questions did not address students’ potential support systems, nor did my survey or focus group questions probe participants’ relationships with the adults in their schools. However, it turns out that I had greatly underestimated the influence of school staff members’ support on participants’ community involvement experiences.
In this study, participants described the presence or absence of school staff members’ support as an important factor mediating the entire process of finding and completing community involvement hours. Participants’ perceived level of mentorship from the staff members at their schools contrasted starkly between the two socio-economic subgroups. High-income participants most often described their school staff members as positive role models, and reported receiving ample support in identifying placements and partnering to complete their community involvement hours. In contrast, most low-income participants reported receiving virtually no guidance in locating a community involvement placement and saw this lack of support as an indication of school staff members’ wider lack of concern for their civic engagement. Thus, this chapter seeks to address an emergent research question: probing the various ways in which some school staff members did (or did not) provide support to participants’ community involvement processes, and the impact of the absence of such support as perceived by some participants.

Through the individual responses of both high- and low-income participants, I came to recognize that school staff members were identified as serving (or not serving) four main functions in supporting participants’ community involvement efforts: providing access to social networks and untangling the logistical elements of finding community involvement placements; initiating and facilitating participants’ community involvement projects within or outside school property; guiding participants’ reflections on their community involvement experiences; and serving as role models who encouraged participants’ community involvement efforts. This chapter will focus on each of these types of adult support.
5.2 **Staff Role #1: Providing Contacts and Logistical Support**

Under Ontario Ministry of Education provisions, individual schools (and school Principals in particular) are only mandated to inform students about the community involvement requirement by way of an itemized publication in the school calendar (see Policy Memorandum No. 124a: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/124a.html). Individual schools are *not* required to allocate staff members to help identify, set-up, or guide students’ reflections on their community involvement activities. In this study, high- and low-income participants spoke differently about the extent to which their school staff members provided contacts and logistical support. For example, in the low-income sample, none of the participants made reference to receiving an orientation through any official avenue in their schools. Conversely, in the high-income sample, participants consistently detailed scenarios in which their school staff members had gone out of their way to provide students with information about community involvement opportunities. Consequently, high-income participants typically perceived having had a myriad of readily available community involvement options to pursue, while low-income participants described having encountered difficulties in locating opportunities of interest.

In all of the high-income focus groups I conducted, participants said that their schools had taken it upon themselves to share information about, and connect students with, a variety of community involvement opportunities. In some instances, this school staff involvement was fairly minimal: Sarah (FG2, HI), Kristina (FG2, HI), and Abner (FG9, HI) noted that their respective public schools had provided them with lists of opportunities where they could potentially complete their required hours. Suzanne
(FG2, HI) reported that her secondary school had organized a ‘volunteer fair’ in which
informational booths in the school foyer highlighted possible community organizations
where students could choose to work. These participants spoke positively about being
provided access to tangible examples of possible community involvement placements.
Thus, schools that organized avenues for information dissemination appeared to help
build some high-income participants’ repertoires of options for completing their
community involvement hours.

High-income participants in every focus group I conducted at independent
institutions described their schools as having provided even more abundant and varied
resources to support students’ community involvement hours. In fact, three high-
income participants in separate focus groups confided that they had often felt
overwhelmed by the constant flood of opportunities made available to them. For
example, Camille (FG3, HI) described the daunting daily experience of logging into her
school e-mail account: “Literally, every day on our e-mail system, [the teachers write]
‘Volunteers needed! Volunteers needed! Are you sure you don’t have anything to do
today? Because we need volunteers!’” According to Camille, her school staff members
drew on a wealth of social networks to generate community involvement opportunities
for their students: “We have so many teachers who just know so many people…” Given
this access to school staff members’ wealth of social networks, it seemed “impossible”
(Jonah, FG7, HI) for a high-income participant to not complete at least 40 hours of
community involvement.

Secondary school students’ unequal access to social networks is mediated, in
part, by their relationships with adults. These relational resources may be understood
as ‘social capital,’ which is described by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (1983, p. 249). Similarly, in his oft-quoted book *Bowling Alone* (2000), American political scientist Robert Putnam notes that:

...the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value...Social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them...‘Social capital’ calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations (p. 18).

Privileged students gain social capital by virtue of their connectedness with other privileged individuals. Furthermore, the advantages of social capital tend to be cyclical and mutually reinforcing: privileged students have greater access to social capital, and greater access to social capital helps to maintain privilege.

In addition to linking students with community involvement opportunities, high-income participants also appeared to benefit from logistical support provided by their schools. Logistical support reported in high-income focus groups included transporting students to and from events, assigning teacher supervision of activities, providing students with money for meals and snacks while on site, and allocating classroom periods to students’ completion of community involvement hours. For example, Jonah (FG7, HI) noted that his school arranged transportation to community involvement activities when needed:
If it’s a large group, there’s a [school-owned] van...or a bus if it’s a really big event that we are going to. And then, one time, I did a shift just by myself going to one place, and [my school] arranged a taxi for me, and they paid for it.

This provision of logistical support suggested a strong level of institutional support for community involvement activities in some high-income schools. Furthermore, such support, when available, may ameliorate obstacles that students otherwise might encounter in completing their community involvement requirements.

In light of the generous school staff support they described, it is not surprising that high-income students, when asked about any barriers they might have experienced in completing community involvement hours, did not describe confronting any significant challenges. Aside from a murmur or two over the “hassle” of verification paperwork, Cassidy (FG6, HI) was typical in noting that:

I can’t think of any barriers that I encountered because my school emphasized community involvement a lot, and so they actually provided a lot of ideas on where to do community involvement hours...Come to think about it, I did a lot of community involvement at school.

Gareth (FG6, HI) concurred: “Being at an independent school as well, I think it was pretty easy to find opportunities, because our school pretty much made sure we had opportunities...” Often, high-income participants described the process of locating community involvement activities, not as something that they had gone out of their way to find and complete, but rather, as a wellspring of opportunities that had been perpetually available.
Whereas high-income participants typically spoke about their school staff members going “over the top” (Sasha, FG3, HI) in their attempts to facilitate community involvement activities, about one-third of low-income participants could not even recall having received any initial information about the community involvement requirement from their schools. Samantha (FG5, LI), in trying to remember when she had first learned about the community involvement requirement, said: “I don’t even know when they tell you you need to do community involvement hours. I guess in grade 9, right? They hand you a piece of paper or something? I have no idea.” Similarly, Anthony (FG8, LI) only recalled seeing a “little thing on my report card” reminding him of the hours he had left to complete. None of the low-income participants mentioned a significant school effort to disseminate orienting information about requirement protocol; instead, low-income participants tended to describe school-wide silences regarding the community involvement program and its elements.

No low-income participant mentioned that their school staff members had helped them to make contact with community organizations. Given this perceived absence of orienting information, about half of the low-income participants described feeling as though they did not know where to begin the process of locating community involvement placements. Chris (FG1, LI) professed a common complaint among low-income focus groups: “I didn’t really know where to go. There wasn’t much information...I just had to stumble upon [a placement] myself.” Indeed, most low-income participants expressed feeling as though they had been stranded with no models of success or sense of what community involvement was supposed to accomplish.
None of the low-income participants mentioned receiving logistical support for community involvement hours from their school staffs. For example, Trevor (FG8, LI) described the likelihood of his school organizing transportation to a community involvement event as an almost-laughable improbability: “It’s not like you could have, through the school, gotten on a bus with some other kids who wanted to do their volunteer work and get taken to a location.” Trevor’s comment sits in stark contrast to Jonah’s (FG7, HI) above description of a school-crested van, on standby whenever students required transportation to off-campus community involvement events. Thus, low-income participants’ access to community involvement placements would have been constrained by personal barriers involving logistical coordination, as low-income schools were not described as assisting to arrange the details of these activities.

No low-income participants said they had completed what they considered their ‘dream’ or ‘ideal’ community involvement placement. Apparently, while the placement possibilities had been theoretically broad, low-income participants’ actually available ‘choices’ were limited by barriers such as lack of transportation, time, and social networks. For example, after listening to some of her peers describe meaningful placements at local community centres, Samantha (FG5, LI) reflected that:

I’m from [a low-income community], and people I know go to the [recreation] centre and wash windows, or shit like that...I guess in [other communities] there are more community resources for people...because in [my community] there’s not very many agencies...[and] that’s a good reason why I wasn’t doing [my community involvement hours], right? Because I don’t want to wash windows. But I’d love to go out in the community and help people.
Here, Samantha did not appear to believe that she could choose her community involvement placement based on unfettered personal preferences, but rather, out of the small repertoire of activities she had heard of her peers completing. Thus, without the benefit of school staff members’ social networks to build upon, many of the low-income participants appeared to feel as though they had not had personal connections to draw on for meeting community involvement requirements.

A few low-income participants appeared to disregard the possibility that their school staff members could have been potential resources for seeking community involvement placements. For example, Lance (FG5, LI) said he had not even considered approaching a school staff member to locate community involvement openings: “A teacher might not really know too much about that. I think [you need to] go to your nearest community centre.” Thus, low-income participants in this study did not appear to envision their school staff members as reservoirs of social capital, or did not know how to access this resource (given the lack of staffing allocation to this graduation requirement).

There was a strong sentiment expressed in every low-income focus group that individual schools ‘should’ be made responsible for providing students with a variety of options for completing their community involvement hours. Though they sometimes differed about what level of school staff support would be optimal, all low-income participants agreed that some degree of adult involvement in supporting their community involvement activities was both appropriate and necessary. At very least, low-income participants described having needed assistance locating potential placements. For example, Veronica (FG5, LI) reflected that "...had you known [about]
other opportunities, you would have actually had an open mind.” Veronica suggested that she might have displayed eagerness to complete community involvement activities if she had been made aware of options that aligned with her personal interests. Among low-income participants, the most common request for increased adult involvement was that schools create a placement bank, envisioned as a descriptive contact listing of appropriate, pre-approved community involvement placements. Another common suggestion was that school boards hire a dedicated staff person in each school to help match students to personally relevant activities. Thus, despite the community involvement policy’s flexibility, allowing (or abandoning) students to select their own placements may not be a universally advantageous program feature. In particular, low-income participants in this study suggested that they did not want to be left to navigate the processes of initiating and completing community involvement placements alone.

At least a few low-income participants suggested that they would have been comfortable (perhaps even have preferred) being assigned to a community involvement placement. For example, five low-income participants used phrases such as ‘give students an activity’ or ‘place students somewhere’ to suggest that responsibility for locating community involvement opportunities be retained by school staff members. When I asked Jason (FG1, LI) how he would improve the community involvement requirement, he responded that school boards in Ontario should be charged with coordinating community involvement projects for students to complete: “I mean, they force everyone to do everything else in school, why not just force [students] to do the 40 hours in an organized way?” At first, this greatly puzzled me: why would a young person be eager to forfeit control over their personal decisions? I came to interpret that
some low-income participants would have been willing to trade some of their choice over their community involvement placements in exchange for the support and social capital connections of knowledgeable and caring adults. Similarly, in McQuillan’s (2005) case study of a democratic secondary school in a western United States city, when students were invited to “create the school, its climate, [and] the curriculum,” students voiced that they had been given “too much power” (p. 660). Students in McQuillan’s study reported that they wanted some voice in the school’s decisions, but that they needed guidance in making such decisions, especially when they had relatively little experience with the task at hand. In my own study, I did not get the impression that the majority of low-income students wanted to divest themselves of the responsibility to choose and complete their community involvement hours; rather, they sought support in locating opportunities outside of their known spheres of choice.

5.3 Staff Role #2: Initiating and Facilitating Community Involvement Experiences

Beyond pointing students in the right direction by providing contacts and logistical support, about half of high-income participants gave specific examples of how their school staff members had helped to initiate and facilitate activities in which students could complete their community involvement requirements. About one-third of these examples involved school-organized on-campus events available to the entire student community; usually fundraising for a charitable cause (such as a food drive or walk-a-thon). For example, Jerome’s (FG4, HI) independent school partnered with the Youth and Philanthropy Initiative to organize a number of school-wide charitable fundraising initiatives, such as a yearly daffodil selling campaign to support the
Canadian Cancer Society. Similarly, at Sydney’s (FG2, HI) independent school, students sold pancakes in the foyer to raise support for people affected by natural disasters such as the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Thus, some school staff members in high-income schools ensured that students would have access to community involvement activities by organizing these events themselves.

In addition to arranging school-wide opportunities for community involvement, just over one-quarter of high-income participants reported that individual teachers had approached them to create tailored community involvement experiences based on their individual talents and interests. For example, Jonah (FG7, HI) described participating in a staff-initiated program aimed at teaching low-income youth how to play the guitar. This program was conceived by Jonah’s music teacher, who forged a partnership with a local community in need, hand-selected musically apt students to serve as tutors, purchased guitars using the school budget, and allocated teacher supervision for weeknight and weekend tutoring sessions. Thus, some high-income school staff members became involved, not only in the arrangement of many students’ placements, but even as partners in the completion of community involvement hours.

