Children’s rights awareness: Fostering a democratic platform for current citizens of change

By:

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CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AWARENESS: FOSTERING A DEMOCRATIC PLATFORM

Abstract

The goal for this research study was to learn how elementary educators create opportunities for their students to enact agency. Furthermore, I also wanted to learn what outcomes they observed from these opportunities having on students’ understandings of democratic citizenship education. The main research question guiding this investigation was the following: How does a sample of elementary educators create opportunities for students to enact civic agency and what outcomes do they observe from their students? The study was conducted using a qualitative research method which included a review of the existing literature that is pertinent to the research purpose and questions of the study, as well as a set of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 2 educators. The findings of this study highlighted that meaningful implementation of civic agency is contingent upon students being knowledgeable about their rights and capacities as current citizens of change. Moreover, educators who utilize their own voice and take on the role of advocate for children’s rights and purposeful youth civic literacy opportunities indeed encourages students to become intrinsically motivated to engage in critical dialogue and enact their civic agency in a peaceful manner. As a result of these findings, it is imperative that all educators—school board officials, researchers, educational professionals, parents, and non-profit youth-centered organization members—educate themselves on the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child to not only be cognisant of their rights, but to also meaningfully bring about awareness via purposeful youth-centered civic engagement opportunities.

Key Words: Children’s Rights, Democratic Citizenship Education, Civic Literacy, Youth Civic Engagement Opportunities
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

1.0 Research Context

Under the U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child, member countries are obliged to educate children - as well as adults - on the rights of the child that the Convention describes (Covell & Howe, 2005). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) is a treaty which outlines the fundamental human rights to which every child is entitled to. These rights include “the right to survival, the right to development of their full physical and mental potential, the right to protection from influences that are harmful to their development, and right to participation in family, cultural and social life” (MacLennan, 2010, p.7). The Convention, which was adopted in November of 1989 by the Generally Assembly, was created to ensure that decisions are made with the best interest of the child in mind (UNICEF, 2012). Article 29 of this convention states clearly that under the aims of education, “children should be prepared for active participation in a free society, and learn to respect their own culture and that of others” (UNICEF, 2012).

Children’s rights education is indeed necessary to promoting citizenship. As students learn about their rights under the Convention, students also learn about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. They learn about the values, virtues, and practices of good citizenship (Covell & Howe, 2005). Indeed, through imparting the attitudes and values upon which the practice of citizenship and democratic living is based, children are taught respect for the rights of others, social responsibility, and to support justice and equality (Tibbits, 1997). To this day, not all children up to age 18 in Canada are yet fully protected or provided for under certain provincial and federal laws. Inequities in terms of children’s rights are heavily influenced by ethnicity, poverty status, and a variety of other factors (UNICEF, 2012). According to a recent research report done by UNICEF in 2012, Canada ranks an average of 11.8 out of 21
industrialized nations in a ranking on the six dimensions of child well-being. These six dimensions include: material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviour and risks, and subjective well-being. Informing students, their parents, and their community about the rights of the child is indeed the first step in making progress.

It is the role of the educator to inform students of their rights and treat students as individuals who are worthy of these rights within their classrooms. Moreover, teachers are expected under the Convention to provide children with opportunities to witness and experience their rights and responsibilities, and create opportunities for students to develop and practice their capacities to respect human rights of all those around them and act upon their responsibilities in an authentic manner. Teachers are indeed encouraged to incorporate teaching strategies, such as an outward-looking classroom, that encourage all students to share their experiences that will be viewed as equally valuable to that of academic resources and authority figures (Davies, 2006; Schultz, 2007; MacMath, 2008). This type of empowerment which comes from sharing of experiences in an open classroom climate has led to students becoming more actively involved due to their experience of having agency in their classrooms (Chicoat & Ligon, 1994).

1.1 Research Problem

If students are to be educated in and for global citizenship this suggests that they should experience democracy and human rights in their daily lives at school - and not just be told about it. This means that pupils must have some role in the decision-making structures of the school (Davies, 2006). Students who are learning about citizenship in schools are currently being trained to become active agents of change and, as a result, students learn that they are not
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regarded as citizens who have rights and responsibilities in this present moment (Osier & Starkey, 2006). This disconnect from reality and an overemphasis on developing a sense of duty and responsibility, is indeed counterproductive in the mission of empowering students to civically participate post their schooling years (Howe & Covell, 2005). For example, the British citizenship curriculum, though it is more progressive than most, continues to lack the opportunity for moral reasoning and dialogue to occur (Rowe, 2006).

It is an unfortunate truism that when educators tend to underestimate their students by treating them as young and incapable of developing a relational or contextual understanding of the knowledge, students are denied of several opportunities to utilize their agency and create positive change in the world in which they live (Howe & Covell, 2009). This perception of students in the eyes of educators is also a strong contributing factor of the ‘not-yet’ approach which is currently taking place in schools (VanSiedright & Grant, 1994; Alderson, 1999; Hughes & Sears, 2006). The quest to encourage student voice in the classroom also requires teachers who value and use their own voices (MacMath, 2008). Educators themselves are limited to how they too can express their agency as creating an open classroom climate may be impeded by curriculum, parents, and/or administrators whose views and goals for an open classroom (VanSledright & Grant, 1994).

Another major piece to the puzzle that is often missing in civic education courses is the recognition that each student is currently a citizen with rights and responsibilities. Due to this lack of knowledge and understanding on behalf of teachers, parents, and students themselves, students do not receive a civic education program which meets their needs of being able to think and act critically about citizenship as a whole and the role they play within it. The lack of accountability teachers give to their students implies that teachers themselves are not aware of
the Convention of the Rights of the Child nor know how to effectively teach and respect the basic rights given to every child.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

In view of this issue, the goal of my research is to learn how elementary educators create opportunities for their students to enact civic agency. Furthermore, I want to learn what outcomes they observe from these opportunities having on students’ understandings of democratic citizenship education.

1.3 Research Questions

The main research question guiding this investigation is: How does a sample of elementary educators create opportunities for students to enact civic agency and what outcomes do they observe from their students?

Subsidiary questions guiding this study include:

- How do these teachers understand the meaning of civic agency in theory and what does this look like in their instructional practice?
- How do these teachers assess and evaluate students’ enactment of civic agency?
- How did these teachers develop an interest in the topic of children’s rights and civic agency?
- What factors and resources support these teachers’ approach to this work?
- What challenges do these teachers encounter and how do they respond to the challenges they confront?
- What outcomes of democratic citizenship education do they observe from students?
1.4 Background of the Researcher/Reflexive Positioning Statement

As someone who has had the privilege of participating in many civic agency opportunities both in and outside of the school setting (such as dancing on Sunday afternoons for those residing in the nursing home in my area, serving meals to the homeless, taking part in children’s camps, etc), I have developed a strong desire to encourage both teachers and students to become aware of their agency and to utilize it by taking part in positive citizenship action. I do, however, have a bias around the idea of citizenship action as I had a great desire to get involved from a young age and such events are seen as a highlight to my formative years. From the moment I can remember, both my parents and older siblings have been active members of our small rural community. My parents had instilled in my siblings and I the importance of serving all those we can for the greater good of our community. Small rural towns such as Glengarry, Ontario thrive off of community involvement as that is what is expected and is our responsibility to maintain that high standard level throughout our lifetime.

As a result, during my research I need to be aware and sensitive to the students who may not naturally be excited to get involved or may not be approaching the topic from a similar position in terms of access to particular kinds of opportunities and do not see the immediate benefits that civic participation brings. I had a very privileged upbringing due to my ethnicity, family income, as well as social status. I grew up on a farm which was and still is highly regarded in my region. Many are also not given the opportunity to take Scottish dance lessons, piano, as well as other hobbies which can be displayed as entertainment at local community events. While I take part in doing research, I am curious to learn how teachers go about engaging a class full of students in civic agency opportunities in a democratic way.
1.5 Overview/Preview of Whole

To respond to the research questions, I will be conducting a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview 3 teachers about the ways in which they create opportunities for students to enact civic agency and to learn what outcomes they observe from students. In Chapter 2 I review the literature in the areas of children’s agency, civic agency, and democratic citizenship education. Next, in Chapter 3 I elaborate on the research design of my MTRP. In Chapter 4 I report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature. In Chapter 5 I identify the implications of the research finding for my own teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings of my MTRP, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature in the areas pertaining to civic action and engagement, children’s rights education, and children’s agency. More specifically, I review the definitions of democracy, democratic citizenship, global citizenship to present a clearer and more accurate distinction between civic action and democratic citizenship as a whole. Next, I consider the state of citizenship education programs across Canada, the United States, and well as in England and why a ‘not-yet’ approach is generally taken when new and refined citizenship education programs are to be implemented in educational institutions. As a result of this lack of effective implementation, I consider how teaching students about their rights alongside engaging them in meaningful civic action opportunities affects their ability to develop an internalized understanding of their rights and responsibilities as active citizens of change. Finally, I look into how both students and teachers express their agency in schools to date and how the school context that the principal creates affects both the teachers and the students understanding of their rights and responsibilities as active citizens.

2.1 Defining Democratic Citizenship and Pedagogy

Democratic citizenship is a term which encompasses several interconnected terms within it. Before addressing the key pieces of the research revolving around civic action in and outside of the classroom, it is important to highlight the various key terms within democratic citizenship to better understand the research being presented. Within the scope of democratic citizenship, there are a multitude of terms which include but are not limited to: political, cultural, social, and economic. Veldhuis (1997) described political citizenship as the political rights and duties in relation to the political system, cultural citizenship to a consciousness of a common cultural
heritage, and social citizenship to the relations between individuals in a society, and the demands of loyalty and solidarity. Veldhuis (1997) further states that an economic citizenship refers to the relation of an individual towards the labour and consumer market. Traditionally, the definition of democracy took solely a political lens which focussed on turning “self-rule into reality” (Osborne, 2001, pg. 33). On the contrary, the definition of democratic citizenship from the 20th century onward has taken on a critical approach which promotes a transformative dialogue in relation to social justice, civic action, personal rights and multiculturalism (Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Solomon & Portelli, 2001; Glass, 2005).