In contrast, none of the low-income participants mentioned participating in any school-initiated community involvement activity. On the survey, those low-income participants who reported that they had completed a portion of their community involvement activities at school gave examples of individual tasks such as filing paperwork for a school secretary, sorting books in the school’s library or helping to serve lunch in the school’s cafeteria. In no instances did low-income participants provide examples of participating in organized school events. However, I got the
impression that the low-income participants in this study would have liked to have had the opportunity to participate in school-initiated activities alongside other students in group situations. For example, a few low-income participants recommended that a portion of the required community involvement hours be incorporated into the Grade 10 Civics/Careers course as a day-long or week-long field trip activity. Thus, school staff members in low-income schools did not appear to have helped organize community involvement activities for their students to collectively participate in, whether inside or outside of classroom time.

In this study, only one low-income participant described a teacher as having helped them to initiate a community involvement opportunity. Tom (FG1, LI), described an arrangement he made with his school’s football coach in which Tom received a signature attesting to 40 full hours of community involvement in exchange for conducting a one-hour inventory of the team’s field equipment. According to Tom, this coach was concerned that Tom would not otherwise graduate; so “[my coach said] I’ll write off for 40 if you do a really good job.” Tom perceived his coach’s attestation to an inflated total of community involvement hours as ‘helpful.’ However, when school staff members ‘sign off’ low-income students’ community involvement completion forms, it also presumably communicates that they place little priority on active citizenship. For example, Lance (FG5, LI) spoke about how his school staff members showed little concern for community involvement hours, such that they were easily forgotten and pushed aside until a students’ graduating year: “[School staff members] don’t really push [community involvement hours] like they push your credits.” The message—that community involvement is relatively unimportant—appeared to be
accentuated among the low-income participants in this study, as evidenced by their perception of little school staff support in initiating or facilitating community involvement experiences. Furthermore, when their teachers did initiate community involvement opportunities, high and low-income participants described very different circumstances: while Jonah (FG7, HI) reported that his guitar teacher approached him in order to capitalize on his existing musical talent in a way that could help others, Tom reported that the school's football coach sought him out because he was in danger of not graduating.

Although the Ministry of Education guidelines state that it is the individual students’ responsibility to ensure the completion of their own hours, participants in all of the low-income focus groups I conducted discussed the need for students to be reminded and held accountable throughout the community involvement process. For example, having had recently enrolled in an alternative secondary school to complete her remaining graduation requirements, Samantha (FG5, LI) suggested:

If you're in my situation, or even if you're in grade 11 in a normal high school, and you haven't done your [community involvement] hours, maybe the guidance counsellor can meet with the students and say 'look, why haven't you done your hours? Are you having problems with it?'...Then the guidance counsellor can come and maybe set something up or help [their students] out.

Similarly, Andrea (FG10, LI) said that she had wished someone at her school would have asked: “How are your community involvement hours going? How come you didn’t get it done? Well, I have this placement here for you, let's get it done together. I'll call
you in two weeks. We’ll check up on it.” Both Samantha and Andrea’s comments suggested a desire for school staffs to take explicit actions to show their interest in helping students to overcome personal hurdles in completing their community involvement hours. Here, it appeared as though low-income participants desired ‘accountability’ from school staff members as an indicator of personal support for their endeavours.

5.4 Staff Role #3: Guiding Structured Reflection Activities

Structured reflection is held to be a pivotal cornerstone in helping students to deepen citizenship learning from community involvement activities (Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Cook-Sather, 2002; Eyler & Giles, 1997; Masucci & Renner, 2001). By ‘structured reflection,’ I am referring to both preparatory activities (such as exploring social problems and the need for community involvement) and post-service activities (such as reflective assessment of experiences and outcomes). According to this literature base, structured (teacher-guided) reflection would provide a platform for students to think about, and make sense of, their personal experiences, as well as an avenue to explore the social problems underlying the need for community involvement.

On the survey, 28% (14/50) of all participants in this study reported that they had had some opportunity to formally reflect on their community involvement activities in their classes. This rate was higher for high-income participants (9/26 or 35%) than it was for low-income participants (5/24 or 21%). In my view, even these latter rates appear to be high, considering that classroom time for reflection is not a
mandated aspect of the community involvement requirement, nor is it a mandated aspect of any school staff member’s job description. Thus, any instance in which a participant noted that they had had the opportunity to reflect on their community involvement experiences in their classes may signal that a teacher had voluntarily initiated reflective discussions with their students.

While 28% of study participants reported on the survey that they had had some opportunity to reflect in class, during the focus groups, neither high- nor low-income participants mentioned these discussion opportunities. It could be that community involvement opportunities were spoken about in classes, but that these discussions were either not fully developed or not overly memorable. Instead, a few participants noted during the focus groups that no reflection activities had taken place at all. For example, Samantha (FG5, LI) remarked: “[Teachers] don’t really discuss it.” Then Veronica (FG5, LI) added, gesturing with quotation marks: “Because it’s not a topic that’s of ‘importance.’” In addition to potentially consolidating and broadening students’ learning, these comments show that facilitated reflection on community involvement activities would have been an opportunity for adult school staff to show support for the importance of this kind of citizenship involvement.

An important potential consequence of not incorporating teacher-guided reflection into community involvement activities may be that students have few (if any) structured or intentional opportunities to learn the reasons that their service was needed (the roots of social problems in society), nor to reflect on what they accomplished. This is particularly important because Ontario’s community involvement hours are mandated, meaning that students may not be intrinsically
motivated to complete community involvement hours, nor have the opportunity to come to see the benefit of active citizenship. Five low-income participants explicitly mentioned that, throughout the entire duration of their hours, they had not understood the point of their community involvement. For example, Sandra (FG5, LI) described feeling “furious” when she learned that she would have to complete community involvement hours because she did not see the reasons for providing such a service. Similarly, Jeffery (FG9, LI) said that he had not felt a sense of ‘buy in’ because “I never grasped the idea of community involvement and didn’t quite understand why I had to do it in the first place at that age.” In contrast, the inclusion of teacher-guided reflection opportunities might help to develop students’ support for active citizenship by giving them a sense of why community involvement should be a personal and educational priority.

Without teacher-guided reflection, students would be denied the opportunity to discuss the social problems that underpin the need for students’ community involvement in the first place. Clearly, teacher-guided reflection is no guarantee that such discussions would include critical inquiry, but they would be a necessary minimum condition. In this study, no low-income participant indicated that any discussion of social issues had taken place in their schools. Perhaps by consequence, low-income participants in Focus Group 8 appeared to struggle when I asked if community involvement activities could help to eliminate wider social problems:

Shane: “What does a social problem even mean?”

Anthony: “Yeah. I don’t understand. What do you mean by social problem?”
Trevor: “This guy can’t afford his own can of beans? That’s a social problem?”

Here, the role of the teacher is particularly important. For example, Hollis (2002) argues that students could integrate basic concepts of social change into a larger frame of understanding, but only if a teacher specifically drew linkages between poverty/inequity and their structural causes. Thus, it is not that secondary school students are incapable of achieving justice oriented citizenship understandings, but that if these understandings are unfamiliar, students may require the facilitation of a school staff member. Similarly, the act of having a dialogue about community involvement in school would signal that social issues were something worth thinking about.

5.5 **Staff Role #4: Encouraging and Role Modelling Active Civic Participation**

During every focus group they participated in, high-income participants consistently reported positive encounters with school staff members. About one-fifth of high-income participants made explicit reference to school staff members as uplifting role models who reliably provided support and guidance. High-income participants used terms like “great” (Jeremy, FG4, HI), “phenomenal” (Jamie, FG4, HI) and “very involved” (Suzanne, FG2, HI) to describe their school staff members. While not all high-income participants made such reference to personal positive relationships with school staff members, no one in the high-income group voiced a single negative comment toward a teacher, guidance counsellor or ancillary staff member. Teachers, in particular, were often perceived as mentors who provided “the symbol of what we aim to do with [community] service” (Jonah, FG7, HI). When I asked Natalie (FG2, HI) about her most significant community involvement recollection, she spoke about the
opportunity to be mentored by her art teacher with whom she had worked as a teaching assistant: “[My fondest memory] was the development of my relationship with my art teacher...she ended up being very inspirational to me, so that was positive.” Natalie continued to reference her art teacher throughout our conversations, signalling to me that this adult role model had become inextricably incorporated into Natalie's personal narrative of her community involvement experiences. This teacher’s positive influence was not restricted to the months that Natalie had been a student in her class, but rather, became an enduring relationship that was strengthened throughout Natalie’s secondary school career. Thus, working alongside adult role models on meaningful political and social tasks can offer students a ‘convoy’ of developmental resources to help promote their orientation toward active engagement (Cotterell, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003).

Students in all but one of the high-income focus groups discussed the ways in which they perceived community involvement to have been highly valued by their school staff members. In part, teachers appeared to communicate this sense of importance via increased expectations placed on students. About one-quarter of high-income participants perceived their teachers’ implicit and explicit expectations to have exceeded the minimum community involvement requirement of 40 hours. For example, when I asked Alexis (FG3, HI) how her community involvement experiences were different from other youth, she responded that:

At [our school], we are sort of encouraged to help out more than at some other schools. I know some of my friends who go to public schools, [and they] are just
expected to do just the minimum 40 hours, whereas...we are encouraged to do volunteer work throughout high school, even once we are already finished.

This agrees with Gaztambide-Fernández’ (2009) claim that extra-curricular activities such as community involvement are a staple within the elite (usually private) educational experience and a fundamental aspect of the student’s socialization into the upper class.

Beyond just rhetorical commitment to active citizenship, all of the independent schools I visited further evidenced their commitment to community involvement by hiring additional school staff whose portfolio of duties centred on community involvement. At the various institutions, these titles included ‘Service Counsellor,’ ‘Volunteer Coordinator,’ and ‘Head of Service.’ My data did not uncover comparable positions in the public or alternative public school systems. In addition to hiring a community involvement liaison, Jonah’s (FG7, HI) independent school dedicated special periods during the school day for students to work on community involvement projects, which he referred to as a ‘service co-curricular.’ Jonah’s school staff also oversaw a student ‘community service council’ and a ‘service club,’ both of which provided opportunities for students to become involved in planning and facilitating community involvement activities throughout the school. Thus, high-income schools in this study formally reinforced their prioritization of community involvement activities by hiring ancillary staff members and coordinating service councils solely to support students in obtaining their required hours (and beyond).
In contrast, low-income participants did not typically speak of school staff members as potential role models for active citizenship. Most of the low-income participants evidently understood that school staff members (and guidance offices in particular) did not have the staffing resources, nor the time, to authenticate (nevermind, to facilitate) every community involvement claim. However, almost half of low-income participants argued that their school staff members did not show that they ‘cared’ about whether or not students completed the community involvement requirement. Remembering his experience submitting the community involvement completion sheet to a guidance counsellor, Tom (FG1, LI) recalled: “In high school it was like, ‘Did you get your 40 hours? Yeah, okay, cool. Check in the box.’ That was it, just signing off for it. No one cared about it, teachers or students.” During the same focus group session, Jason (FG1, LI) recalled receiving a similar response when he had arrived at his guidance office without any supporting documentation or verifying signatures:

I told the school that I did [all of my hours]. I didn't give them any proof, but just to get me out of there, they were like ‘OK, we’ll give you the hours’...I thought I was going to end up in a bunch of trouble...[but] they didn’t seem to really care.

These participants cited an easy-to-manipulate process of submitting community involvement records as evidence of staff’s blasé approach toward the requirement at their schools. Thus, even when low-income schools’ frequent lack of support for the community involvement requirement stemmed from resource and staffing scarcity rather than actual lack of concern, low-income participants often said they interpreted these patterns as an implicit message that community involvement was not important to the adults in their schools.
School staff members’ perceived indifference toward students’ completion of community involvement hours in most low-income communities appeared to negatively influence the attitudes of several of these students. Five low-income participants made reference to ‘just trying to get the hours done.’ Four said that they ‘forgot’ about having to complete required community involvement hours. Three called their community involvement hours a ‘waste of time.’ Thus, perhaps influenced by their frequent perception of indifference among school staff members, some low-income participants tended to brush aside community involvement activities as unimportant.

When students devalue a school initiative, they may look for loopholes to remove themselves from the process. On the anonymous survey, 46% (11 of 24) of the low-income participants admitted to forging or exaggerating their community involvement hours. During the focus groups, some of these participants elaborated on their reasons for doing so. For example, Christina (FG10, LI) explained “…students know that [guidance counsellors] are not going to call all 50 papers, so you know, why not forge it?” Shane (FG8, LI) said his teacher’s perceived inattention to the community involvement requirement both allowed and provoked him to forge his community involvement hours: “[My teacher] was a pushover, so I just forged my own shit...He didn’t care…I handed it to him, he looked at it, saw a signature—I had done it myself—and he basically checked me off on the list and I graduated.” I found it interesting that Shane made this comment during our discussion on the barriers participants encountered during the completion of their community involvement hours. I interpreted this to signal that some low-income participants were sensitive to, and influenced by, the extent to which they deemed school staff members to have ‘cared’
about the requirement. When students got the sense that their school staff members did not care, some chose to extract themselves from completing hours, and justified this inaction by pointing to their teacher’s perceived lack of concern.

In a few instances, it seemed to me that some low-income participants extrapolated from school staff members’ apparent inattention to community involvement that these adults also did not ‘care’ more generally about them as students. For example, Jason (FG1, LI), Tom (FG1, LI), Shane (FG8, LI) and Andrea (FG10, LI) all used generalizing language when speaking about their school staff’s perceived level of concern, including full-stop sentences such as “He didn't care.” Furthermore, when I asked Andrea (FG10, LI) how the community involvement requirement could be improved, she said “I just think that we need more teachers or guidance counsellors who are going to be there for the students, and actually show that they care for the students instead of just getting [their salary].” Thus, if school staff members are perceived to exhibit a lack of concern over a student’s graduation requirements, students may extend that these adults have ‘written them off’ more generally.

5.6 Conclusion

In this study, on average, high-income participants reported that their school staffs were more involved in the processes of the community involvement requirement than low-income participants, particularly within four roles: providing contacts and logistics, initiating and facilitating community involvement experiences, guiding structured reflection activities, and encouraging and role modelling active civic participation.
The presence or absence of school staff support appeared to have an influence on students’ ease or struggle in completing their community involvement hours. High-income participants generally reflected positively on the smooth process of locating and carrying out their community involvement activities, having received copious support and guidance from adult mentors throughout the process. Furthermore, high-income participants saw opportunities to participate as active citizens as abundant and construed their participation in such activities (above and beyond the 40-hour requirement) as an expectation. Conversely, low-income participants highlighted the barriers they encountered in the absence of much support from their school staff members. For these students, opportunities to participate as active citizens seemed inaccessible and were downplayed as inessential. Without strong social networks to draw upon, low-income participants desired more direction from school staff members in finding and completing a community involvement placement, even at the price of some personal autonomy.

This data is significant because there appears to be a different set of resources available to, and civic expectations placed on, students of divergent socio-economic statuses. In this study, there was a large dichotomy between the levels of school staff support provided to high- and low-income participants. For example, while high-income participants described having had specialized staff members dedicated to enriching the community involvement requirement, low-income participants described school staff members as having served the purely administrative function of collecting community involvement completion forms. This suggests that, while the community
involvement requirement is mandated across all schools in Ontario, the ways in which it is implemented and supported in individual schools varies.

This chapter contributes uniquely to literature base because it serves to challenge the notion that community involvement is a ‘free’ activity that can be accessed equally among all students without regard to context or personal circumstance. Students’ ostensibly unfettered choices for meeting community involvement requirements do not enable all students to choose activities that they ‘want’ to do. Furthermore, because students’ choices are constrained by what they believe to be available, some students may require guidance from school staff members beyond the information document that is printed in the school calendar (as required by the Ministry of Education).

Even though the community involvement requirement is meant to be largely autonomous, the implication of my thesis findings is that adult mentorship is important. For low-income students in particular (who may have limited access to social capital), school staff member support could provide information, direction and access to contacts, while simultaneously reinforcing active participation as an important aspect of citizenship. Thus, further research is needed to ascertain how community involvement programs could be directed toward thickening the bonds of connectedness between school staff members and students, particularly in schools without resources to hire additional staff members.
Chapter 6: Participants’ Direct or Distant Interactions with Service Recipients

6.1 Introduction

Community involvement activities can be partly distinguished according to the extent of opportunity they offer servers to directly interact with service recipients. By ‘direct interaction,’ I am referring to face-to-face exchanges between the providers and beneficiaries of community involvement assistance. Existing literature tends to advocate community involvement activities involving sustained contact with marginalized social groups. For example, Billig (2002) reviewed dozens of studies from the 1990s and concluded that servers’ positive personal gains were likely to be maximized with increased in-person interaction among community members. More recently, Reinders and Youniss’ (2006) longitudinal survey of 620 middle-upper class secondary school students in Washington, DC revealed that servers’ ongoing exchanges with people in obvious need was positively associated with servers’ self-awareness, helpfulness, anticipated future civic engagement and intent to volunteer in the future. Thus, community involvement experiences that involve opportunities to build personal relationships over time may play an important role in fostering the development of the server’s civic-related outcomes.

When servers have the opportunity to directly interact with service recipients, Yates and Youniss (1996b) describe servers’ potential to be ‘transformed’ as a progression along three linear levels of ‘transcendence.’ In level 1—the least transformative outcome—servers begin to replace simplistic and sweeping categorizations of ‘others’ (often construed as minority and marginalized social groups) with the understanding that individuals possess unique biographies that are shaped by
their distinct contexts. At level 2, servers inventory and compare their observations of
service recipients’ lives to their own lived experiences, and respond to observed
discrepancies by developing a heightened awareness of, and appreciation for, their own
privilege. Finally, in level 3—the most transformative outcome—servers’ direct
interactions with formally distant ‘others’ inspire them to search for the underlying
causes of encountered social problems. Thus, students’ direct interaction with service
recipients is not necessarily an immediate pathway to profound personal
transformation: there are a number of ways (of varying criticality) that servers might
respond to their encounters with other people.

I find Yates and Youniss’ (1996b) ‘transcendence levels’ useful for organizing a
discussion of the potential implications of student servers’ direct interaction with
service recipients. However, one caution is that Yates and Youniss appear to assume
that servers are largely unaware of social problems before completing their community
involvement activities. This suggests to me that these authors envision servers as
economically privileged, and thus, as beginning their community involvement journeys
at a considerable distance from the contexts of service recipients. This chapter
examines whether the low-income participants in this study reflected upon their
interactions with service recipients differently than the high-income participants. In
general, while high-income participants in this study spoke about overcoming
stereotypes, reflecting on their own circumstances, and becoming ‘aware’ of social
problems to varying degrees, low-income youth largely expressed having been already
prepared to encounter social problems through their own lived experiences.
In this study, both high- and low-income participants’ opportunities to forge relationships with service recipients varied considerably: some (mostly high-income) participants heralded their newfound bonds as the chief benefit and main positive memory of their community involvement experience, while other (mostly low-income) participants reported seldom having had exposure to anyone outside of their project supervisors or other volunteers. In this chapter, I will focus on participants’ experiences of both distant and direct interaction with service recipients, especially the latter. Using Yates and Youniss’ (1996b) proposed levels of transcendence as organizational markers, I will discuss the variety of ways that participants in this study reflected on their personal learning in relation to their interactions with service recipients.

### 6.2 Distant Interaction with Service Recipients

One criticism of school-based community involvement activities is that student projects are too often undertaken in the comfortable confines of the classroom, involving no direct interaction with marginalized groups (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007). For example, collecting canned goods during a local food drive provides an important contribution to organizations working to alleviate the symptoms of poverty and hunger; however, such activities do not take place in a setting where student servers could directly interact with the individuals who rely on such subsistence. Without opportunities to develop relationships within and across communities through direct interaction with service recipients, student servers may be less likely to develop the qualities that are desirable for democratic citizenship, namely, an appreciation for diversity and an understanding of personal and socio-historical contexts.
When secondary schools provide on-campus opportunities for students to complete their community involvement hours, these initiatives may inadvertently cloister students by offering little exposure to the ‘outside world.’ In this study, over three-quarters (20/26) of the high-income participants reported on the survey that they had completed a portion of their community involvement activities on their school campus, detached from in-person contact with service recipients (see Table 3.2). About half of these school-based activities were one-time events and an additional one-fifth involved on-campus fundraising initiatives, further suggesting a transient and abstract connection to service recipients. Kielsmeier, Scales, Roehlkepartain and Neal (2004) similarly found that school-based service activities were often fleeting in nature: 80% of the service activities reported in their study were one-time events. Drawing on one typical example from this study, Jamie (FG4, HI) worked with his school staff to organize a fundraiser for a well-known international charity:

We organized a canvassing around the neighbourhood, raised over $1,000, which we donated to that charity [to] help kids and families around Third World countries. After we completed that, we had everyone stand up for a minute of silence [to support an anti-poverty campaign]. Then we made a recording and posted it online so people around the world could see our initiative.

Jamie evaluated this particular experience very positively, and he appeared to take pride in having helped generate a collective effort toward an issue of importance. However, Jamie’s commendable pursuits to raise awareness and resources involved no direct contact with any less-advantaged people and did not appear to provoke an
understanding of (nor a yearning to discover) why people are impoverished in the first place.

Detachment from service recipients may be exacerbated among independent school students who live in residential halls during the school year. These students may have few opportunities to leave their campuses outside of the structured excursions facilitated and supervised by school staff, perhaps making it difficult for students to forge a connection with, or develop an understanding of, their wider community. For example, Jamie (FG4, HI) seemed momentarily puzzled when I asked him how the community had benefitted from his community involvement hours: “...as a boarded student, I haven’t seen much of the outside, except during the holidays. So in terms of how I benefitted the community, I don’t exactly know how.” In this study, at least five other high-income participants were known to live on-campus during the school year. If these boarded students encountered few opportunities to physically depart from their campuses, it seems unlikely that they would significantly heighten their understanding of community involvement’s impact on individual people, the wider community, or society-at-large. Thus, while high-income schools may provide ample opportunity for their students to complete community involvement hours on-campus, students’ resulting distance from the actual communities being served may inadvertently hinder opportunities to develop an understanding of marginalized groups of people and the social problems that affect their lives.

Low-income youth do not often have the luxury to choose whether or not to be (at least physically) embedded in their communities. In this study, no low-income participant described being isolated from their neighbourhood during the completion of
their community involvement hours. Instead, Samantha (FG5, LI) explained that there was no partition that could have separated her from community life: “I have been involved in the community because of my life; being around certain people and certain things that I honestly never thought that I’d be around.” Samantha’s comment suggests that there is certain intractability between some low-income participants and their communities. Still, low-income participants did not necessarily have opportunities to directly interact with service recipients during their community involvement activities. On the survey, one-third (8/24) of low-income participants reported having had no interaction with people beyond their minimal encounters with project supervisors or other volunteers. For example, during Focus Group 8 (LI), the participants collectively recounted that no one in the group had come into contact with a single service recipient during their community involvement hours:

Anthony: “I didn’t work with anybody. When I worked for the church, they just put me in the basement cleaning chairs...The only person that I worked with was one of my classmates that I went with.”

Arden: “Ultimately, I didn’t really have much contact with anybody...the closest I would have had [to direct interaction] would be the server position at the Seniors’ Dinner, and even there, it’s like less of a relationship than they’d have with a waiter.”

Shane: “I actually didn’t see the faces of the people I helped. I didn’t see one of them...”
Trevor: “...I never got to actually meet any patrons of the Food Bank...[so] it’s not like I got to know any of any of these people or understand where they are coming from.”

In the days following Focus Group 8, I received follow-up correspondence from Shane, who informed me that he and his co-participants had continued discussing their community involvement activities long into the evening, and that these conversations centred on their shared absence of direct interaction with service recipients. Shane divulged that the focus group session had prompted them to question whether community involvement activities could serve the public in a meaningful way if they entailed no involvement with the intended beneficiaries of such service. The group had also considered whether a student server could harness the personal benefits of ‘being engaged’ without actually interacting among the community or building relationships with people outside of their existing social circles. Thus, when ‘the community’ is omitted from community involvement activities, student servers may question the legitimacy or value of such experiences as they pertain to their own development and the wider community.

During this second conversation with Shane, as well as in most of my discussions with low-income participants, I got the sense that participants had wanted to develop impactful relationships with other people during their community involvement activities. For example, all of the members of Focus Group 8 (Shane, Anthony, Arden and Trevor) expressed regret that more meaningful social interaction had not taken place between themselves and service recipients. They attributed their lack of direct interaction to the nature of the community involvement activities they had completed.
rather than any lack of desire to interact meaningfully with service recipients. On the survey, the eight low-income participants who reported having had no interactions with service recipients all completed either administrative tasks or physical labour to fulfil their community involvement requirement. These activities—which included inventorying sports equipment, constructing a backyard deck, canvassing for donations, filing paperwork and shovelling a driveway—provided few opportunities to interact with service recipients or the wider community by virtue of their design. Low-income participants’ ‘choice’ to complete these activities rather than more meaningfully engaging ventures may have been linked to their beliefs about what limited placement options were available to them. Thus, while low-income participants may have desired to complete community involvement activities that allowed them to forge relationships with service recipients, they did not appear to know how to access the placements that would allow such interactions to happen.