Bickmore (2001) adds that ‘citizenship’ education which heavily relies upon the ‘common’ dominant values without question is indeed not deemed ‘democratic’. Such educational efforts may still, however, contribute to the goal of fostering necessary preconditions for ‘true’ democratization, such as modelling nonviolent community values, developing the ability to critically reflect, engage in decision making, as well as demonstrating autonomous action (Bickmore, 2001). Actively participating in critical discussions regarding social issues which directly impact one’s rights indeed assists youth to develop ‘citizenship-relevant’ capacities for autonomous thought (Battistoni, 1997; Bickmore, 2001; Hahn, 1996). The potential challenge in fostering said ‘citizenship-relevant’ capacities within the school context is dependent on whether significant authority figures will implement a democratic pedagogical framework in their classroom (Battistoni, 1997; Bickmore, 2001; Hahn, 1996). Mary Ann Raywid (1976), on the contrary, heavily disagrees with the notion that democracy can authentically be modelled and fostered within the school context to the same capacity as political democracy outside of educational institutions. The inequitable distribution of classroom roles and inability to withdraw or disagree with a particular set of rules and practices is most overtly
apparent in the hidden curriculum as it greatly contradicts the role democratic citizenship as a whole. Nonetheless, educators believe certain ingredients for democratic citizenship can indeed be fostered through critical dialogue, various decision making processes, as well as peacebuilding initiatives, such as peer conflict mediation programs, in an equitable manner which supports and reinforces the creation of inclusive, just, and peaceful communities between status groups both in and outside of the classroom setting (Bickmore & MacDonald, 2010). The methods in which said critical approaches have been executed in and outside of the classroom climate will be further discussed in the sections below.

2.2 Defining Global Citizenship

Within the realm of democratic citizenship also lies the term of global citizenship. According to Hebert (2009), global citizenship is based “on an understanding of history, geography, economics, other social sciences and the humanities as they affect the Canadian community and the world” (p.6). One common definition of global citizenship which is used in schools is that of preparing students with the knowledge, skills, values and behaviours required to respond to a growing number of concerns with our present world (Goodreau et al., 2004; Davies, 2006; Oxfam, 2006). Students are encouraged to develop a global awareness in so that they take on a more active role as citizens to diminish these issues and, as a result, bring about a better world (Davies, 2006). Global citizenship is indeed educating students to take their civic duties to the international level.

In order for students to enact their civic agency on a global scale, Andreotti (2006) stresses the importance of developing a transformationalist as well as critical lens while teaching global citizenship programs which highlights the need to not only transform institutions and systems, but equally the personal and cultural mindsets of individuals involved. Insodoing,
critical citizenship education begins to actively acknowledge and consider the implications of “inequality and injustice” which stems from a series of “complex structures, systems, assumptions, power relations, and attitudes which create and maintain exploitation and enforced disempowerment and tend to eliminate difference” (Andreotti, 2006, p. 46). In conjunction with Andreotti’s proposed cortical global citizenship framework, Larsen (2014) proposes a dual citizenship education framework consisting of both an awareness/analysis as well as an engagement/action component that have the common goal in working towards challenging global power structures. It is indeed from the building of local and global relationships where transformative dialogue and civic action can plant a seed of mutual understanding and begin to work together towards tackling common global concerns.

2.3 Civic Action and Engagement

Civic action and engagement amongst youth begins, if at all, most commonly within educational institutions via social studies and character programs, as well as through the medium of charities, participatory opportunities, and leadership initiatives. The way in which citizenship education programs are valued and implemented has claimed to be an immense challenge within recent decades and can easily have a detrimental impact on student’s ability to receive meaningful and transformative opportunities that are guaranteed and protected rights under the U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child. The following sub-themes explore the ways in which education policy-makers understand the current ‘crisis’ and work towards modifying citizenship education programs to prevent the ‘not-yet’ approach followed commonly by teachers from re-surfacing in the future. Three of the major implementation issues which hinder an effective execution of citizenship education programs within schools involve lack of capacity
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building, application of best practices as well as a lack of an effective values framework dedicated across the board to such programs.

2.3.1 Citizenship education programs

Since the beginnings of modern democracy in the 19th century, Western countries have played a large role in promoting and instilling democratic citizenship values within the explicit and hidden curriculum. However, in recent decades, there have been trends to suggest a particular lack in civic involvement where students are intrinsically motivated to perform their duties and responsibilities as citizens (Naval, Print, & Veldhuis, 2002; Osier & Starkey, 2002, 2006; Print, 2007). The wide belief among researchers to resolve this ‘crisis’ is to provide stronger citizenship education programs in our schools in order to better equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary so they can become active agents of change who are dedicated to meaningfully participate in their society (Beyer, 1988; Boyer, 1990; Tiana, 2002; Print, 2007). Hughes & Sears (2006) also speak to this ‘need’ by adding that citizenship education programs need to create more concrete and attainable goals. It is commonly agreed upon that the aims of citizenship education programs are not simply to teach students political literacy, but rather, the objective of such programs is to deepen students sense of duty and responsibility to participate, strengthen their support for values such as equity and human rights, and to encourage them to become active agents of change in and outside of their community (Howe & Covell, 2009).

Education policy-makers in response to this need for change have undertaken reforms in countries such as Canada, Australia, the United States, and England (Heater, 2002; Curriculum Corporation, 2005; Davies & Issitt, 2005; Osier & Starkey, 2006; Pike, 2007; Sears & Hyslop-Margison, 2007; as cited in Howe & Covell, 2009; Obenchain, 1997). In Canada, the majority of the provinces have altered their social studies content to reflect a stronger emphasis on
citizenship education in their curriculum documents via civics classes. Ontario, in particular, has also implemented Character Education Programs across the province in order to “challenge students to think critically about their world, anticipate problems, contribute to solutions, and develop higher levels of social responsibility” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, pg.5). In Australia, a new national citizenship program known as ‘Discovering Democracy’ has been created and taken affect in classrooms (Curriculum Corporation, 2005). The United States, like Canada, is working on strengthening their implemented civic education classes in the middle and high school grades. England, unlike the other mentioned countries, has established a new required citizenship foundational course in both the elementary and high school sectors (Pike, 2007).

James Banks (2004) attributes the disconnect of citizenship education programs within the 21st century to an imperative change needed due to the deepening racial, ethnic, cultural, language, and religious diversity across the globe. Citizens in a diverse democratic society, thus, need a balance of diversity and unity to ensure a protected set of democratic values, such as justice and equality, are respected across all groups (Banks, 2004; Gutmann, 2004). The co-existence of diversity and unity indeed creates the space that respects and empowers all citizens to participate civically while maintaining attachments to their cultural communities in multicultural nation. In Canada, educators have been exploring classroom and school-based pedagogical approaches that accommodate the complex learning goals which balance diversity and unity within citizenship education (Evans & Hundey, 2000). Case analysis, public issue research projects, model town councils, peace-building programs, community participation activities, public information exhibits, online international linkages, and youth forums are a few
of the types of classroom instructional strategies and school-wide initiatives being encouraged within the 21st century reform of citizenship education programs.

2.3.2 *Implementation of citizenship education programs*

Despite this gesture taken upon the countries listed above to strengthen their civic education programs, research has indicated that these civic courses do not align with Dewey’s (1938) view of democratic citizenship as a “social process” (pg.59). Citizenship education courses have tended to focus solely on the political and structural aspects of citizenship (Ichilov, 1990). Moreover, the civic action in those circumstances is viewed as obligatory and passive, rather than voluntary and meaningful (Ian Davies and John Issitt (2005). Tomey, Oppenheim, and Farnen (1975) conducted a survey regarding the theory and practice of meaningful citizenship education programs and the response that came from the voices of 30 000 students aged 10-17 spanning from across 10 countries, is that rote learning of facts and idealizing patriotic rituals may have a counterproductive effect in instilling students with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to become active agents of change. In agreement with Lyon and Russo (1980), in order for students to make meaningful connections and put their learning into purposeful action, both declarative and procedural knowledge should be evident in such programs. In addition to this study, it is also important to note that despite this new interest in strengthening citizenship education programs within school contexts, the research on civic action and engagement is very dated and quite scarce (Wade, 1995; Obenchain, 1997).

Moreover, despite the international consensus of needing to transform our citizenship education programs by taking a constructivist approach, many educators and schools as a whole are demonstrating a ‘not-yet’ approach which opposes the much discussed goal of implementing best practices (VanSiedright & Grant, 1994; Alderson, 1999; Hughes & Sears, 2006). Judith
Torney-Purta, Rainer Lehmann, Hans Oswald, & Wolfram Schulz (2001) performed a cross-national study across 28 countries during the late 1990s and early 2000s to examine students’ knowledge, engagement and motivation for citizenship in their daily lives. Their studies found that the knowledge students had in regards to citizenship education had no direct connection or meaning to their personal lives. Moreover, there was little evidence to demonstrate that students felt engaged or motivated to participate in purposeful civic action initiatives in their communities. This lack of interest in civic action from the perspective of youth may not be due to the act of citizenship education in itself, but due to the insufficient implementation of citizenship education in the classroom. Due to this ‘not-yet’ approach taken by the majority of schools, (excluding British Columbia and Alberta, according to Sears, 2004), students in this particular study did not report authentic experiences which were issues-based, participatory, collaborative or took on a critical lens. In agreement with Torney-Purta (2002), "narrow instruction restricted to facts from textbooks and covering few topics in depth leaves students with disconnected knowledge and a lack of excitement about the real world of social practice outside their school and classrooms" (p. 210).