In this study, participants’ lack of direct interaction with service recipients during community involvement activities appeared to be the result of both too much and too little opportunity. While the abundance of on-campus opportunities appeared to keep some high-income (particularly independent school) participants physically sectioned away from the community, low-income participants’ physical embedding within their communities seemed irrelevant when participants reported not knowing how to access opportunities for meaningful contact with others.
6.3 Direct Interaction with Service Recipients

On the survey, all but two high-income participants reported having had some level of direct interaction with service recipients during their community involvement placements. High-income participants most commonly interacted with children (21 mentions), the elderly (five mentions), people with special needs (six mentions), and people of low-income background (three mentions). Just over one-third of high-income participants noted that they had worked with more than one category of service recipients. Furthermore, when high-income participants were asked to recall their most significant memory from their community involvement experiences, over three-quarters described situations which highlighted the relationships they had built with people in their community. Furthermore, when I asked high-income participants how they had benefited personally from their community involvement experiences, over half spoke of developing skills related to relationship building, such as knowing how to interact with a diverse group of people. Therefore, the majority of high-income participants in this study had had some opportunity to directly interact with service recipients, and when they did, the resulting relationships featured prominently as positive memories and perceived catalysts for personal development.

In comparison, fewer low-income participants (about half) reported having had some level of direct interaction with service recipients. Low-income participants reported interacting with children (nine mentions), the elderly (five mentions), and people of low-income background (three mentions), however, none of these participants worked with more than one category of service recipients. This is presumably related to the fact that low-income participants reported less variety in the
types of community involvement experiences they completed (see Table 3.1). When I asked low-income participants to recall their most significant memory from their experiences completing community involvement hours, under one-third mentioned any relationship with service recipients. Furthermore, when I asked how these participants had benefitted personally from their community involvement experiences, only one-fifth spoke of developing skills related to relationship building. Thus, the extent to which high- and low-income participants' comments emphasized their relationships with other people appeared commensurate with whether or not they had had opportunities to directly interact with service recipients.

6.3.1 Overcoming stereotypes

In this study, high-income participants who had had opportunities to directly interact with service recipients reported a diminished sense of 'otherness' between themselves and people from less advantaged social groups. About one-third of high-income participants spoke about having had to confront and dismantle their own negative stereotypes regarding the population they were serving. For example, remembering his community involvement placement at a local soup kitchen, Jeremy (FG4, HI) recalled having to 'check his baggage' upon arrival:

I admit, I was 14 years old and I was scared...and I was, I confess, kind of ignorant. But as the process went along...I definitely saw the homeless population differently. Many of the times I thought they must be escaped criminals or whatever...[but the homeless] are not people that we should be afraid of; they are people that we should be trying to help.
This quote was very similar to other reflections from high-income participants who worked among the homeless population. Through his direct interaction with a marginalized population, Jeremy appeared to tackle a previously held assumption and reported being able to reframe his understandings as a result of this experience. Therefore, community involvement activities that include direct interaction with other social groups may provide high-income servers with face-to-face models who challenge them to replace sweeping stereotypes with qualified understandings of individual contexts.

Still, I was not entirely convinced that the high-income participants in this study had set aside their stereotypes in response to their brief encounters with others. After all, socially desirable answers may be common in research where both the researcher and the participants’ peers are present. It also seems unlikely that 40 hours of community involvement could eradicate all traces of high-income participants’ former understandings of other social groups. Furthermore, rarely did a high-income participant speak about the potential commonalities between themselves and the people they had encountered during their community involvement activities. This is consistent with what Battistoni (1997) called the ‘philanthropic view’ and what Kahne and Westheimer (1996) called ‘charity,’ which both refer to affluent servers feeling obligated to help the less advantaged, but not conceiving of those served as being part of their own (presumably superior) communities. Even when high-income participants claimed to overcome their stereotypes, they also appeared to maintain a comfortable distance between themselves and the people they sought to help. This finding lends support to Melchior’s (1998) study of Learn and Serve America programs, in which
participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the personal relationships they forged with service recipients, however, shifts in participants’ civic attitudes were quite small (3–5%). Thus, while a few of the high-income participants may have come to recognize that their stereotypes could not be applied to all members of a marginalized group, I did not get the sense that any high-income participant did (or could have) entirely reframed their attitudes toward other people as a result of their brief community involvement experiences.

In this study, high-income participants did not automatically overcome their stereotypes of other social groups simply by directly interacting with members of those populations. When I asked whether any of the high-income participants had changed their attitudes or opinions as a result of their community involvement experiences, about one-fifth definitively answered “no.” In fact, one high-income participant’s direct interaction with service recipients had appeared to reinforce stereotypes of the homeless population. When Lily (FG6, HI) reflected on her experiences distributing sandwiches during a school-organized anti-poverty campaign, she reflected on her shifting perceptions as follows: “I kind of thought homeless people are [on the street] because they don’t have money, [but when you meet them] you see that a lot of them choose to be there.” During her brief encounters with members of the homeless population, Lily apparently strengthened her sense that poverty is the result of personal deficiency rather than stemming from systemic inequities. Lily’s comment is reminiscent of Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff’s (1994) study of undergraduate students at the University of Southern California who, after completing a voluntary semester-long service project in nearby low-income schools, judged social problems to
be the result of individual character deficits. Similarly, when Hollis (2002) collected reflection papers from her undergraduate sociology class after students had completed twenty hours of service at various neighbourhood sites, she found that their written responses tended to objectify community residents and blame them for their own problems. Thus, while Lily’s comment was an exception among both high- and low-income participants, it is nonetheless an important example of how community involvement can serve to fortify students’ preconceptions or engender new misconceptions, especially if divorced from guided critical reflection.

Low-income participants tended to reflect quite differently from high-income participants on their positioning in relation to service recipients: rarely did a participant in the low-income group make a comment that implied a division between themselves and the service recipients they encountered. On the contrary, low-income participants’ comments tended to imply closeness between themselves and service recipients. For example, low-income participants referred to service recipients using the descriptors ‘friend’ or ‘family’ on nine occasions, terms which were not utilised in any of the high-income focus groups. Furthermore, about one-quarter of the low-income participants explicitly stressed the similarities and shared personal histories between themselves and service recipients. For example, Andrea (FG10, LI) explained her reason for completing her community involvement hours in a youth program designed to empower at-risk girls: “I want to help [these young women] out because [they] are going through the same thing that I’ve been through.” Here, Andrea spoke about the community involvement requirement as an opportunity to better the lives of those with a shared history rather than impacting the lives of distant others. Thus, low-
income participants may locate service recipients more proximally if they envision themselves to be members of the same community or social group.

Low-income participants rarely spoke of having had personally struggled to overcome preconceived notions of other social groups. On the contrary, low-income participants seemed to have implicitly ‘known’ to view service recipients as individuals with unique contexts rather than relying on stereotypes. For example, on three occasions, low-income participants made reference to the importance of learning about community members’ personal narratives as the foundation for relationship-building between student servers and service recipients. For example, Andrea (FG10, LI) voiced her opinion that community involvement is largely ineffective in eliminating wider social problems because student servers pay little attention to “…what [the recipient’s] story is, about their history, what they go home to…Everyone has a different story [and] a different past…it’s all different when they go home and the door is closed.” Here, Andrea went on to describe the act of listening to, and sharing in, personal narrative as a fundamental element of ‘successful’ community involvement activities. Throughout my focus groups with low-income participants, I got the sense that this propensity to seek explanations in individual contexts (rather than generalizations about groups) may have stemmed from participants’ own experiences feeling categorized by negative stereotypes. That being the case, if adolescents are already familiar with the consequences of judgements based on preconceived notions, as the low-income participants in this study appeared to be, then their capacity to ‘overcome stereotypes’ may be deeply engrained through personal experience rather than the result of direct interaction with others during community involvement activities.
6.3.2 Reflecting on one's own circumstances

When high-income participants reported having interacted with people from other social groups during their community involvement experiences, they typically spoke about the transformative benefits of, in Victor’s (FG4, HI) words, seeing beyond their own “comfortable lifestyle.” For example, in separate focus groups, five high-income participants used the term “bubble” to describe the cocooning nature of their affluent upbringings. Jeremy (FG4, HI) reflected that, having been raised in a resource-rich household, it was all-too-easy for him to “forget” about the circumstances affecting other people: “...you don’t really see [social problems] and you kind of start living in a little bubble, and the important thing about giving back is that it opens you up to that world...” Additionally, about one-third of high-income participants reflected that their community involvement experiences had encouraged them to widen their orbits of concern beyond their inner circle of friends and family. For instance, when I asked Natalie (FG2, HI) how she had benefitted from her community involvement hours, she explained: “I guess my experience allowed me to broaden my horizons past my immediate sort of social network and to recognize different parts of my community that were in need.” Thus, direct interaction with service recipients appeared to provide an avenue for some high-income participants to become more familiar with previously uncharted territory.

Outside of their self-described ‘bubbles,’ high-income participants who experienced direct interaction with service recipients described being confronted with realities that were far removed from both their expectations and personal norms. For example, prior to working with a local religious association focused on poverty
alleviation, Madeline (FG3, HI) noted that she had assumed that her lived experience had been reasonably representative of the wider citizen population, however: “...giving out food to the poor and stuff, [you] kind of learn [that their] world isn’t actually like what we’re used to living, like nice houses and everything.” Here, Madeline apparently came to recognize a disparity between her own life and the lives of less-advantaged communities. Thus, direct interaction with service recipients may urge some high-income students to readjust their understanding of the workings of the social world.

About half of high-income participants spoke about how direct interaction with service recipients had encouraged them to recognize their unusually privileged upbringings. For example, Michelle (FG3, HI) reported that a March Break volunteer excursion to the Dominican Republic had illuminated the stark contrast between the living conditions she had been accustomed to and those experienced daily by the service recipients she encountered:

We couldn’t drink the water that came out of our taps. We didn’t have water heaters, and we lived in a building that looked like a prison for two weeks, and we ate rice and beans. And it’s like, I come from this amazing place...it’s like incredibly wealthy, Whole Foods is down the street, you can buy whatever you want from anywhere around the world. We have these great beds. We have hot water, safe water, and just having that all go away, it’s like ‘wow, this is happening to so many people.’

Here, Michelle compared her own lifestyle with the shortage of accoutrements in the community she served, and responded to this discrepancy by expressing gratitude for
her own fortunate status. This finding echoes King’s (2004) case study of four students during a week-long service trip to Tijuana, Mexico who, despite the shortness of the program, reported that they came to re-evaluate the taken-for-granted elements of their lifestyles and recognize facets of their privilege which they had previously been unaware of. Thus, when high-income participants had the opportunity to directly interact with service recipients during their community involvement hours, some came to recognize the various manifestations of their own privilege, and furthermore, appeared to deepen their sense of appreciation toward these advantages.

In contrast, low-income participants did not speak about crossing into unfamiliar territory in order to complete their community involvement activities. They also did not speak about needing to widen their sphere of concern beyond their traditional social networks. Instead, low-income participants typically reported working with service recipients who were located within their own social groups. For example, five low-income participants mentioned completing their community involvement hours within a community program in which they had been formally enrolled themselves and that had played a large supporting role in their own childhoods. These participants described such organizations as second homes, the staff members as surrogate parents, and the service recipients as extended family members. In addition, low-income participants seemed to have a shared awareness of the circumstances that typically affect the lives of others. For example, Veronica (FG5, LI) described feeling compelled to reach out to her former community program in order to share her experience with new members:
I’ve grown and I’ve actually done it, been there myself, in terms of what young women and youth go through and all the issues they face. I’ve been through that myself. And now, being on top and being the person who can educate, [I feel I can] enlighten youth with my knowledge.

Veronica’s direct interaction with service recipients did not appear to stimulate any novel revelations regarding the lives of others, perhaps because she had navigated similar situations throughout her own life.

Low-income participants did not speak about developing an appreciation of their own lifestyles in relation to their interactions with service recipients. This may be partly attributed to the fact that this group of participants were not privileged, and by extension, did not appear to witness a large disparity between their own lives and the lives of service recipients. In fact, Jeffery (FG9, LI) mentioned that, in drawing parallels between himself and the service recipients he encountered, he had grown more cognizant of his own income-related struggles. Furthermore, Jeffery shared that he had originally resented having to provide community involvement to other community members when he had not been the recipient of similar aid: “I felt that I was helping others when I felt that perhaps I should have been helped.” While Jeffery’s comment was not typical of all low-income participants, it is nonetheless an example of how low-income participants may reflect on their own circumstances during their encounters with service recipients, but may not respond by affirming the preferability of their positioning in society.
6.3.3 Becoming ‘aware’ of social problems

All of the high-income focus groups I conducted discussed becoming more ‘aware’ of social problems as a result of direct interaction with service recipients: the term ‘eye-opening’ was peppered throughout almost all of the high-income focus group transcriptions. About one-third of high-income participants made specific reference to how, prior to their community involvement experiences, they had not recognized the extent of need in their communities. For example, Miranda (FG3, HI) expressed feeling surprised upon discovering the severity of social problems within an international context:

I think that all of us kind of know about social issues...but I don’t think any of us sort of knew the extent of it...We’ve had [school assemblies] on the Dominican and Africa and the state that things are in, but I don’t think any of us...were as aware as we probably should have been.