Howe & Covell (2009) further this issue by stating there is also a lack of commitment to implementation. Howe & Covell (2009) refer to three implementation problems which are: lack of capacity building, lack of application of best practices, as well as a lack of an effective values framework. Hughes & Sears (2006) and Hyslop-Margison & Naseem (2007) address the first issue by stating that effective capacity building for citizenship education relies on the development of clear and attainable goals, continuous support and resources for teachers, as well as funding to strengthen the programs overall development. In Canada, teachers feel unprepared to effectively integrate citizenship education in their classrooms as a discussion surrounding the
objectives and goals of citizenship education has not occurred, unlike in Australia and in England (Hughes & Sears, 2006). In addition to the unclear expectations, Canadian teachers also identify inadequate teaching development sessions and a lack of curriculum aids to be another barrier in teaching citizenship education effectively (Hughes & Sears, 2006). Even when providing educators with clear expectations, ample resources, professional development and support, Murray Print (2007) reiterates that there are still major implementation issues. In countries such as England and Australia, Print (2007) states that only a small portion of teachers utilize the citizenship education curriculum resources at their disposal. According to Mark Pike (2007), a major source of the implementation problems may be due to the ambitiousness of the goals itself. Educators and educational institutions are expected to teach students to civically participate, and not simply teach them about civic education. As a result, the teacher’s role in fostering and assessing civic action initiatives in and outside of the classroom is a challenge in itself.

For countries such as England and Australia, where citizenship education is perhaps more advanced, there is still a lack of application of best practices. Existing citizenship education programs are typically implemented as particular subjects such as civics, social studies, or citizenship education, and most times only seen at the secondary level. The issue with having citizenship education as a separate subject is that it limits its effectiveness (Davies & Issitt, 2005; Howe & Covell, 2009). Schools who do aim to strengthen their student participation within their classrooms via school council committees, classroom representatives or supporting charities, tend to place heavy restrictions as to what students have choice over and such choices tend to be on trivial matters (Davies, 1999; Howe & Covell, 2009). Moreover, choosing to promote participation initiatives which target only a select amount of students is not an authentic
representation of meaningful student participation. This sort of selective participation sends the message to students that civic action opportunities serve as a means to an end and not something to meaningfully engage in as aware and critically engaged citizens.

Lastly, Howe & Covell (2009) argue that without an effective values framework to motivate students to participate in civic action, progress will be limited. Indeed, students need to be motivated and see the value in practicing citizenship for it to be a meaningful and engaging experience that will carry on in the future. Promoting a distinct set of values attributed to citizenship post the Second World War however can be seen as a problematic endeavour due to the secular and pluralistic society in which we live in (Arthur, 2005). Educators have therefore placed their primary focus on transmitting knowledge and teaching a wide range of skills rather than promoting particular values (T.H.McLaughlin, 1992). The majority of explicit teaching of values, excluding character and moral education, is assumed to be left up to the discretion of parents.

Despite this stance, newly implemented citizenship education programs in England, which was brought forth due to the 1988 Crick Report, emphasize the importance of teaching the values attributed with active democratic citizenship (Pike, 2007). One of the key objectives of the report was to empower citizens to develop a strong moral dimension by learning the value of democratic citizenship from physically taking part in it. Character initiatives, as a result, have been reintroduced in the school systems in response to the concerns of civic engagement and moral decline (Winton, 2008). The key purpose of implementing such programs in England was to aid students in developing a sense of social responsibility and duty, encouraging community involvement, encouraging respect for others, and promoting a student’s contribution to the building of the common good (Howe & Covell, 2009). The focus of character and moral
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education programs, however, was not embraced by all. Character education programs have been criticized for placing responsibility for societal issues on individuals themselves, rather than on political, economic, or cultural institutions (Kohn, 1997; Howe & Covell, 2009).

Osier and Starkey (2006), state that as students are being trained to become active agents of change, students learn that they are not regarded as citizens who have rights and responsibilities in this present moment. This disconnect from reality and an overemphasis on developing a sense of duty and responsibility, is counterproductive in the mission of empowering students to civically participate post their schooling years (Howe & Covell, 2005). Don Rowe (2006) addresses the issue stating that students need to internalize the values underpinning social responsibility as well as carry through with one’s own values in order for students to develop an authentic sense of duty and responsibility as a citizen. The English citizenship curriculum, though it is more progressive than most, continues to lacks the opportunity for moral reasoning and dialogue (Rowe, 2006). Educators tend to underestimate their students by treating them as young and incapable, and as a result, deny them the opportunities to utilize their agency and create positive change in the world in which they live (Howe & Covell, 2009). Thus, what can be taken into consideration are not only the implementation of a values framework, but also the educator’s perception of students as current agents of change and what that may look like in their eyes.

2.4 Children’s Rights Education

Children’s Rights Education is an often lacking but crucial element in students’ development in making personal and meaningful connections to their rights and responsibilities as current active agents of change. This disconnect and inaction by a large majority of educators indicates that educators themselves are unaware of their duty to respect and educate students on
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their rights which are protected under the U.N Convention of the Rights of the Child. The Children’s Rights Program introduced in 2004 called Rights, Respect, and Responsibility (RRR), was created in an effort to provide a stronger connection towards lifelong civic participation by teaching and respecting student’s rights as current agents of change while engaging in citizenship education programs within the school context. RRR remains a relatively new and under-researched method alongside many other initiatives as mentioned programs are still perceived to be fairly ‘new’ in the research of citizenship education and further research is needed. The following sub-themes explores the attitudes and understanding of Children’s Rights Education as well as the ways in which adhering to children’s rights may lead as a pathway to citizenship.

2.4.1 Attitudes of teachers towards children’s rights education

A major piece to the puzzle that is often missing in civic education courses is the recognition that each student is currently a citizen with rights and responsibilities. Due to this lack of knowledge and understanding on behalf of teachers, parents, and students themselves, students do not receive a civic education program which meets their needs of being able to think and act critically about citizenship as a whole and the role they play within it. The lack of accountability teachers give to their students implies that teachers themselves are not aware of the Convention of the Rights of the Child nor know how to effectively teach and respect the basic rights given to every child.

2.4.2 Children’s rights education as a pathway to citizenship

Children’s rights education is a values framework which heavily promotes the importance of educating students of their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as also recognizes that at times there are conflicts among rights, such
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as held religious beliefs (Osler & Starkey, 1998 & Howe & Covell, 2005). According to Howe & Covell (2005), teaching children about the value of their rights (rights to protection, provision, and to participation) alongside citizenship education is a necessary and purposeful way of creating meaning and empowering students to positively change the world in which they live in. This particular mix has been implemented in individual classrooms across Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom and was documented to have been an effective means of empowering and motivating students to take ownership of their own in civic action initiatives (Covell & Howe, 2001; Howe & Covell, 2005). This research took part in a newly launched children’s rights program in 2004 called Rights, Respect, and Responsibility (RRR).

The RRR children’s rights program lives up to the UN Convention of the Child principle which is that students are already citizens in their own right and should be treated as such (Cleaver & Nelson, 2006). Children indeed have the right to freely express their opinions on matters which affect them and their views will be weighted in accordance with their age and maturity level. Moreover, by educating students of their fundamental rights (via an interactive and experiential process of role play, cooperative learning in small groups, as well as discussions of controversial issues that affect them), students develop a process of moral reasoning in regards to the rights and responsibilities that pertain to them as citizens and are able to question and critique how their rights are being violated (Osier & Starkey, 1998; Howe & Covell, 2005). Students, therefore, are better informed and positioned to appreciate the value of social responsibility and to carry through on their responsibilities than the otherwise traditional disconnected method mentioned previously.

One prominent advantage of teaching citizenship education alongside the rights of the child is the agency that students are now aware they possess. RRR indeed provides a stronger
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and clearer pathway to lifelong civic participation, but to prove the RRR children’s rights program is the absolute best method would require a compilation of longitudinal studies taken by students at a young age up until mid-adulthood. This lack of research is also partially due to the current ‘new interest’ in the decline on civic participation as many research articles speak of the needs but are unable to provide specific and clear solutions to this decline. Further research studies need to be done in schools to strengthen arguments and include a larger audience to the conversation.

2.5 Children’s Agency

An authentic enactment of children’s agency is indeed contingent upon the classroom and school climate which is fostered and encouraged by both educators and principals alike. Moreover, it is role of the principal to ensure educators are supported and encouraged to utilize their voices and enact their agency in a democratic manner towards their fellow colleagues, administration, and students alike. The following sub-themes examine the appropriate climates and individuals needed in order to support an open and democratic classroom which values students’ rights to enact their rights as current citizens of change both in and outside of the school setting.

2.5.1 Classroom climate

A classroom climate can take the form of being open or closed. According to L.H. Ehman (1980), open (or democratic) classrooms are viewed as those in which students feel they are in a safe space to speak their mind on easy and difficult subjects alike. On the contrary, closed classrooms are those in which students do not feel safe nor are granted to participate in such activities. Research indicates that students who perceive they are learning in an open
classroom climate indicate more positive political attitudes and a stronger sense of political efficacy (Ehman, 1980; Obenchain, 1997). Moreover, a historical study on the Mississippi Freedom Schools Project of the 1960s by Chicoat and Ligon (1994) indicated that many of the students who experienced the qualities of an open classroom climate (such as classroom decision-making, critical discourse, sharing of experiences, etc) became more actively involved due to their experience of having agency in their classrooms. Long-term studies have not been further investigated but the documented short-term effects demonstrate a general positive experience.

2.5.2 The teacher’s role in the classroom climate

The teacher is indeed the main agent in establishing whether their classroom will be opened or closed (Hepburn, 1983). In accordance with Sheryl MacMath (2008), the emergence of student voice in the classroom requires teachers who value and use their own voices in and outside of the classroom. A teacher’s behaviour and composure in the school classroom can indeed influence the attitudes and behaviours of their students. Hepburn (1983) adds that the modelling of the teacher acts as a form of ‘justice curriculum’ which is part of the hidden curriculum. VanSledright and Grant (1994) on the other hand, questions the amount of control teachers have or believe they have over such processes. VanSledright and Grant (2004) suggest that teachers who wish to create an open climate in their classrooms may be impeded by curriculum, parents, and/or administrators whose views and goals for an open classroom may differ and, as a result, may lose their agency in creating their own meaningful decisions in their classroom. As educators it is important to acknowledge all viewpoints and ensure that decisions which are made to positively affect students do not hinder the democratic nature of an open classroom environment. Indeed, despite knowing the importance of the role of the teacher, there
is very little research which speaks to the subject of the extent in which teachers do value and use their own voices. Much information in regards to voice is that of incorporating more student-voices in the classroom to make it more and/or equal to that of the teacher. There is also much of the research stating its importance and not recent specific instances of teacher being observed in the classroom.

2.5.3 School climate

Every individual who attends an educational institution, whether they attend or are paid a salary, follow the protocol in which the principal individually creates (Howe & Covell, 2009). The principal, who takes on the main leadership role, is given the power to choose whether to create a school climate which is either opened or closed. These decisions the principal makes regarding power dynamics, transparency of common goals, and leadership style, heavily reflect not only the school climate but that of the classroom environment as well (Ehman, 1980). Indeed, educators who feel supported in their pursuits, and whole-heartedly believe in the goals of the school are those who have the privilege to work in an open styled school environment where the principal not only encourages educators to utilize their agency via leadership, but multiplies those opportunities for all those they meet (Howe & Covell, 2009).

Research indicates that the leadership style of principals greatly effects both the school and classroom environment. Eagly, Karau, and Johnson (1992), took a meta-analysis of 50 studies on the leadership styles of principals and analyzed three aspects which were interpersonal oriented, task oriented, and democratic versus autocratic. The predictions for the outcome of this study were in line with gender stereotypes. The only results which differed between the two sexes were that of leadership style. According to the study, female principals are considered more democratic in their roles as females are more likely to values themselves and each member of the
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educational institution with equal weight. Female principals, as a result, ensure to include all members in the decision-making process and provide as rationale for each major decision or assignment to ensure all members have an understanding of why they are participating in all that they do. This study therefore suggests that female educators in particular view their presence in the educational system as that of ‘master-teacher’ whereas male principals take on their role from a ‘managerial-industrial perspective’ (Shakeshaft, 1987).

2.6 Conclusion

In this review of the literature I reported research, and made connections in the areas of civic action and engagement, citizenship education programs and its implementation across Canada, the United States, and England, children’s rights education and its pathway to citizenship via Rights Respecting Schools. I also reported on teacher’s attitudes towards children’s rights, as well as children’s agency and its dependency on the teacher’s and principal’s role in creating an open classroom and school climate for students to express their agency. I learned about the extreme importance of teaching students about their rights under the UN Convention of the Child while providing students meaningful civic action opportunities in an open classroom climate as it allows students to internalize the rights and responsibilities that come alongside being a citizen in the here and now. Students should indeed be provided ample opportunities to engage in meaningful and authentic civic action initiatives as it is only possible to respect the fundamental rights of the child by encouraging students to critically engage and participate as active agents on change in and outside of their communities. Further research and additional recent studies are needed in regards to teachers understanding of children’s rights, as well as best practices in how to implement meaningful citizenship education opportunities alongside children’s rights education. I believe that in learning best practices from
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knowledgeable educators, educators will be able to implement and expand upon new pedagogical practices which will enhance students personal understanding of their rights and how to effectively enact their agency both now and in throughout their future.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I will describe my research methodology, as well as provide a rationale for the methodological decisions which were applied based on the research purpose and questions. I will then commence with a discussion revolving around the research approach and procedure before moving on to describing the main instrument of data collection. Next, I will proceed to identify the participants of the study, list the sampling criteria, describe the sampling procedures, as well as include mini biographies of each participant. Afterwards, I will define how I have analyzed the data while also identifying the relevant ethical issues which were considered and addressed throughout the study. Lastly, I will conclude with stating some of the methodological limitations as well as highlighting a few key strengths in regards to qualitative research.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

The study has been conducted using a qualitative research method which included a review of the existing literature that is pertinent to the research purpose and questions of the study, as well as a set of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 2 educators. Horvat, Heron, Taancredi-Brice Agbenyega, & Bergey (2013) emphasize the importance of noting that high-quality qualitative work is not more or less rigorous or demanding than that of high-quality quantitative work. Horvat et al. (2013) further state that the most critical difference between the two research methods is indeed the epistemological assumptions that guide the research. It is the role of the researcher to identify whether the outcome of their research is to have a fixed, single, agreed upon, and measurable product, or one that is socially constructed by the individuals’ interactions and experiences with their world (Merriam, 2002).
In very broad terms, all qualitative research can be defined as an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions which take place there (Patton, 1985). Qualitative research attempts to analyze the processes which occur in particular contexts by addressing the “how” and “why” questions as opposed to “how much” or “how many” (Horvat et al., 2013), with the intent to construct an in-depth understanding of the findings to put toward theory and the creation of themes and subsequent sub-themes (Merriam, 2002).

McLeod (2001) exclaims that to get to the heart of qualitative research, one must immerse themselves fully in some aspect of social life, in an attempt to capture the wholeness of that lived experience, and later make an effort to convey the experiences to others. McLeod (2011) further states that knowledge, given that we live in a complex world, is constructed, and can be viewed from many perspectives without needing one finite truth. Unlike quantitative research in which the goal is to achieve a fixed result through numerical data, qualitative research is in large part culturally bound (Merriam, 2002), and the knowledge acquired through the lived experiences of individuals may or may not be transferable to a diverse context or quantifiable (McLeod, 2011). Furthermore, qualitative research takes on an interpretive approach (Merriam, 2002), as the role of the researcher is to learn how individuals experience and interact with their social world and the meaning it has for them, which is also known as taking an emic perspective (Ponterotto, 2005).

Qualitative research is also a particularly useful method when wanting to explore the practices or problems of a topic which occurs in a particular context, as opposed to seeking a quantifiable outcome (Horvat et al., 2013). Therefore, given the purpose and questions related to my research, I believe that using a qualitative research approach was best suited to help me fully
immerse myself in the lived experiences of a small sample of elementary educators who are actively encouraging civic agency opportunities for their students in an environment where their rights are acknowledged and respected. Fittingly, such an approach has allowed me to not only immerse myself in their experiences, but to also learn from their lived experiences and to share the challenges and successes these educators have encountered throughout the process in the hopes of informing others.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The three most major sources of data for a qualitative research study are interviews, observations, and documents (Merriam, 2002). The chosen instrument or instruments of data collection when conducting qualitative research is greatly dependent on the nature of the purpose of the research and type of questions being raised, as well as identifying which source(s) of data will directly address those questions. Moreover, utilizing multiple data collection instruments has been deemed to greatly enhance the validity of the research findings (Merriam, 2002).

According to Kirby & McKenna (1989), the act of an interview is not only a method of data collection, but also a serves as a means for sharing ideas, philosophies, and a personal sharing of one’s self. Interviews in itself can range from either being highly structured in which all information regarding the process of the interview is shared with the participant ahead of time, to highly unstructured interviews where the interviewer has solely the topic in mind to discussed prepared in advance. Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, can be referred to a combination of the two as questions are arranged prior to the encounter, but the manner in which the questions are worded and the ordered is greatly dependent on how the interview naturally takes its course (Merriam, 2002). Unlike highly-structured interviews which are commonly seen with quantitative collection data, semi-structured interviews truly allow
participants to openly speak of their experiences in detail without being under a particular constraint (Hill, 2012).

Due to the flexibility and allowance for in-depth responses on the part of the interviewees, I have used the semi-structured interview protocol as my sole instrument of data collection as it has best allowed me to authentically investigate how elementary educators create opportunities for their students to enact their civic agency and the outcomes they observe from these opportunities having on students’ understandings of democratic citizenship education. In addition, my semi-structured interviews have all taken place face-to-face at a previously agreed upon time and place outside of their work day. Despite the large accessibility of technological tools in the 21st century, I decided to utilize the traditional face-to-face approach as it provides an environment which encourages free-flowing and in-depth descriptions of their experiences (Hill, 2012). The online interview method, on the other hand, may very well affect and shape the nature of the data that is collected (Merriam, 2002). Furthermore, my protocol (found in Appendix B), is organized in the following 5 sections: background information, educator perspectives/beliefs, educator practices regarding their role in providing civic agency opportunities for their students, supports and challenges that they encounter when implementing and assessing student understanding of democratic citizenship education, and ending off with possible next steps to consider in the research.

3.3 Participants

Within this section, I will state the sampling criteria I have established for purposeful and convenient participant recruitment and the possible avenues to find such participants, as well as introducing each of my participants.
3.3.1 Sampling criteria

Educator participants of the study have meet the following set of criteria:

1) Educator has been heavily involved in democratic citizenship for a minimum of 5 years.
   
   **Rationale:** I was curious to learn how their experiences with providing civic agency opportunities in a children’s rights respected environment altered throughout the beginning years of implementation and what key insights they had to share about their lived experience.

2) Educator is passionate about providing civic agency opportunities for his/her students and prioritizes education for democratic citizenship within all pedagogical decisions.
   
   **Rationale:** I was interested in learning how the participant became passionate about the topic and how providing such an environment for their students has been perceived by the other educators, principal, and school community as a whole.

3) Educator has demonstrated a commitment and/or leadership in the area of children’s rights education.
   
   **Rationale:** I wanted to know how the teacher came to making the decision of creating a classroom which respects the rights of students and the affect this has on students’ ability to understand their own rights as children and the rights of their other classmates. Did students become more empowered to utilize their rights to bring about positive change?

4) Educator has an academic background in democratic citizenship and children’s rights (AQs, MA or PhD courses, workshops, conventions, etc.).
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Rationale: I was interested to learn what academic background educators have acquired surrounding citizenship education and children’s rights and how that has affected their view of teaching and learning. Has their practice altered throughout their years of experience?

5) Educator who is knowledgeable of how to ‘effectively’ provide such opportunities and implement children’s rights in their classroom and has witnessed many forms of implementation.

Rationale: I was curious to learn about what strengths they have witnessed of implementing such an environment for students to enact their agency and what limitations they have encountered due to the nature of schooling. What recent techniques and/or suggestions did they recommend for educators who are newly adopting this approach in their teaching? Assessment strategies?