This process of becoming ‘exposed’ to the reality of social problems (beyond the understandings gleaned from in-school presentations) was perceived as a strong positive take-away in every focus group I conducted with high-income participants. Thus, high-income participants’ direct interaction with service recipients appeared to provide a window into the magnitude of some entrenched social problems.

When high-income participants asserted that their direct interaction with marginalized social groups had ‘opened their eyes’ to the plethora of social problems impacting contemporary society, I got the sense that the depth of these understandings remained relatively shallow. With few exceptions, high-income participants either
made observational comments about the specific ways social problems were evidenced in service recipients’ lives or used ambiguous phrasing to describe a general understanding of the existence of social problems. For example, when Jessica (FG2, HI) described her experiences working with less-advantaged children at a summer camp, she reflected that: “I did a lot of learning about [social problems] like inequality and depression and poverty and stuff.” Here, as was typical within almost all of my conversations with high-income participants, Jessica did not verbalize concerns about the contributing forces that underlie the inequality, depression and poverty she had encountered during her interactions. This finding lends support to Einfield and Collins’ (2008) study of ten Americorps volunteers, where the more privileged study participants had become ‘conscious’ of existing social inequalities but did not appear to have integrated any deep interpretations of justice into their personal understandings of civic engagement. Thus, while it would be naïve to expect student servers to grasp the full complexity of social problems after only 40 hours of community involvement, high-income participants in this study only noted the symptoms of social problems rather than questioning the possible causes.

Furthermore, only a few high-income participants overtly recognized their own implication (as part of the ‘affluent class’ or the ‘Western world’) in the perpetuation of societal inequities. I took this as evidence that high-income participants in this study could speak about the existence and magnitude of social problems, but had not thought deeply about the roots of these issues. Instead, it seemed to me that social problems such as poverty were envisioned as a constant: something that is ‘out there’ to discover rather than something that is actively created.
Finally, with few exceptions, high-income participants in this study appeared to express little discomfort when faced with the chasms of inequity that exist between various social groups. For example, when Sarah (FG2, HI) discussed her experiences working in an elder-care facility, she shared her interpretation that residents had been “thrown in this system” without significant social stimulation or attentive medical care. However, Sarah then concluded that “…as sad as that seems, I’m not sure that that’s a really huge problem.” Here, whether intentionally or not, Sarah’s appending comment downplayed the need to rectify her original grievance. Similar comments were typical among high-income focus groups, in which participants appeared to recognize the existence of, but dismiss the call to redress, entrenched social problems.

Low-income participants did not typically speak about becoming more ‘aware’ of social problems during their community involvement experiences, with the exception of Andrea (FG10, LI), who had worked with survivors of domestic abuse. Instead, five low-income participants asserted that they had entered their community involvement activities already equipped with a lived understanding of social problems. For example, when I asked Tom (FG1, LI) whether any of his opinions or attitudes had changed as a result of his community involvement experiences, he maintained that “My perception didn’t change from community involvement. It changed from life.” Presumably, if low-income youth are exposed daily to the effects of social problems, these students may interpret their personal history as more educative than their experiences completing community involvement hours. Thus, just as Einfield and Collins (2008) found that Americorps volunteers who had previously experienced injustice communicated a more sophisticated awareness of how hardship moulds the day-to-day lives of other people,
none of the low-income participants in this study suggested that their 40-hour community involvement activity had been at the helm of profound realizations regarding the workings of the social world.

6.4 Conclusion

When completing mandated community involvement activities, not all secondary school students have the opportunity to directly interact with people from diverse social groups. In this study, these distant interactions with service recipients appeared to be the result of both too much and too little opportunity. While the abundance of on-campus opportunities appeared to keep some high-income (particularly independent school) participants sectioned from the community on sprawling gated campuses, low-income participants’ physical infusion in their communities seemed irrelevant when participants reported not knowing how to access opportunities for meaningful contact with others.

In this study, students’ opportunities to encounter service recipients appeared to be related, in part, to their socio-economic status: low-income participants reported having had less access to the types of community involvement activities that would have brought them into sustained contact with others, with the exception of low-income participants who had worked with a community organization in which they had previously been enrolled. However, while servers’ direct interaction with service recipients is presumed to be one catalyst for the development of civic-related outcomes, the results of this study question whether briefly interacting with service recipients could serve to deepen students’ understanding of other people or wider social
problems. For example, low-income participants did not tend to speak about overcoming stereotypes, reflecting on their own circumstances, or becoming more ‘aware’ of social problems in relation to their community involvement activities; and high-income participants did so largely in a superficial way. Without sustained contact with service recipients, or teacher-guided reflection on the social problems they encountered, participants did not appear to have had the opportunity to deepen their understandings of their community involvement experiences.

This data is significant because low-income participants in this study did not fall into the typical service paradigm—in which privileged servers attend to the needs of less fortunate ‘others.’ On the contrary, low-income participants tended to see themselves as members of the communities they served, and did not tend to report having had to (or needing to) dismantle pre-existing stereotypes, overcome stark contrasts between themselves and service recipients, or increase their awareness of social problems. Yates and Youniss’ (1996b) proposed ‘transcendence levels’ seemed inadequate for describing low-income participants’ community involvement experiences. Such traditional frameworks of server-recipient dichotomies did not appear to acknowledge diverse students’ pre-existing and lived understanding of social problems. Indeed, some students in Ontario gain a personal understanding of social problems, with or without their participation in community involvement activities. Thus, this chapter contributes uniquely to the literature base because it serves to challenge privileged notions of who servers ‘are’ and what benefit they might glean from completing community involvement activities. Future research should explore potential theoretical models for describing low-income students’ community
involvement experiences and citizenship orientations, as these students may already have a lived understanding of stereotypes, struggles and social problems.
Chapter 7: Participants’ Perceived Sense of Individual and Collective Agency to Effect Change

7.1 Introduction

Existing literature has often demonstrated a positive association between students’ participation in community involvement learning activities and their development of personal agency. I use the term ‘personal agency’ broadly to encompass the related concepts of self-efficacy, self-esteem and political-efficacy; however, participants’ self-efficacy will be highlighted in this chapter. Self-efficacy, as described by psychologist Albert Bandura, refers to an individual’s view of their capacity to bring about the changes or effects they desire (Bandura, 1997). Astin et al. (2000) collected quantitative longitudinal data from a nationally representative sample of 22,236 United States undergraduate students, and conducted qualitative interviews, focus groups and classroom observations on three different campuses, and found that students’ participation in some form of community involvement activity was positively associated with their self-efficacy and self-rated leadership ability. The authors attributed these positive findings to students’ opportunities to process the outcomes of their service experiences with their peers, through professor-guided group discussions. Such data suggest that students who complete community involvement may have the opportunity to develop a strong sense that they can effect change within certain spheres of their control.

In the literature that I reviewed, positive associations between students’ completion of community involvement and sense of personal agency were generally touted as successes. However, having either too much or too little self-efficacy may
impede young citizens’ pursuit of solving social problems. Some students may have quixotic notions of the social world that ignore or misunderstand contentious social problems and lead to inflated or self-congratulatory interpretations of one’s influence. On the other hand, social problems may also be left intact if individuals do not feel capable of shifting the status quo and responding effectively through their own actions.

I found little research on students’ attitudes toward the potential for their community involvement activities to affect wider social problems. Thus, it is not known whether students envision community involvement as a strong or weak avenue for bringing about social change. Thus, this chapter will focus on high and low-income participants’ perceptions of their own ability to ‘make a difference’ generally, as well as the extent to which they believed community involvement could help to eliminate social problems. High-income participants tended to view themselves as capable social actors who were responsible for improving their communities, while low-income participants spoke about needing to prioritize income-generating opportunities over community involvement hours. Low-income participants also tended to perceive their actions as having little consequence on the wider community. Neither high- nor low-income participants asserted that brief community involvement activities could eliminate social problems. However, low-income participants tended to discuss potential reasons why community involvement might be benign, while high-income participants tended to discuss the ways in which community involvement could ‘chip away’ at social problems over time and with sustained effort.
7.2 Participants’ Perceived Ability to Individually ‘Make a Difference’

Almost half of high-income participants spoke about their ability to contribute meaningfully to the local community through their community involvement activities. Notable in both survey and focus group data, these participants appeared confident that they possessed the knowledge and social capital to stimulate positive change. For example, one high-income participant scribbled a proclamation across the blank space of his survey: "I have 139 hours....I wish to make a difference in the world!"

Furthermore, six high-income participants used the phrase “made a difference” to describe the perceived ramifications of their community involvement efforts. In a couple of instances, high-income participants described themselves as having “so much to contribute” (Jamie, FG4, HI). One high-income participant stated that he had made a “tremendous” positive impact (Jamie, FG4, HI) and another described his own community involvement work as “courageous” (Arden, FG9, HI). While Jamie and Arden’s comments represented more optimistic claims of personal agency than was typical, high-income participants largely appeared to view themselves as capable social actors and seemed assured that they “do have an impact” (Jerome, FG4, HI) within certain community spheres.

High-income participants appeared to construe their ability to contribute meaningfully through community involvement activities as an individual obligation. About one-fifth of high-income participants mentioned feeling a sense of duty to ‘give back’ to their communities as a way to use responsibly the privileges derived from their own affluent upbringings. For example, when I asked Jamie (FG4, HI) how he had benefitted from his community involvement experiences, he responded that he felt
personally rewarded by his ability to "...[give] back to the community after what we’ve been given, [because] a lot of us are very fortunate to be in the situation we are in today.” Here, Jamie suggested that the warm feelings he had gleaned from ‘giving back’ outweighed any other benefit he had obtained from completing community involvement. Jamie’s comment was typical among high-income participants, who also referenced their perceived responsibility to ‘balance the scales’ of inequity between themselves and other social groups. Battistoni (1997) describes such compensatory justifications for community involvement as “a kind of noblesse oblige of people lucky enough to be where they are” (p. 151).

While none of the high-income participants in this study said they had performed community involvement as a way to assuage ‘guilt’ over their privilege, a few did describe feeling relieved to complete activities that were not self-serving in nature. This finding contrasts with Kennedy’s (2007) statistical analysis of the IEA Civic Education Study, in which a sample of approximately 12,500 students drawn from 25 countries tended to deemphasize their social obligations (volunteering to help community members, protesting for a social cause) in favour of political ones (gathering information about candidates, voting in elections). In this study, high-income participants seemed to view their socio-economic advantage as bearing an implicit expectation to counter one’s individualism by assisting less-fortunate community members.

In contrast, about one-quarter of low-income participants made comments that implied an absence of a sense of personal agency. For example, when I asked Shane (FG8, LI) about the role he could play in improving his community, he answered
without pause: “Not a very big one, I think.” Similarly, when I asked Luke (FG1, LI) what his community involvement had contributed to eliminating social problems, he answered: “Very little. Very, very little...A blue collar individual like myself, I’m not going to make too much of a difference.” Here, Luke seemed to imply that other people—perhaps individuals with ‘white collars’—might have greater success in attempting to effect positive social change. Similarly, about one-quarter of low-income participants referenced more affluent peers who “have the means to be involved in the community” (Arden, FG8, LI) as the people who ‘make a difference’ during their community involvement experiences. For example, Trevor (FG8, LI) reflected:

I have to be in a position where I can afford the time to volunteer at a Food Bank. You know what I mean? You don't see people who rely on Food Banks for food working at Food Banks very often.

Here, Trevor made a connection between one’s financial resources and one’s ability to participate as active citizens. Only the four low-income participants who had performed their community involvement hours within a community organization in which they had been formally enrolled described themselves as having a strong sense of empowerment. Thus, with only a few within-group exceptions, low-income participants appeared to downplay their own sense of personal agency, and instead, emphasized the potential of more advantaged peers.

Low-income participants did not usually say they felt indebted to perform community involvement hours, with the exception of the few participants mentioned above, who had completed their hours working with a community program in which
they had previously been enrolled. About one-quarter of low-income participants said that their personal economic disadvantage had relieved them of any obligations toward the wider community. For example, recall from the previous chapter that Jeffery (FG9, LI) said he had originally resented being required to complete community involvement hours because his family had not been the recipient of similar aid. Jeffery’s testimony was an example of how students’ attitudes toward performing community involvement could be influenced in relation to one’s interpretations of their own privilege. Thus, several of the less advantaged participants interpreted themselves as having previously been neglected by social services, and said they did not feel obligated to outreach to other struggling community members.