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

Selecting participants using purposeful sampling is indeed imperative (Merriam, 2002) to ensure you encounter information-rich cases which allow you to learn a large amount about issues of vital importance to the purpose of your research (Patton, 1990). Due to the methodological parameters of my research purpose and questions, selecting a random sampling of educators to receive a generalized consensus (Merriam, 2002) would indeed not have been a beneficial outcome as participants who are considered for in-depth semi-structured, face-to-face interviews should indeed be purposefully chosen in order to learn from as many experiences as possible related to my research purpose. Theoretical sampling, moreover, also does not rest with the sample quality as purposeful sampling to support the nature of my research purpose, as it involves building on theories and analyzing emerging themes from data collected, and revisiting them as more data is collected (Merriam, 2002).
The most suitable sampling choice due to the nature of my research purpose, as a result, has been purposeful sampling. I have also utilized convenience sampling, as it entailed contacting the most accessible participants in regards to geographical location, experience, and contactability (Kirby & McKenna, 1989), which has fostered a small, but rich sample of educator experiences within the Greater Toronto Area. In order to ensure that participants did not feel obliged to take part in the study, I chose not to provide my information and write-up of my research questions directly to the participants, but rather, contacted educators and organizations (which have been recommended to me by other researchers) with an overview and allowed them to bring them to the attention of educators they believed may fit the criteria. Prior to having conducted the interviews with the volunteer participants, I made a strong effort to arrange a meet-up to ensure each of the participants met the criteria of my study and were able to share experiences which were in line with my research purpose.

3.3.3 Participant bios

Participant #1: Angelina (pseudonym) is an Ontario Certified Educator, youth advocate, educational director, civil liberties speaker, program, workshop, and resource developer, community partner, and a civic literacy enthusiast. It was only after being offered the job of creating engaging lessons and activities that align with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that Angelina became aware of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and the role she must take as an informed and active citizen of change. From that moment on, Angelina has been utilizing her immeasurable expertise to civically inform and engage students of all ages-including elementary and high school students, pre-service and in-service educators, newcomers to Canada, and youth in custody - across Canada of their rights by spearheading multiple conferences, creating accessible resource packages for educators and students alike, and
providing civic engagement opportunities. Angelina indeed takes an active step towards reducing the ‘not-yet’ approach followed by many educators by developing educational resources which encourage learners of all ages to gain a deeper understanding of their rights and freedoms as well as critically consider competing interests in a democracy. It is indeed through these civic literacy opportunities that encourage learners to critically reflect upon ways to individually and collectively utilize their agency to address spaces which do not mirror a democratic environment in their lives and to take initiative by engaging with their rights as current citizens of change.

Participant #2: Fred (pseudonym) is a youth advocate, community builder, municipal policy aficionado, and a civic literacy educator. It was during Fred’s undergraduate degree when he first spearheaded an LGBTQ+ organization, took on the role of Vice President of Internal Affairs of a large student’s association, became coordinator of a mental health peer support group, as well as participated in other campus roles, which have lead Fred to discover his passions of governance, civic engagement, LGBTQ+ issues, and mental health promotion. From that moment on, Fred has been actively involved in multiple non-profit organizations whose mission is to advocate for youth on the municipal level by facilitating civic literacy and engagement opportunities within the Greater Toronto Area. As a result of Fred’s immense contribution – taking on the role of executive director, organization founder, consultant, chair and board member, and volunteer – he has recently been recognized as one of the top young leaders in Ontario for having worked to develop solutions to make municipal budgets more accessible and inclusive for younger citizens. Fred’s enthusiasm for youth empowerment and civic engagement has indeed lead him to carry out his civic duties not only as a full-time career, but rather as an actively chosen lifelong commitment. Fred’s dedication to provide democratic
spaces for all undeniably makes him a role-model to all citizens of how to utilize one’s rights to bring about a better world.

3.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is largely understood as following an inductive strategy, although diverse theoretical stances and disciplines have favoured particular strategies for data analysis (Merriam, 2002). Making sense of data is indeed crucial to the overall ability of the researcher to describe and explain the meaning which has been derived from the in-depth interviews and conversation (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Moreover, reflections recorded during and post the data collection is the beginning of the analysis process. As threads of thought begin to emerge, these connections are given particular codes, are organized into specific categories, and then eventually evolve into specific themes and subthemes which are directly reflected from the specific data collected (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Data analysis can be viewed as simultaneous with data collection (Merriam, 2002). As a result, the researcher is able to make necessary adjustments along the way and critically analyze concepts and emerging themes despite the predetermined restrictions of the data collection (Merriam, 2002).

Given the nature of qualitative research and the ways in which data can be analyzed, Kirby & McKenna (1989) stress the importance of intersubjectivity during the analysis of data by ensuring each aspect of the data collected is given equal opportunity to contribute to the analysis. Moreover, we as researchers must be cognisant of the social context attached to the data collected and reflect critically when in the analyzing process as to fully understand the data and to create next steps, we must first understand the existing context of facts and the structures which shape the actualities of their lives (Freire, 1985). Therefore, given the nature of my
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research and questions, I have audio-recorded the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and transcribed the responses and questions addressed by hand and wrote down all reflections and thoughts which arise post each interview. After this process, I engaged in the coding process by creating categories and highlighted major themes from each of those categories. By critically analyzing each of the categories, themes and sub-themes side-by-side, I then addressed my findings and emphasized what needed to be brought to the attention of others (including the ‘hidden/unspoken’ data), given the existing research in the literature.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

The act of qualitative research intrudes into the personal world of the participant by asking purposeful questions and examines in great detail the participants, thoughts, concerns, and experiences (Stacey, 1988). Due to this volunteer release of their personal thoughts and experiences, participants need to be given the autonomy to choose whether they wish to participate or continue to participate at any given time in the study and should feel comfortable making that free choice without being at-risk (Hill, 2012). Such personal experiences, moreover, may reach a high level of vulnerability and participants, no matter the nature of the research topic, have the right to keep their confidentiality by receiving an assigned pseudonym and not having specific details of their personal lives unveiled (Hill, 2012). Furthermore, the use of member-checks is another ethical procedure that allows participants to feel comfortable with their final statements (Kirby & McKenna, 1989), as they have the right to clarify or withdraw any previously stated comments prior to the data analysis phase.

The small sample of educators who have voluntarily agreed to partake in my research, in accordance with the ethical procedures, were able to refrain from answering any questions they
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wished. The consent letter (given to all prospective participants upon initial interest to participate), further outlined any issues related to confidentiality and consent by stating that there were no known risks in engaging the study, participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and the audio-recording of the 45-60 minute semi-structured, face-to-face interview are stored on a password protected computer and will be destroyed after 5 years. The only outside observer of the data, as stated clearly on the consent letter (Appendix A), is my research instructor, Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic.

Before participants gave their permission to participate by signing the consent letter, I ensured that all participants were already aware of their rights and answered any questions they had prior to and during the interview process. In agreement with Hill (2012), if participants do not feel safe or judged in any way, the interview process may be a traumatic experience, and the validity and/or depth of the shared experiences may be lacking. It is indeed the role of the researcher to create safe environments in which a trusting relationship between researcher and participant can emerge (Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Given the ethical parameters allotted for my MTRP in the MT program at OISE, we were given a very limited scope in terms of the sampling size, methods to collect data, and research topics which purposefully fit all the MTRP restrictive requirements. In accordance with Merriam (2002), having the right amount of supporting data versus analysis and interpretation can be of difficulty with a limited sampling size and can make it problematic to generalize the data analyzed. The inability to generalize the data does, on the other hand, strengthen the nature of each of the interviews as small samplings allows for a lengthier and in-depth data collection. Richly descriptive data collected from a small sample of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews
indeed strengthens the quality and range of experiences which educators can speak to and make meaning from, as opposed to surveys and other methods of data collection (Merriam, 2002; Hill 2012).

Despite only being restricted to utilizing semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with a limited sample of teachers who fit the required criteria, this set-up, according to Horvat et al. (2013), not only allows for a necessary flexibility, but also requires both the interviewer and participant to engage in reflexivity (as opposed to informal interviews) and the role that may play within the interpretation and meaning of the experiences, and of the data as a whole. The use of purposeful and convenience sampling (Merriam, 2002), moreover, allows for the opportunity to validate the voices and experiences of educators who are not only informed, but are passionate about children’s rights and democratic citizenship in and outside of the classroom context.

3.7 Conclusion

In this research methodology chapter, I outline my methodological decisions based on the given purpose of my research and the significance qualitative semi-structured interviews has had on my research findings. The sampling criteria list for my two face-to-face semi-structured interviews were purposefully created to ensure that the participants selected were able share a range of meaningful experiences and resources which addressed and heightened the research questions that were selected. To ensure a rich participant sampling, I confirmed prior to any interviews that the educator has been heavily involved in democratic citizenship for a minimum of 5 years, is passionate about providing civic agency opportunities for their students and prioritizes education for democratic citizenship within all pedagogical decisions, has demonstrated a commitment and/or leadership in the field of children’s rights education, has an
academic background in democratic citizenship and children’s rights, as well as is knowledgeable of how to ‘effectively’ provide said opportunities and implement children’s rights in their classroom in a variety of methods. I believe that a purposeful sampling size allowed for not only more rich and in-depth sharing of experiences and meaning, but also the opportunity to have the flexibility to engage in reflexivity while validating the voices and experiences of educators who were not only informed, but passionate about children’s rights and democratic citizenship both in and outside of the school context. It is indeed by creating a safe, consensual, and confidential environment, as advised by the ethical guidelines of this research study, which allowed for a rich data collection that has heavily contributed to present gaps in the research field of children’s rights and democratic citizenship implementation.
Chapter 4: Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter will consist of the findings of interviews with two Toronto-based educators who are intrinsically motivated to fulfill their duty to inform children of their rights under the U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child as well as advocate and create civic agency opportunities for children to enact their rights and freedoms. The purpose of these interviews was to discover how a sample of elementary educators create opportunities for students to enact civic agency and what outcomes do they observe from their students. This main research question was selected with the hope to generate a more accurate understanding of how civic agency opportunities are meaningfully implemented both in and outside of the school context and the outcomes observed of informed and capable young citizens. Each of the six themes will consist of an introductory paragraph stating the purpose, importance, and the additional considerations of the findings. Within each theme are two-three subthemes that will follow the sequence of a brief introduction, voice of participants using the pseudonyms Angelina and Fred to respect confidentiality, examples of participants’ experiences, and followed lastly by research and further implications. Below are the following six findings which are categorized into themes:

1) Meaningful Implementation of Civic Agency is Contingent upon Students being Knowledgeable about Their Rights and Capacities as Current Citizens of Change.

2) Participants’ Evaluation of Students’ Civic Agency is an Ongoing, Accumulative Process which Factors in Critical Questioning and Civic Engagement.

3) Interest Amongst Educators to Enact and Advocate for Youth Civic Agency Opportunities Emerged Without Having Received Democratic Citizenship Education in Their Own Schooling.
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4) Transparency and Sensitivity Regarding Potential Risk and Difficulty Involved in Enacting One’s Rights is a Necessary Factor to be Addressed in All Civic Literacy Initiatives.

5) Educators Take on the Role of Advocate to Diminish Misconceptions Regarding Youth Capacity by Providing Youth with Purposeful Civic Engagement Opportunities.


A conclusion paragraph outlining an overview of the most significant findings and its contribution to the existing literature will be the final contribution to the chapter.

4.1 Meaningful Implementation of Civic Agency is Contingent upon Students being Knowledgeable about Their Rights and Capacities as Current Citizens of Change.

Both participants highlighted the importance for educators to emphasize to their students the fundamental purpose and positive impact they, as children, can contribute by enacting their civic agency as current active citizens of change. Moreover, the participants advised that reinforcing children’s awareness of their rights and responsibilities which are outlined in the U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child, will allow children to develop meaningful associations with enacting their civic agency and, as a result, will be more motivated to take personal ownership in enacting their civic agency throughout the course of their lives. As educators and fellow citizens, it is our role to ensure that children are not only given opportunities to enact their agency, but are also aware of their rights as current citizens of change both in and outside of their local community. Both participants agreed that an authentic infusion of civic literacy begins via the act of open critical dialogue with the understanding that the
educator takes on the role of facilitator in the discussion and advocate when needed to ensure students are given opportunities to enact their civic agency in accordance with their rights.

4.1.1 Authentic infusion of civic literacy begins via the act of open critical dialogue.

According to both participants, engaging in ongoing critical dialogue concerning matters which are taking place on both the local and global scale provide educators, children, and other citizens alike, a meaningful way to develop one’s understanding of one’s rights and freedoms, investigate alternative points of view, as well as begin creating civic action plans in a collaborative manner. Angelina heavily promoted the critical dialogue approach to enhance civic literacy amongst children as a way for them to utilize the power of their voice in a visibly purposeful manner that respects their rights and capacities as current citizens. Angelina referred to instilling the critical dialogue approach with students she had encountered by informing them that disagreeing and questioning was highly recommended and that taking the time to critically consider the impact one’s decisions may have on the rights and freedoms of others is vital. One specific occasion in which Angelina engaged her students in critical dialogue was by creating a scenario in which she decided she wanted to embrace the characteristics of a duck and decided to add one after another, such as flapping her arms as wings or calling out for food using bird noises, and asked students after each added feature if it respected the rights and freedoms of other individuals. Moreover, when the requests began to infringe on one’s rights and freedoms, students were prompted to critically consider equitable solutions which could be made to respect the rights and freedoms of all that would be affected. By having students critically consider how their chosen actions, such as embodying a few characteristics of a duck, may impede on the rights and freedoms of others, Angelina revealed that students begin to think beyond the “golden rule” of right versus wrong implemented in schools, and commence to “critically question the
inequitable powers that infringe on one’s rights and freedoms and start to effectively address these problems in a lawful way.” Children indeed need to develop their civic literacy to be able to meaningfully engage and create opportunities to enact their civic agency.

Fred extended on Angelina’s approach by stating that providing opportunities through critical dialogue to enhance one’s civic literacy will initiate “breaking down the cycle of youth disempowerment.” Fred provided these opportunities by facilitating student-led working groups which were arranged based on student-interest and commitment to a variety of civic engagement issues. A few of these working groups consisted of but are not limited to the Toronto Ravine Strategy, Scarborough busing, as well as low-income housing units within the city of Toronto. Moreover, providing such opportunities allowed educators and citizens alike, to witness the immense capacity children possess as they engage in critical dialogue. The “blanket approach towards children’s capacities” mentioned previously by Angelina, is indeed not acceptable as students are more than capable of meaningfully engaging in civic action which surpass surface-level efforts that do not contribute to their own lived experience or the experience of others. It was extremely prominent across the literature that educators who value and utilize democratic citizenship as a pedagogical framework, implement strategies such as critical dialogue and other outward-looking classroom techniques which look beyond the classroom environment for learning and meaning-making, so that students witness their personal experiences to be regarded as equally valuable to that of academic resources and authority figures (Davies, 2006; Schultz, 2007; MacMath, 2008). Providing students with a supportive learning environment to enact their rights by simply engaging in critical dialogue indeed encourages children to enact their agency within a multitude of civic spheres outside of their current circumstance (Chicoat & Ligon, 1994). Fred specifically referred to a student who initially took on the role of “listener member”
and then smoothly transitioned into the role of “group-lead” which entails spearheading civic engagement opportunities and facilitating critical dialogue in small-group work sessions. This shift, according to Fred, was achieved due to the meaningful civic engagement opportunities and individualized support provided within the non-profit organizations to inform, support, and advocate for children’s rights and capacities as current citizens of positive change.

4.1.2 Participants see the role of the educator to serve as both advocate and facilitator of civic agency initiatives.

The educator plays a vital role in ensuring children are not only aware of their rights, but are also given a multitude of opportunities to enact their civic agency both in and outside of the classroom context. Fred greatly emphasized the importance of providing said opportunities in both an experiential and hands-on learning environment which are student-led and student driven. It is through student-made working groups which Fred observed from working with the Toronto Youth Cabinet that led him to believe that “children learn best and gain confidence in their ability to enact their agency by taking an active role in the civic engagement process, such as the Toronto transit fare working group.” The role of the educator during said initiatives, thus, resembles that of a facilitator who encourages and provides direction by asking questions without taking any control in the decision-making process.

Angelina, on the other hand, touched upon the element of teacher as advocate for youth civic engagement opportunities. Angelina reported that “advocacy not only takes form by ensuring students receive meaningful civic agency opportunities which surpass surface-level attempts such as food drives and various charity organizations.” Angelina highlighted that advocacy also manifests in the form of educators utilizing their own agency and “building their capacity to better support children in their civic literacy development.” Angelina, as part of her
role as Director of Education for the Canadian Civil Liberties Education Trust (CCLET) non-profit organization, speaks to students upon the request of educators or school boards about their rights and freedoms as current citizens and is reminded of the importance of her role as advocate when she witnesses what she termed as the “let’s-not-teach-this cycle” that uncomfortable educators abide by. Angelina defined this cycle as a way in which to describe the misconceptions regarding youth capacity that educators reproduce when choosing to either not address children’s rights and democratic citizenship education in their classroom, or providing authority-monitored level of civic engagement in school contexts and beyond. Moreover, schools that do aim to strengthen their student participation within their classrooms via school council committees, classroom representatives or supporting charities tend to place heavy restrictions as to what students have choice over, and such choices tend to be on trivial matters (Davies, 1999; Howe & Covell, 2009). One specific example of the “let’s-not-teach-this cycle,” as told by Angelina, was of an educator who invited her to speak to her class on the Convention and students’ rights, however, prefaced Angelina’s talk by warning students that their “rights did not exist within her classroom.” This specific example of the educator vocally displaying her discomfort of implementing a democratic classroom approach was intended as a classroom management strategy, but effectively disempowered student from engaging with their rights before it had even started. This is problematic as educators who continue to hold onto misconceptions regarding youth capacity reinforced in their own schooling threaten the chances for students to develop their civic literacy via meaningful civic engagement opportunities. Indeed, it is the role of the educator to serve as both advocate and facilitator of civic agency initiatives as stated under the Convention.
The research to date largely supports the theory of educators utilizing their own voice as a positive example for their students. However, despite this largely agreed upon strategy, more research has been focused on its importance rather than specific instances of educators putting their agency into action. Both participants highlighted the importance of not only addressing this need within research, but to also extend this theory into hands-on implementation procedures as well as accessible resource supports which assist educators as they begin to openly civically engage with their rights both in and outside of the classroom. Fred and Angelina both mentioned that many educators are aware of the importance of civically engaging with their rights, but feel overwhelmed and unknowledgeable of the peaceful avenues with which they can do so with a group of students equally eager to civically participate. Moreover, as a result of this overwhelmed and unknowledgeable state of being, Fred and Angelina stated that many educators shy away from civically engaging with their rights and strengthening their understanding of democratic citizenship and children’s rights education alongside their students despite knowing its importance. In accordance with Sheryl MacMath (2008), the emergence of student voice in the classroom requires teachers who value and use their own voices in and outside of the classroom. A teacher’s behaviour and composure in the school classroom can indeed influence the attitudes and behaviours of their students. Hepburn (1983) adds that the modelling of the teacher acts as a form of justice curriculum which is part of the hidden curriculum. Evidence in the research suggests that many educators are still following this “not-yet” approach which places both educators and students alike at a disadvantage as students are currently citizens with rights as stated under the Convention and do not need to wait until the age of 18 to be relevant partners in discussion. Both Fred and Angelina shared positive experiences of students feeling inspired and motivated to engage in meaningful civic engagement opportunities after witnessing
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first-hand their commitment to civically engage with their rights. Fred, in particular, witnessed a student spearhead a student focus-group specifically addressing the misconceptions of safe spaces within high schools in the Greater Toronto Area after observing Fred’s commitment to promoting LGBTQ+ rights.

4.2 Participants’ Evaluation of Students’ Civic Agency is an Ongoing, Accumulative Process which Factors in Critical Questioning and Civic Engagement.

Both participants interpreted the question of assessment and evaluation of civic agency as a complex and multi-layered demonstration of one’s individual learning and civic development. As educators, it is important to remain cognisant of the fact that all learners acquire and demonstrate their civic agency in a variety of meaningful ways which may not reflect the commonly used cookie-cutter model of testing students. Learning how to effectively articulate and represent students learning in a manner which describes both their level of civic literacy and engagement is a multi-layered accumulative approach which is revealed through ongoing observations, anecdotal notes, as well as frequent one-on-one communication updates with students regarding their personal civic literacy development.