Just over half of low-income participants described out-of-school commitments as their priority over required community involvement hours. Specifically, these participants said they needed to attend to their personal expenses through income-generating employment. For example, Richard (FG5, LI) explained that he had not yet completed any community involvement hours because he believed those responsibilities would impede opportunities for part-time employment: “I need to work because I live on my own and I don’t have enough time to go out and do community involvement hours.” Richard appeared to construe 40 hours of community involvement as both a daunting task and a distant priority in light of his other responsibilities. Similarly, Andrea (FG10, LI) described having wanted to continue volunteering at a women’s support program after she had finished her required hours, but decided to discontinue her involvement in order to prioritize the demands of her household: “I was working two jobs already…there was money issues too…bills need to get paid.”
Here, Andrea’s personal circumstances were an impediment that factored into her eventual choice to suspend further community involvement. Thus, less advantaged students may sometimes encounter barriers when offering assistance to the wider community if their own basic needs have not been fully met.

7.3 Participants’ Perceived Ability to Solve Social Problems through Community Involvement

With the exception of only one optimistic participant (Cassidy, FG6, HI), neither high- nor low-income participants said they believed their short-term, mandated community involvement activities could eliminate social problems. Typically, participants in this study described social problems as too large and complex to be cured by the addition of a few helping hands. For example, Richard (FG5, LI) said: “...we’ve had poverty for thousands and thousands of years. There’s always been people with no food or homeless and stuff, but what makes you think that we can [eliminate poverty] with 40 hours of community involvement?” Here, Richard pointed to the entrenched nature of social problems, and questioned the extent to which students’ stints of community involvement could bring about social change. Even study participants who claimed a strong sense of personal agency to individually impact the lives of people in their community spoke about the limitations of community involvement a remedy for the world’s woes. For example, Jamie (FG4, HI) said: “I don’t think what we do directly eliminates poverty. It’s not like we organize one event and the next day—BOOM—Africa is not poor anymore; everyone has water and food.” Thus, both high- and low-income participants in this study considered social problems too complex to be “solved overnight” (Eli, FG1, LI).
While almost all participants stated that community involvement work does not solve social problems, low-income participants tended to discuss the multitude of reasons why community involvement might have limited effects, while high-income participants tended to examine the ways in which community involvement could still make a limited difference. This reinforces Marichal’s (2010) qualitative analysis of 61 Californian undergraduate students’ post-service reflections. When students reflected upon their ability to effect positive change through community involvement, they either emphasized the challenges they had encountered in helping to incite change or trumpeted the ways in which they had been able to ‘make a difference.’

During all of my focus groups with low-income groups, participants dedicated discussion time to hypothesizing why they believed their community involvement work had not been able to bring about social change. Most often, low-income participants spoke about the tokenistic nature of some service projects. By ‘tokenistic,’ I am referring to activities that were described as make-work projects, and not perceived as meaningful to either the server or the service recipients. In *Youth Serves the Community*, Paul Hanna (1936) criticizes such “superficial betterment” and argues that community involvement activities should focus on untangling social problems and “...the basic inhibiting influences which perpetuate a scarcity economy in the midst of abundance” (p. 40). In this thesis study, I came to believe that low-income participants’ tendency to speak about the limitations of tokenistic community involvement was related to their own experiences completing such activities. During our discussions, these participants provided a number of palpable examples: Anthony (FG8, LI) wiped down metal chairs in his church basement, Michael (FG5, LI) photocopied paperwork
and made registration folders for a school secretary, and Jason (FG1, LI) “sat around,” talked with his friends and “drank free coffee” at a local animal shelter. About one-quarter of low-income participants described feeling ‘bored’ and ‘waiting for time to pass’ during their community involvement placements. Finally, Trevor (FG8, LI), in a light-hearted but telling example, spoke about his experience fundraising for a charitable cause at the entrance of a department store: “I was basically a human version of [a cash register]. I sat behind a box with a slot in it. And people dropped their change in it.” When I asked Trevor if community involvement activities had the potential to help to eliminate social problems, he chuckled and responded: “Yeah. Just not the work we did.” He later explained: “In the ideal, you get out there and you do this volunteer work, and that opens your eyes to these societal problems, and you feel good about yourself contributing to a solution. [But] the locations you end up doing this shit, you’re not helping anyone.” Trevor’s comment was very typical among low-income participants, who also suggested that the extent to which community involvement activities could contribute to positive social change was partly dependent on the types of community involvement performed.

Four low-income participants said that the short-term nature of some community involvement activities could, at best, bring about temporary solutions. For example, recalling his observations working at a local food bank, Trevor (FG8, LI) noted that “[Community involvement is] not really going to help, because...[the recipients] get to eat a full breakfast for a week, and then after a week it’s just like back to their normal life.” Here, Trevor spoke about the potential for some community involvement to provide only a fleeting benefit. Similarly, a few low-income participants spoke about
the reactionary nature of some community involvement. For example, Shane (FG8, LI) described feeling disturbed during his community involvement placement at a holiday toy drive because he perceived the event’s staff members as geared toward temporary results rather than remedying underlying issues:

[Their mentality was] ‘okay, let’s just get it done’ as opposed to ‘let’s find out what the actual problem is, and let’s work on that.’ Sending us out there in an army of community involvement doesn’t solve the problem, because we are not figuring out what the problem is.

Arden (FG8, LI) followed: “Yeah, we are just putting on a thousand Band-Aids. No one is really tackling these issues. We’re just reacting to what happens out there.” Densmore (2000) and Cipolle (2004) have similarly criticized community involvement initiatives for merely easing social tensions, thereby encouraging marginalized groups to accommodate to ‘reality’ rather working to eliminate underlying social problems. Such surface-level remedies may cover, but not resolve, the underlying structures that contribute to social problems.

On a couple of occasions, low-income participants appeared to have felt a sense of futility about the social problems they encountered while completing community involvement activities. Three low-income participants used the phrase ‘it’s not going to change’ when referring to the social problems they encountered while completing community involvement. For example, Veronica (FG5, LI) noted that her community involvement activity might have temporarily satiated someone’s hunger, however: “obviously poverty is not going to be changed, and there’s not going to be a huge social
change from my 40 hours.” Here, Veronica suggested that it was almost unfathomable to consider that her community involvement could impact a social problem such as poverty. Like Veronica, it was typical for low-income participants in this study to speak about social problems as if they were destined and immutable. Furthermore, if less-advantaged youth perceive social problems as unalterable, they may not envision a role for their community involvement efforts in remedying these issues.

In contrast, all of the high-income focus groups discussed what could potentially be accomplished through students’ community involvement activities. About half of high-income participants asserted that community involvement could help to decrease social problems by improving the lives of individual recipients. For example, these participants often cited the academic strides they had witnessed among younger students they had tutored. High-income participants appeared to construe social problems as a collection of individual problems: thus, helping one individual was en route to solving the whole.

Similarly, about one-quarter of high-income participants spoke about how community involvement activities could make small, concentrated efforts toward social change. For example, when I asked Lily (FG6, HI) what role her community involvement could play in eliminating social problems, she responded: “We can do little things here and there...If you can’t do the big stuff then you might as well do the little stuff leading up to the big stuff.” Three high-income participants spoke about the importance of “giving a hand,” “lending a hand” or “extending a hand” to those in need. Four high-income participants noted that students’ community involvement activities constituted steps—“one step,” “small steps,” and “baby steps”—toward eliminating
social problems. These comments resemble Albert Bandura’s (1997) description of self-efficacious individuals, who view challenging problems as tasks to be mastered, and respond by increasing their level of commitment. Thus, high-income participants tended to place emphasis on the individual and small-scale changes that they described as being within their locus of control, rather than striving toward wider systemic change.

About one-third of high-income participants described community involvement as an additive process: individual citizens’ good deeds would presumably accumulate until social problems were remedied. These participants used terms suggesting an accumulation process: students’ community involvement efforts would “build,” “add up,” and “spread” until inequities were vanquished from society. In addition, six high-income participants spoke about community involvement as if it were a snowball, growing and gaining momentum over time. They used phrases like ‘pay it forward,’ ‘get the ball rolling,’ ‘chain reaction,’ ‘chain of helping,’ and ‘like a virus’ to describe how their community involvement activities could spread contagiously outward. Jamie (FG4, HI) reasoned that:

...if every person in Canada helps contribute to a certain aspect to eliminate poverty, yes, slowly it will reduce poverty, and eventually we’ll get to a state where Third World countries will have a much more successful environment to live in and the individuals will not starve to death anymore.

Jamie’s comment, which was typical among high-income participants, described community involvement as if it were an investment that would pay dividends if
carefully tended to over time. Thus, high-income participants often construed social change as a feasible expectation for ‘later on,’ given citizens’ considerable long-term contributions.

### 7.4 Conclusion

High- and low-income participants spoke differently about their personal sense of agency. Participants’ presumed ability to bring about small-scale change was often tied to their lack (or abundance) of personal financial resources. Generally, high-income participants expressed feeling a strong resolve that they could ‘make a difference’ in the world, and spoke about feeling obligated to do so as a consequence of their fortunate status. In contrast, low-income participants did not appear to identify themselves as empowered social actors, capable of having a positive influence on their communities or wider society. Low-income participants did not often articulate a sense of indebtedness to the community, and spoke about being guided by the priority of income-generating work in order to meet their own basic needs, thereby limiting their available time for uncompensated activities. This data is significant because, despite having had participated in the ‘same’ community involvement requirement, there was a strong dichotomy between the ways in which high- and low-income participants viewed their abilities to ‘make a difference.’

Both high- and low-income participants argued that brief community involvement activities were insufficient for solving social problems. However, high-income participants’ comments displayed optimism about the arduous task of confronting entrenched social problems, concentrating on what could be accomplished
through community involvement. Conversely, low-income participants spoke about the various reasons why community involvement had been ineffective, and appeared to approach social issues with a sense of futility.

This chapter serves to question the extent to which all community involvement activities are ‘helpful.’ Specifically, it seems unlikely that community involvement projects perceived as superficial or menial would make considerable strides toward solving the structural underpinnings of social problems. Thus, future research is needed to examine the potential limitations of brief community involvement initiatives, and to pay close attention to the mediating effects of the various types of activities performed.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Summary

In this study, I sought to learn about how diverse students interpreted their experiences completing Ontario’s community involvement requirement. Through quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups among a sample of 50 current and recently graduated secondary school students of widely contrasting socio-economic statuses, I explored the types of community involvement activities participants completed to fulfill their mandated community involvement hours, whether these activities involved opportunities for students to directly interact with service recipients, how participants spoke about social problems in relation to their community involvement activities, and how these community involvement experiences compared among students of different socio-economic status. Finally, this study investigated the emergent research question of what roles school staff members played (or did not play) in supporting diverse participants’ community involvement activities. This chapter will detail the main study findings and implications, methodological strengths and limitations, study contributions and significance, as well as some personal reflections on my own citizenship education journey. Suggestions of areas for future research will also be peppered throughout.

Assumptions about social class have helped to shape educators’ notions and goals for citizenship education, including community involvement initiatives. After all, social class is a “relational concept and embodied experience that is central to how social relations and practices work and take shape” (McLeod & Yates, 2008, p. 357). In choosing to pursue a sample of participants with widely contrasting socio-economic
backgrounds (in line with my personal interest in privilege and access to civic-related educational opportunities), my goal was to draw some comparison between diverse students’ experiences completing community involvement activities. In addition, as discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), existing research on community involvement activities tends to highlight the experiences of middle to upper class students (who are typically more involved in community involvement activities). Thus, I endeavoured to showcase a more diverse range of student experiences in my own work.

Ontario’s community involvement requirement provided a fascinating case to examine both community-based citizenship education and the influence of social class on youth participation. First, Ontario’s community involvement requirement is a mandated condition of secondary school graduation. While all students must complete an equal number of hours, this study has shown the mere policy of requiring community involvement did not ensure that diverse students had equitable access to meaningful community involvement placements, and by extension, citizenship learning opportunities. Second, Ontario’s community involvement requirement allows for student autonomy within the program structure. While the option for students to self-select their community involvement placements may appear to accommodate diverse students’ needs, some students’ choices may be limited by the reach of their social networks, as well as barriers such as lack of time and access to transportation. Thus, Ontario’s community involvement requirement provided me an avenue to explore the relationship between students’ social class and their community-based citizenship education opportunities, in the context of programmatic conditions that may have been
intended to minimize such influences. While Ontario’s community involvement requirement was designed to include all students (in the sense that it is compulsory), this study shows that diverse students had different experiences completing the community involvement activities associated with this requirement—in part, related to their individual social class origins.

This study found that high- and low-income participants, on average, completed different types of community involvement activities in fulfilment of their required hours. The survey data showed that high-income participants in this study tended to complete a more diverse range of community involvement activities than low-income participants: high-income participants reported having had more experience completing every community involvement type except administrative tasks. High-income participants also reported completing community involvement activities at a greater variety of locations than low-income participants. Finally, high-income participants were more likely report having addressed a social problem (77%) during their community involvement hours than low-income participants (42%). High-income participants’ wider breadth of community involvement activities and low-income participants’ relatively limited (and sometimes negative) community involvement experiences were consistently spoken about throughout the qualitative focus group discussions and formed the basis for this thesis’ analysis chapters.