4.2.1 Teachers’ primary form of civic agency assessment involves anecdotal observations of students’ understanding of their rights and responsibilities.

The act of observation and collection of anecdotal notes on students’ growth in their civic literacy development was a highly-recommended strategy by participants as it easily and effectively accommodates all learners on their individual development as well as describes students learning in a variety of ways. Fred spoke highly of this form of assessment as he declared it was both time-effective and helpful in having a visual and detailed representation of
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each student’s progress. Fred preferred this method because “it is far too easy to make
assumptions and follow biases that students are at specific points in their development based
solely on what is heard during one-on-one check-ins between the educator and the child.” Fred
further explained that “keeping notes on comments and actions witnessed during peer
interactions also speak volumes as to their level of critical engagement both in discussion and in
action.”

Angelina also reached this conclusion as her observations of students’ attitudes, both
spoken and unspoken, made it abundantly clear where individual students stood in regards to
their level of understanding of their rights and responsibilities as current citizens of change.
Keeping updated notes on observations, such as a conversation discussing the impacts of the
peanut butter ban, indeed allows the educator to pinpoint specific concepts that students need to
revisit and make more prominent within their learning. Angelina provided an example of a
student’s vocal understanding and commitment to engaging with their rights when asked to
consider the impact the ban of peanuts could have on a school community. This student
demonstrated a clear understanding of how to critically engage in dialogue by considering
beyond his own best interests and weighing the options this ban could have for a small minority
of heavily allergic students. Howe & Covell (2009) state that the lack of assessment and
evaluation approaches is due to the lack of capacity building, best practices, and an effective
values framework within citizenship education. Fred and Angelina advised that a good place to
begin collecting assessment data and providing meaningful feedback to students is by observing
and recording anecdotal notes of students understanding and engagement with their civic literacy
in a variety of situations over the school year. Both participants also noted that the forms of
anecdotal notes taken may differ from one student to another as their civic understanding and
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ways of communicating and engaging with their rights is indeed unique and personal to every citizen.

4.2.2 Students’ understanding of their rights and responsibilities are evidenced by their increasing desire to enact their civic agency in a multitude of capacities.

The enactment of civic agency, as well as the desire to civically engage, can be executed in a variety of ways. Fred expressed that a big sign of students wanting to further engage with their rights as citizens was through verbal comments shared in his direction, such as “I’m very excited to join more working groups and take on a more leadership position this time around.” Moreover, Fred also mentioned that students demonstrate an increasing understanding of their role as current citizens when civic engagement is not perceived as an extra-curricular activity, but rather a right given to all citizens. Angelina, on the other hand, revealed that she witnessed students increased understanding of their civic rights when students made it apparent to her that civic agency does not only consist of writing letters of concern to governmental officials, but is as simple as saying “I know my rights, and I know who I can speak to help me defend them if they are being overlooked.” Moreover, Angelina expressed that having students request to learn more about a particular case study, critically question their previous viewpoints, and consider how they can best contribute using their individual skills to all be authentic indicators of students who understand their importance as current citizens of change.

Research on assessment and evaluation of how one enacts their civic agency is, as previously mentioned, one of the trickiest elements of research to gather as the objectives and goals surrounding best practices are still unclear and largely undefined (Hughes & Sears, 2006; Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007). Another case to be made in the research according to Mark Pike (2007) is that a major source of the implementation problems may be due to the
ambitiousness of the goals itself. He states that educators and educational institutions are expected to teach students to civically participate, and not simply teach them about civic education. Thus, the teacher’s role in fostering and assessing civic action initiatives in and outside of the classroom is can be viewed by many as a challenge. Despite the ambitiousness of the objectives and goals surrounding best practices highlighted in the research, both participants observed that this indeed was not the case as educators have begun to effectively assess as well as evaluate students understanding and engagement with their rights as current citizens primarily via anecdotal notes.

4.3 Interest Amongst Educators to Enact and Advocate for Youth Civic Agency

Opportunities Emerged Without Having Received Democratic Citizenship Education in Their Own Schooling.

Despite the strong-held belief by many educators who reinforce the “let’s not teach this” cycle (as observed and termed by Angelina) which restricts students to surface-level decision-making that is gauged by adults who consider themselves to be more qualified, Fred and Angelina confirmed that educators do not need to have experienced their rights and freedoms protected under the Convention as a child to develop a passion and intrinsic motivation to civically engage as an adult. Moreover, adults are also able to fulfill their role as educators by providing children with civic agency opportunities. As educators, it is important to acknowledge that comfortability and understanding children’s rights and capacities can come through simply enacting our rights as adults via hands-on and experiential civic agency opportunities. Moreover, fostering democratic spaces for students to disagree, self-reflect, and consider various points of view is vital to the learning process and the development of their civic literacy as current citizens.
4.3.1 Interest in children’s rights and civic agency in adulthood is strongly influenced by one’s first hands-on and experiential civic engagement opportunity in one’s community.

Fred and Angelina similarly only became aware of their rights and freedoms, and thus the rights and freedoms possessed by children protected under the Convention, once they themselves enacted their agency in several experiential and hands-on civic opportunities in their adult years. Angelina confessed that the way in which she taught the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to students in her first job after completing Teacher’s College took on solely a theoretical approach which informed students of the outcomes of cases due to stipulations in the Charter. It was only once Angelica joined a non-profit organization which advocates for children’s rights, that she was awakened to the realization that “a democracy is dependent on an engaged and informed citizenry” and that “the first way to foster a democratic space is my helping students develop an understanding of their rights and ways to enact their agency as current citizens.” Fred, on the other hand, developed an interest for civic matters by spearheading an LGBT club at the University of Toronto which he himself attended. Such a bold move inspired Fred to immerse himself in other civic agency opportunities, which led him to working as Executive Director at the Toronto Youth Cabinet. Fred exclaimed that “immersing yourself in civic projects which are of personal significance to you, such as youth empowerment, promotes the desire to civically engage in a variety of opportunities.” Fred further mentioned that the civic opportunities which unfold when one is knowledgeable about their rights are indeed immeasurable.

Research still suggests that despite being able to develop the comfort level to enact and advocate for civic agency opportunities without previous exposure to the Convention as an adult, educating children of their fundamental rights before they reach adulthood is a vital human right
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that needs to be respected (Osier & Starkey, 1998; Howe & Covell, 2005). Moreover, respecting and informing children of their rights from a young age will better position students to appreciate the value of social responsibility and to carry through on their responsibilities than the otherwise traditional disconnected methods mentioned previously due to early meaningful exposure (Osier & Starkey, 1998; Howe & Covell, 2005). Angelina mentioned a scenario where a student stated that he wished he knew that he had the voice and power to civically engage in issues he felt interested and personally connected to before the age of 18. As a result, both Angelina and Fred emphasized that it is indeed imperative that educators utilize their own voices and provide similar hands-on and experiential civic engagement opportunities for their students to develop their civic literacy.

4.3.2 Educators committed to children’s rights and civic agency provide democratic spaces which encourage the development of students’ civic literacy and capacities.

According to both Angelina and Fred, an essential component to creating and fostering a democratic space for children that welcomes critical inquiry is to encourage disagreement, critical questioning, and self-reflection as it is part of the process in developing one’s civic literacy. Angelina greatly supports the use of critical inquiry by introducing scenarios that place restrictions that may impede on one’s rights and freedoms and, as a result, encourages critical dialogue to come to an equitable compromise. The online ACORN test is a perfect example of a way in which to encourage critical dialogue amongst students as it is a tool that helps one decide when it is fair and reasonable to place limits on one’s rights and freedoms by factoring in the following three questions: 1) Why? What is the purpose of the limit? 2) Will it work? Is the limit effective in achieving its intended purpose? 3) What else might it do? (What are the side-effects or unintended consequences of the limit?) Angelina implemented these scenarios as they enable
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both children and educators alike, to “questions misuses of power, consider varying viewpoints, as well as create alternative solutions which would least infringe on the rights of all involved”.

Fred, on the other hand, focussed more on the outcome of critical inquiry as he arranges consolidation meetings after students take part in student-led civic agency opportunities to critically reflect on successes as well as possible changes and improvements for future initiatives. Both Fred and Angelina also greatly emphasized that critical inquiry does not solely belong in citizenship education courses, but needs to be integrated meaningfully in a cross-curricular manner.

Despite no specific mention of critical inquiry in the literature, research does suggest that students who perceive they are learning in an open (democratic) classroom climate indicate more positive political attitudes and a stronger sense of political efficacy (Ehman, 1980; Obenchain, 1997). Moreover, a historical study on the Mississippi Freedom Schools Project of the 1960s by Chicoat and Ligon (1994) indicated that many of the students who experienced the qualities of an open classroom climate (such as classroom decision-making, critical discourse, sharing of experiences, etc) became more actively involved due to their experience of having agency in their classrooms. Critical inquiry can, thus, be classified as the vital element that is often lacking in alleged democratic classrooms as it is through critical inquiry that students develop an intrinsic motivation to civically participate and advocate for rights being infringed upon in effective and peaceful manner. As highlighted by both participants, engaging in critical dialogue and developing one’s civic literacy indeed provides students with a heightened interest and commitment to civically engage post their schooling years as current and active citizens of change.
4.4 Transparency and Sensitivity Regarding Potential Risk and Difficulty Involved in Enacting One’s Rights is a Necessary Factor to be Addressed in All Civic Literacy Initiatives.

Enacting one’s civic agency is not always a breezy task that is accomplished on the first try. A large majority of high-profile unjust acts that take place in our world may encompass too many obstacles based on discriminatory misconceptions that could place one’s life or safety in danger. Highlighting the potential risks associated with citizens that are labelled as a minority is an extremely important component to democratic citizenship education as students need to be informed of the realities and aware of the appropriate resources in place for those situations. With this reality in mind, it is of utmost importance that educators remain transparent with the potential risk and difficulty of the task as well as critically evaluate if the work being done is worth the potential consequences. Moreover, when discussing the infringement of one’s rights and freedoms, it is of vital importance to remain sensitive to the personal experiences of students who may or may not have been treated unfairly due to circumstances of racism, sexism, homophobia, et cetera, and have the necessary supports easily accessible if needed. With this knowledge of transparency and sensitivity in mind, there are a selection of professional as well as human resources which provide insight into these difficult questions as well as align with the Convention and Ethical Framework in terms of programming and delivery of materials and services.