In this thesis research, study participants described a number of different roles played by school staff members in support of students’ community involvement activities. In particular, high-income participants reported that school staff members had supported their community involvement activities by: providing access to social
networks and logistical support for finding community involvement placements; initiating and facilitating community involvement projects within and outside school property; guiding students’ reflections on community involvement experiences; and serving as role models who encouraged students’ community involvement efforts. Such support from school staff members seemed to be universally present for high-income participants in this study, and appeared to strongly contribute to their positive community involvement experiences. In contrast, most low-income participants reported receiving virtually no guidance from school staff members to locate, organize or discuss community involvement placements, and viewed these inactions as a lack of support for their wider civic engagement.

In this study, high- and low-income participants’ opportunities to forge relationships with service recipients varied considerably: some (mostly high-income) participants heralded their newfound bonds with community members as the chief benefit and main positive memory of their community involvement experience, while other (mostly low-income) participants reported seldom having had exposure to anyone outside of their project supervisors or other volunteers. Some high-income participants in this study spoke about overcoming stereotypes, reflecting on their own circumstances, and becoming ‘aware’ of social problems to varying extents as a result of their direct interactions with service recipients. Low-income participants, in contrast, expressed having been already prepared to encounter social problems through their own lived experiences and usually did not describe their community involvement placements as having broadened their horizons.
Finally, this study showed that when reflecting on their personal sense of agency to ‘make a difference,’ high-income participants tended to view themselves as capable social actors who were responsible for improving their communities. Low-income participants, by contrast, more often spoke about needing to prioritize income-generating opportunities over community involvement hours in order to meet their own basic needs. Furthermore, high-income participants spoke about feeling obligated to participate in community involvement as an expression of gratitude for their fortunate status, whereas low-income participants did not often articulate a sense of indebtedness to their communities. While high- and low-income participants spoke differently about their individual agency to effect change, all but one participant articulated their belief that students’ short-term community involvement activities would not solve underlying social problems.

8.2 Implications

8.2.1 Diverse participants had unequal access to citizenship learning opportunities

This study showed that high- and low-income participants had different experiences completing community involvement activities: an equal number of required hours did not yield equal experiences among diverse students of widely contrasting socio-economic statuses. While mandated community involvement may give a much wider selection of young people opportunities for civic-related learning, at the same time, I agree with Bickmore (2001) (who drew a parallel between service-learning and peer conflict mediation programs) that citizenship education programs “…cannot effectively ignore the ways gender, race, economic inequality, and other
factors have influenced the opportunities that various individuals may (or may not) have to exercise their skills and to carry real citizen influence in the wider society.”

This study serves to challenge the notion that simply mandating a blanket requirement of community involvement hours would provide equal opportunities for diverse students to complete those hours, and by implication, to learn the civic attitudes and skills positively associated with school-based community involvement initiatives.

Students’ community involvement ‘choices’ are shaped by who they know (based on access to social networks), what they know to be available (based on access to informational and financial resources), and the skills they believe they have to offer (based on a combination of prior learning opportunities and sense of personal agency to ‘make a difference’). This means that, even though Ontario students theoretically had a wide choice of ‘eligible’ community involvement activities, in practice for low-income students in this study, citizenship learning opportunities were nevertheless limited.

In conducting this thesis research, I learned that students cannot access community involvement opportunities without resources. I use the term ‘resources’ to encompass a number of material and nonmaterial assets including time, access to transportation, information regarding potential opportunities, and connectivity through social networks. In this study, affluent participants who had more access to resources correspondingly appeared to encounter few barriers in finding and completing meaningful community involvement activities.

Because school staff support for community involvement activities was not part of the provincial mandate, primarily study participants in the most privileged
(independently-funded) settings received such support, while less-advantaged participants typically did not. High-income participants who reported specific practical support from school staff members typically engaged in community involvement placements that they found challenging and meaningful. In contrast, the vast majority of low-income participants did not report receiving ample aid from school staff members and often described ‘settling’ for community involvement activities that they found menial or tokenistic. Thus, where students were supported by adult staff members in their school communities, this seemed to have opened opportunities for students to access citizenship education learning opportunities and to expand their conceptions of what ‘choices’ were available to them.

However, a few low-income participants had had access to adult support elsewhere, and consequently, did not find the lack of staff support in their schools to be as detrimental as it seemed to be for other low-income participants in this study. Lance (FG5, LI), Veronica (FG5, LI), Sandra (FG5, LI) and Andrea (FG10, LI) all performed their community involvement hours at local community centres in which they had previously been involved, and all reported having had relatively positive community involvement experiences, including a strong base of non-school adult support. For example, when Focus Group 5 discussed the perceived absence of school staff support for community involvement activities, Veronica made clear that she had received ample support from the local community centre where she had completed her hours: “The staff [at my community centre] were so supportive and have been a part of my life for so long that I guess they made me feel like...I could actually, one day, be in their shoes.” For Veronica, Lance, Sandra and Andrea, the staff members at their local community centres had
adopted support roles similar to that of school staff members in the independent schools I visited. This within-group difference showed the crucial importance of adult role models in supporting diverse students’ citizenship learning opportunities.

This study shows the potential of an unfunded mandate such as Ontario’s community involvement requirement to leave in place (or even to reinforce) inequalities among diverse students. As of this writing, the Ministry of Education has not allocated funding to support Ontario’s community involvement requirement in individual schools. The large differences that I found within individual students’ access to resources, and the varying extent of school staff members’ support, raises questions about the government’s commitment to all students’ opportunities to learn and to practice active citizenship. If all students had greater access to material and immaterial resources in support of their community involvement activities, this support could potentially decrease the apparent disparities between high- and low-income students’ citizenship learning opportunities.

8.2.2 Study participants encountered limited opportunities to practice justice oriented citizenship

This study probed whether Ontario’s community involvement requirement, as structured at the time of the research, provided opportunities for students to learn alternate perspectives about social problems or to practice critical thinking about their causes or solutions. Ontario’s community involvement requirement has not been linked to, or embedded within, official curriculum or classroom learning expectations. Less than one-third of study participants reported on the survey having had the opportunity to discuss their community involvement experiences in their classes. In addition, such
discussions were not often mentioned during the focus groups I conducted. Without many opportunities for structured preparation or teacher-guided reflection, participants typically had no explicit opportunities to practice or apply critical thinking in this area. For example, even among high-income participants who had had the opportunity to directly interact with service recipients during their community involvement placements, not all spoke in a meaningful way about overcoming stereotypes, reflecting on their own circumstances, or becoming ‘aware’ of social problems. One student, Lily (FG6, HI), who had interacted with the homeless population, appeared to have adopted the opinion that the people she encountered were homeless as the result of poor personal choices, rather than the consequence of any systemic inequities. If Lily had had the opportunity to learn about social problems in advance, or to discuss her observations during teacher-guided reflection, she might have had exposure to multiple lenses for understanding her perspectives about ‘others.’ Thus, the findings of this study reinforce prior research that when students merely perform community involvement activities without structured preparation and teacher-guided reflection (the service-learning model), such activities have little potential to stimulate students’ development of justice oriented understandings of other people or wider social problems.

This study also showed that participants’ understandings of social problems were not limited to the content they had learned in the classroom. Students’ lived experiences inevitably provided socially instructive knowledge about the world and individuals’ roles as citizens within it. If schools were to include structured preparation and teacher-guided reflection as adjuncts or components of the community
involvement requirement, this might provide diverse students the opportunity to share varying interpretations of the social problems they may encounter, and to learn about the ways their own personal contexts might influence their community involvement experiences and citizenship learning.

Provided only with minimal information about the 40-hour community involvement requirement (the Ministry of Education’s mandated explanatory note in the school calendar), some participants in this study reported that they had not understood (or had misunderstood) why they had been required to complete community involvement hours. During one high-income focus group, I asked the participants whether their community involvement experiences had raised their awareness of underlying social problems. Robert (FG6, HI) began by answering affirmatively, but then paused and rerouted his statement:

When I was carrying out my volunteer experience, I didn’t really think about why I was doing this. To me it was just [that] I had to do it. I didn’t really understand the real reason until right now when I’m thinking back.

Here, Robert suggested that, after four years of secondary school and 40 hours of mandated community involvement activities, he had not had the opportunity to consider the reason for his active engagement. Robert also suggested that, over the course of our brief one-hour focus group, such guided peer discussion had helped him to ‘understand the real reason’ for community involvement activities. This suggests that if Robert and his peers had had the opportunity to formally prepare or reflect on their community involvement experiences earlier (in school), they might have
developed such understandings before, during, or sooner after their community involvement experiences.

In sum, my research shows that simply mandating or conducting community involvement activities (disconnected from other school-based citizenship learning opportunities) is insufficient to inform or motivate students’ active community participation or justice oriented citizenship. Furthermore, my research suggests that the Ontario 40-hour community involvement requirement has not yet been afforded the resources or systems of support that would sustain or advance this (presumably citizenship education) policy, and by extension, diverse students’ civic learning opportunities. In conclusion, I recommend that Ontario place greater priority on developing the community involvement requirement to make it more explicitly educative and responsive to the needs of an economically diverse population, in particular, by including opportunities for structured preparation and teacher-guided reflection.

8.3 **Strengths and Limitations**

The data presented in this thesis are not generalizable beyond my particular participants, much less the entire population of students who have completed, or will complete, Ontario’s community involvement requirement as a condition of their secondary school diploma requirements. This study examined the self-reported experiences of 50 current and former secondary school students living in a large, metropolitan area in Southern Ontario who volunteered to participate in this thesis research. While this sample is relatively large for a mixed methods or qualitative study,
these participants were not selected in such a way as to represent the full diversity of the wider Ontario student population, nor were they randomly selected. I intentionally selected participants in widely contrasting socio-economic settings in order to maximize the likelihood of developing an understanding of how the same community involvement requirement might be experienced differently by diverse students.

My research does not capture the experiences of middle-class or rural students. For example, while the majority of Ontario’s 13 million residents are clustered around urban centres in the southern part of the province, future research could (valuably) gauge the experiences of Northern Ontario youth, where there may be less access to public transportation systems and where fewer non-profit organizations are headquartered. Thus, a broader and more representative sample, including mainstream public schools and rural youth would help to expand knowledge of students’ experiences completing community involvement activities in Ontario.

While I made strides to obtain a gender-balanced sample that included visible minority participants, the potential influence of gender and race on students’ experiences completing community involvement hours did not play a strong role in my analysis. I recognize that various identity markers may be central in the ways individuals interpret their lived experiences. Thus, returning to my data with a gender- and racially-informed lens in the future could provide a rich reassessment of participants’ experiences and their implications for citizenship learning and active engagement opportunities.
A mixed methods approach, including quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups, was fitting for an exploration of diverse students’ experiences completing community involvement hours. In particular, I found that the focus groups were a rich source of data, as well as a reciprocally beneficial learning experience for myself (as researcher) and the study participants. For many of the participants, our discussions were the first time that they had had the opportunity to reflect on their community involvement experiences in dialogue with others. Thus, this study provided some participants with a collective learning opportunity that had not been formally available in their secondary school classes. When participants used phrases such as “I never thought of this until right now” or “this isn’t anything that I’ve thought about before...” or “...now that I think about it...,” it suggested to me that, during the focus groups, participants had reflected in a way that might not have arisen through alternative (individually focused) data gathering techniques. Thus, the use of quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups provided a mutually reinforcing research and learning endeavour.

Qualitative focus groups also provided the space and flexibility for an unexpected research question to emerge. When I originally conceptualized this thesis and delved into the research literature on community involvement, I had not fully considered the importance of adult role models in supporting students’ community involvement experiences. However, the various roles participants’ school staff members played (or did not play) emerged as a strong finding in my study. High- and low-income participants described receiving markedly different levels of support from their school staff members, and I came to believe that the presence or absence of these
school staff members had been the strongest mediating feature shaping participants’ opportunities to learn through their community involvement experiences. These discussions also allowed me to explore the role of ‘autonomy’ in students’ selection of community involvement experiences. Because students’ choices were constrained by what opportunities they believed to be available, some low-income participants reported that they had desired more guidance from school staff members to help them locate and complete community involvement activities. In fact, some low-income students described their willingness to trade some autonomy over their personal selections of community involvement placements, in order to gain access to the knowledge and resources of their school staff members. Thus, further research is needed to ascertain how community involvement programs could better thicken the bonds of connectedness between school staff members and students, particularly in schools without resources to hire additional staff members to support the community involvement requirement.

8.4 Study Contributions

Most existing literature on community involvement and related community-based citizenship education has primarily reported research in the United States and British context. This thesis supplements that literature by reporting research on students’ community involvement activities in a Canadian context. Additionally, since Ontario’s Ministry of Education introduced the community involvement requirement in 1999, there has been little specific research conducted on this policy. Thus, this thesis contributes to a largely unexplored topic of contemporary relevance to secondary
school students, school staff, the Ontario Ministry of Education, and communities within the province.

I have argued throughout this thesis that traditional discourse on community involvement assumes that servers are of privileged status. Most existing research literature on school-based community involvement (including ‘community service’ and ‘service-learning’) has tended to over-emphasize the experiences of mainstream and especially high-income youth. This thesis capitalizes on the mandatory nature of Ontario’s community involvement initiative in order to explore the experiences of a more diverse group of students than have typically been studied in voluntary community involvement programs. In this study, low-income participants described their experiences differently than high-income participants within almost every topic I explored: the types of community involvement they completed, the extent to which they had received school staff support, the opportunities they had had to directly interact with service recipients, and the ways they described their individual agency to ‘make a difference.’ The only overlap I found between high- and low-income participants was that participants from both groups overwhelmingly reported their understanding that short-term community involvement activities would not eliminate wider social problems. Thus, this thesis contributes to the research base by challenging traditional understandings of ‘who’ is involved in active citizenship learning activities and illuminating how community involvement experiences might differ for diverse students.

This thesis shows that students’ personal contexts were a paramount factor in their selection of, and participation in, required community involvement activities. Unlike much of the research literature I reviewed, this thesis challenges the notion of
community involvement as a ‘free activity’ that is unencumbered by personal barriers. Despite fulfilling the ‘same’ community involvement requirement, high- and low-income participants reported having had different experiences, based in part on their access (or lack of access) to resources such as well-connected social networks, reliable transportation, spare time, and guidance from school staff members. In an effort to explore how Ontario’s community involvement requirement could become more responsive to the needs of a diverse population, future research should further examine variations among low-income students’ community-based citizenship learning opportunities to better understand how personal and institutional contexts shape students’ experiences. Further, research could explore other, perhaps more appropriate, ways to engage and nurture the development of diverse students as active citizens.

Finally, this study questions the ‘benefit’ to society of students’ required, short-term community involvement activities. As previously mentioned, almost all participants in this study saw their brief community involvement activities as, at best, a weak avenue to bring about social change. In particular, when participants perceived community involvement projects as superficial or menial (which was typical in the low-income group), it seemed unlikely that these activities would help to solve social problems from a structural standpoint. Are community involvement activities ‘better than nothing,’ or is there another way to bring about citizen action for a more socially just world? Future research is needed to examine the potential strengths and limitations of school-based community involvement initiatives for students in order to create a more realistic view of what could be accomplished.
8.5 Personal Journey

When I entered graduate school, I had not expected that the process of writing this thesis would so profoundly modify my understandings of community-based citizenship education. For example, during my initial reading of Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) “What Kind of Citizen?: The Politics of Educating for Democracy,” I strongly identified as an educator interested in developing students’ personally responsible citizenship. I saw community involvement primarily as an avenue to strengthen students’ individual character traits and instil within them a sense of obligation to their communities. Thus, the merit of a school-based community involvement requirement, in my mind, was that students who completed these activities would flourish into contributing members of society. I now occupy a very different location.

When I reflect on my initial semesters as graduate student, I barely recognize myself within those memories. At the outset, I had subscribed to the conservative mantra of ‘hand ups, not hand outs,’ and largely saw societal issues as stemming from individual factors and personal deficits. I had shifted uncomfortably in my seat every time the phrase ‘social justice’ was even uttered among my classmates. When thinking about social problems, I saw no need for government intervention, structural change, or disruption of the status quo (after all, as a white, middle-class woman living in an industrialized nation, I had benefitted from that status quo on many occasions). However, the personal journey of writing this thesis has been a form of citizenship education in and of itself: I now consider the pursuit of a socially just world to be a key driver of my work. Thus, this research project has sharply shifted my perceptions of
the social world, and in doing so, has altered the trajectory of my future academic work. I consider this thesis to be a living document, but also a marker in my own ongoing journey toward justice oriented citizenship and critical scholarship.

8.6 Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this thesis, I have taken a critical stance toward Ontario’s 40-hour community involvement requirement. While I have questioned the structure and merits of the requirement as implemented, this questioning should not be confused as cynicism or contempt. Even though I believe Ontario’s community involvement requirement requires considerable revision in order to facilitate students’ constructive citizenship learning, my research has reinforced my strong advocacy for experiential community-based learning. I base my support on the fact that some participants in this thesis research had encountered opportunities to complete personally meaningful community involvement activities in which they developed strong partnerships with other people (school staff members and service recipients), and reflected positively on their personal agency to ‘make a difference.’ In these (albeit limited) instances, I came to view school-based community involvement activities as one avenue for students’ citizenship education learning (particularly if these activities were to be paired with opportunities for guided critical reflection).

I consider Ontario’s 40-hour community involvement requirement to be worthy of preservation and extension. My research has endeavoured to understand the ramifications of Ontario’s current community involvement requirement, in order to imagine new possibilities for citizenship education strategies that better take into
account the experiences of diverse students. It is my greatest hope that the student experiences presented in this thesis reenergize educators to uncover new avenues for building students’ engagement as active citizens.
References


multicultural education in colleges and universities (pp. 45-58). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.


Appendices

Appendix A. Recruitment E-mail

I am a Masters of Arts student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am interested in learning about current and recently graduated secondary students’ experiences completing Ontario’s 40-hour community involvement requirement. If you are a current or former secondary school student who has taken part in Ontario’s community involvement requirement as a condition of your graduation, I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

By participating in this study, you would be helping teachers, researchers and policy-makers who want to help improve this program in the future. You may also enjoy reflecting on your experiences with other students.

The study consists of a short, anonymous, written survey and a small group discussion. Combined, these will take approximately an hour of your time. Two survey and discussion sessions are scheduled to take place at the University of Toronto on Sunday, 20 September 2009 at 2:00pm and Monday, 21 September 2009 at 7:00pm. If you are not able to attend one of these sessions, another time and location can easily be arranged at your convenience. Directions to the University of Toronto and TTC tokens can be provided for you upon request. If you are under the age of 18, I also need your parent or guardian to sign a consent form before you can participate.

Upon completion of the survey and focus group, you will be thanked with a $10 gift certificate for use at Tim Hortons.
If you are interested in participating, please reply to kaylan.horner@utoronto.ca with your name and session preference. I would also like to encourage you to forward this invitation to any of your peers who may also be interested in participating in this study. You will not be notified if your peers agree to participate.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kaylan Horner
MA Candidate
University of Toronto
kaylan.horner@utoronto.ca
Appendix B. Information and Consent Letter for Participants

<On OISE/UT letterhead>

I am a Masters of Arts student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am interested in learning about your experiences completing Ontario’s 40-hour community involvement requirement. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a current or recently graduated secondary school student who has taken part in Ontario’s community involvement requirement as a condition of your graduation. By participating in this study, you would be helping teachers, researchers and policy-makers who want to help improve this program in the future. You may also enjoy reflecting on your experiences with other students.

Data will be collected using a short, anonymous, written survey followed by a small group discussion. The survey will ask you some background information about the activities you performed to fulfill the community involvement requirement. The survey will take approximately ten minutes to complete. Immediately afterward, you will take part in a focus group where you will be asked to describe your experiences and discuss them with other students. During this discussion, your identity will be known to other participants; however, you are encouraged not to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. The focus groups are expected to last approximately 1 hour. These focus groups will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes.
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without it affecting your relationship with myself or the University of Toronto. Furthermore, you may decline to answer any question included in the survey or group discussion. It is my intention to publish the results of this study. However, your identity (and specific information that could identify you) will remain anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used in my notes and my writing instead of real names. Only myself and my project supervisor (Dr. Kathy Bickmore) will have access to my research data. Written surveys and audio recordings of focus groups will be safely stored for two years after I complete this study, after which point the data will be destroyed.

Participation in this study poses no risks or harms. In the extremely unlikely event that you feel distressed resulting from any aspect of your participation, you are welcome to withdraw if you wish and I can provide you with appropriate referrals if needed. You are encouraged to ask questions about the study at any time before, during, or after its completion.

When you complete the survey and group discussion, you will be thanked with a $10 gift certificate for use at Tim Hortons. Although you can withdraw from this study at any point in time, you will only receive the gift certificate if you stay for the entire course of the survey and group discussion.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please sign the consent form below. I will keep the signed copy and will also give you a copy of the form to keep. If requested, I would also be happy to share my results with you upon completion of the study.
I understand what this study involves and agree to participate. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

_________________________________ ________________________________  ___________________
Participant’s Printed Name   Participant’s Signature  Date

If you would you like a copy of the results of this study, please provide me with an e-mail or mailing address: ___________________________________________________________________

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact the investigators listed below. Please contact the Research Ethics Office (at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416) 946-3237) if you have any questions about your rights as a participant.

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**Project Supervisor**  
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Appendix C. Information and Consent Letter for Parents and Guardians

<On OISE/UT letterhead>

I am a Masters of Arts student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am interested in learning about your son or daughter’s experiences completing Ontario’s 40-hour community involvement requirement. Your son or daughter has been invited to participate in this study because they are a current or recently graduated secondary school student who has taken part in Ontario’s community involvement requirement as a condition of their graduation. By participating in this study, your son or daughter would be helping teachers, researchers and policy-makers who want to help improve this program in the future. Your son or daughter may also enjoy reflecting on their experiences with other students.

Data will be collected using a short, anonymous, written survey followed by a small group discussion. The survey will ask your son or daughter some background information about the activities they performed to fulfill the community involvement requirement. The survey will take approximately ten minutes to complete. Immediately afterward, your son or daughter will take part in a focus group where they will be asked to describe their experiences and discuss them with other students. During the focus group, your son or daughter’s identity will be known to other participants; however, your son or daughter will be encouraged not to answer any question that makes them feel uncomfortable. The focus groups are expected to last approximately 1 hour. These focus groups will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes.
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your son or daughter is free to withdraw at any time without it affecting their relationship with myself or the University of Toronto. Furthermore, your son or daughter may decline to answer any question included in the survey or group discussion. It is my intention to publish the results of this study. However, your son or daughter’s identity (and specific information that could identify them) will remain anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used in my notes and my writing instead of real names. Only myself and my project supervisor (Dr. Kathy Bickmore) will have access to my research data. Written surveys and audio recordings of focus groups will be safely stored for two years after I complete this study, after which point the data will be destroyed.

Participation in this study poses no risks or harms. In the extremely unlikely event that your son or daughter was to become distressed resulting from any aspect of their participation, they are welcome to withdraw if they wish, and I can provide them with appropriate referrals if needed. Your son or daughter is encouraged to ask questions about the study at any time before, during or after its completion.

When your son or daughter completes the survey and group discussion, he or she will be thanked with a $10 gift certificate for use at Tim Hortons. Although your son or daughter can withdraw from this study at any point in time, he or she will only receive the gift certificate if they stay for the entire course of the survey and group discussion.

To give your son or daughter permission to participate in this study, please sign the consent form below. I will keep the signed copy and will also give you a copy of the
form to keep. If requested, I would also be happy to share my results with you upon completion of the study.

I understand what this study involves and agree to allow my son or daughter to participate. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Parent or Guardian’s Printed Name

Parent or Guardian’s Signature

Date

If you would you like a copy of the results of this study, please provide me with an e-mail or mailing address: ________________________________

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact the investigators listed below. Please contact the Research Ethics Office (at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416) 946-3237) if you have any questions about your rights as a participant.

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Appendix D. Survey Questions

Instructions: Please complete the following survey openly and honestly. You may skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Please use the back side of this sheet if you would like to add any additional comments. Please do not put your name on this sheet.

Sex: (Circle) Male Female

Do you identify as a visible minority? (Circle) Yes No

Briefly describe your community involvement placement(s).

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In your community involvement placement, did you address a social problem (for example: poverty, equality, or the environment)? (Circle) Yes No
If yes, what social problem did you mainly address?

_____________________________________________________________________________________________________

What kinds of people did you interact with during your community involvement hours (for example, people who are homeless, the elderly, children, etc.)?

_____________________________________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________________________________

Did you have the opportunity to formally discuss or reflect upon your community involvement experiences in any of your classes? (Circle) Yes No

Did you forge or exaggerate any of your community involvement hours? (Circle) Yes No

If yes, why did you forge or exaggerate your community involvement hours?

_____________________________________________________________________________________________________

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Appendix E. *Focus Group Questions*

Looking back on your community involvement hours, what was your most significant memory?

How do you think you benefitted from your community involvement hours?

How do you think the recipient community benefitted from your community involvement hours?

Do you think community involvement work helps to eliminate any wider social problems (such as poverty or inequality)? If so, how?

What role do people like yourselves play in reducing social problems?

Did any of your opinions or attitudes about social problems change as a result of your community involvement hours?

What kind of barriers did you encounter in completing your community involvement hours?

In what ways do you think your community involvement experiences were similar or different from other youth?

How do you think the community involvement requirement could be improved?