A selection of non-profit organizations as well as educational institutions provide a host of useful materials that align with both the Convention and Ethical Framework which can be infused from Kindergarten right up to twelfth grade in an interdisciplinary fashion. The non-profit organization Canadian Civil Liberties Education Trust, as stipulated by Angelina, has designed a large selection of programming materials titled ‘That’s Not Fair’ which range from case studies, read alouds, lesson plans, interactive activities, the ACORN scenarios test, lesson plans, and beyond all located on their website. Angelina highly recommended the ‘That’s Not Fair’ series for primary and junior students in particular, as “children learn through critical questioning how to make reasonable rules and solutions to problems which may infringe on one’s rights and freedoms.” Moreover, Angelina was also in great favour of the free guest speaker option available across the entire country in and outside of the classroom setting. Angelina stated that “this is option for teachers to receive support and have their students learn about their rights and freedoms.” Fred, who is an active contributor with the Toronto Youth Cabinet, the Planning Clinic, and with MaRS Discovery District, the University of Toronto, amongst other non-profit organizations and institutions, highly recommended the capacity building workshops and working group opportunities, as “having the opportunity to enact your rights and learning how to think critically about what is going on in the world around you are essential skills needed to be practiced and reinforced as active and engaged citizens.” Both participants stated that implementation of said resources can, however, be quite minimal as
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educators and students alike need to be aware of these free opportunities and sign up for them on their own accord.

As evident in the research, "narrow instruction restricted to facts from textbooks and covering few topics in depth leaves students with disconnected knowledge and a lack of excitement about the real world of social practice outside their school and classrooms" (Torney-Purta, 2002, p. 210). With this reality in mind, both Angelina and Fred have been committed to providing meaningful and individualized civic literacy and engagement opportunities for students they encounter. Taking on the facilitator role of student working groups and asking purposeful questions to strengthen students’ civic literacy indeed assists students to develop a strong understanding of their rights as well as maintain an intrinsic motivation to civically engage throughout their lifetime. One pivotal example of this commitment is of a group of accommodated students who, after learning about their rights from Angelina, civically engaged with their rights by contacting the head of an institution that repeatedly refused to accommodate their small-sized classroom visit. Angelina mentioned that the students also submitted their letters into a contest organized by her specific non-profit organization and won due to their outstanding commitment to rights as current citizens of change.

4.4.2 Colleagues, professors, youth, and advocates serve as a valuable human resource bank which assist in the co-creation and delivery of services in alignment with the Convention and Ethical Framework.

Knowledge and a selection of resources which align with both the Convention and the Ethical Framework also can take form of connections made with fellow individuals. Angelina mentioned the extensive knowledge of her fellow colleagues at the CCLET to be extremely beneficial in preparing workshops and lesson plans as she stated “colleagues, and lawyers in my
specific case, are an extremely valuable resource as their background knowledge and understanding of the Charter forces me to critically challenge my pedagogical approaches and biases in regards to civic agency approaches.” Moreover, Angelina emphasized that co-creating professional development workshops and lesson plans with her fellow colleagues in the field of law and teaching “allow for a multitude of voices and considerations to be included within the critical dialogue which would otherwise be excluded if created independently.” Fred, alternatively, highlighted the benefits of having a range of voices which features children as a focal point in the decision-making process. One way this benefit is has been reached is by Fred encouraging students to take civic action after hearing about a meaningful issue by assembling committed members together and creating a student working-group. A few student working-groups focussed on issues such as the Toronto Ravine Strategy, Scarborough transit, as well as low-income housing within the city of Toronto. Fred stated that “if we want to create meaningful capacity building opportunities for youth, we need to ensure they are actively involved and take on a co-creator role in their learning.” Indeed, creating meaningful opportunities for children to develop their civic literacy requires that children themselves be factored in as knowledgeable and beneficial contributors in the process. The Scarborough transit group, for example, was developed after a student addressed some of the misconceptions surrounding the transit system in Scarborough and the context needed in order to effectively bring about helpful and positive civic improvements to the current climate.

Even the most updated research still does not factor in the importance of student voice and co-creation of meaning in the civic literacy equation. Rather, it continuously focuses solely on the role of the educator as advocate and creator of civic engagement opportunities for students which yet again reinforces the “not-yet approach” which, as Angelina previously highlighted,
demonstrates an authority-monitored level of civic engagement in school contexts and beyond. Schools that do aim to strengthen their student participation within their classrooms via school council committees, classroom representatives or supporting charities tend to place heavy restrictions as to what students have choice over, and such choices tend to be on trivial matters (Davies, 1999; Howe & Covell, 2009). Moreover, this sort of selective participation sends the message to students that civic action opportunities serve as a means to an end and not something to meaningfully engage in as aware and critically engaged citizens. Fred revealed that the minimal civic engagement opportunities provided to him as a child was solely available due to his ability to complete in-class work ahead of his classmates and became often quite bored. Moreover, the task Fred received to explore new provisions for green space around City Hall was perceived as a quick project to keep him busy rather than civically engaging with his rights in a meaningful manner. Fred’s allocated civic tasks are indeed equivalent to the civic experiences described in the literature as providing students with restricted opportunities which are not purposefully connected to their personal experiences evidently results in students remaining disengaged and uninformed of their rights are current citizens.

4.5 Educators Take on Role of Advocate to Diminish Misconceptions Regarding Youth Capacity by Providing Youth with Purposeful Civic Engagement Opportunities.

As highlighted under the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is indeed the role of the educator to be informed of children’s rights and freedoms protected under the Convention and advocate for civic engagement opportunities on behalf of children. Despite these rights created to protect and respect the capacities of youth, misconceptions regarding youth capacity have led public and educational leaders to be convinced that young people do not possess the knowledge or agency necessary to be relevant partners in discussion. As a result of this widely-
believed misconception, educators who are committed to children’s rights and democratic citizenship education have found there to be limited purposeful civic literacy implementation opportunities both within their school environment and communities at large. As educators and facilitators of democratic citizenship, it is indeed vital to provide students with civic capacity building workshops and resources via non-profit organizations and educational institutions that align with the Convention and Ethical Framework.

4.5.1 Public and educational leaders are not convinced that young people have the knowledge and agency necessary to be relevant partners in discussion.

With the lack of awareness of children’s rights under the Convention and the abundance of knowledge and experience children possess with their ever-growing capacities, Fred stated the challenge of public and educational leaders continuing to disregard children as relevant assets in the civic sphere. Fred also shared the frustration he feels with having to “convince City Hall officials that children have rights and have knowledgeable insights to contribute.” Moreover, Fred further stated that he had created a presentation with the main objective to “remind City Hall officials of why youth civic engagement opportunities benefit all involved.” Angelina noted a similar challenge within the school context when she observed that “children are not given the option to think for themselves and share their ideas in a democratic manner.” Students, she added, are taught to not question the functions of the classroom as it is educators and adults in general who know best.

Research reaffirms this strong-held misconception regarding children’s capacities, as this lack of knowledge and understanding on behalf of teachers, parents, and students themselves deny them the opportunities to utilize their agency and create positive change in the world in which they live (Howe & Covell, 2009). Angelina specifically commented on a presentation she
gave to students on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and recalled a student being flabbergasted that he indeed possessed the right to civically engage in animal rights issues which were very dear to his heart as he had continuously been discouraged to participate by family and friends in the past. Thus, what can be taken into consideration from Angelina’s specific example and beyond is that it is not only the implementation of an ethical citizenship framework, but also the public and educational leaders perception of students as current agents of change and how that may limit meaningful civic capacity opportunities for youth to engage in the civic sphere before the age of 18.

4.5.2 Educators provide students with civic capacity building workshops and resources which tend to be rarely implemented within their school environment.

Both participants added that due to this highly-followed misconception regarding youth capacity, students can easily be stripped from their rights to civically engage within their school environments. Educators, as part of their duty, have the responsibility to advocate for children’s rights and implement civic literacy opportunities meaningfully throughout their learning. Fred, reflecting on his own schooling years which shied away from provided said opportunities, stated the importance of providing hands-on and experiential learning opportunities, as “it is in getting civically involved that both students and educators alike witness the capacities of youth and their ability to bring about meaningful positive change.” Fred further pointed out that “providing accessible resources to ensure that all students voices are valued in the discussion is also a critical piece to the puzzle.”

Angelina furthered his finding by bringing to the surface the challenges and problematic outcomes that surface-level attempts of civic engagement, such as hosting food drives and charities raised for Third World countries without first addressing the reasons behind doing said
acts and the impact this work can have on others. Not highlighting the purpose of meaningful civic engagement opportunities, such as the food drives, indeed served as a challenge within the schools as “many students are unaware that a large portion of the school population are in need of the collected food drive goods.” Critical discussions tackling difficult questions, such as high poverty rates in wealthy countries such as Canada, Angelina confirmed, are being ignored as it is believed to be too complex of an issue for children.

Research confirming the detrimental outcomes of perceiving student’s capacities as unfit and invalid in civic engagement discussions is exceptionally prevalent across the literature on children’s rights and citizenship education. It appears to be an unfortunate truism that when educators tend to underestimate their students by treating them as young and incapable of developing a relational or contextual understanding of the knowledge, students are denied of several opportunities to utilize their agency and create positive change in the world in which they live (Howe & Covell, 2009). This loss of opportunity indeed correlates to the declining participation of meaningful civic opportunities outside of voting, as citizens from a young age, were typically not given the meaningful opportunities to civically enact their agency. Angelina, specifically addressed this point by stating that meaningful civic engagement opportunities during her schooling equated to the “golden rule” of treating others how you would want yourself to be treated. Without having any previous exposure to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child or civic engagement opportunities, both students and educators reinforced the belief that children must abstain from civic engagement opportunities till the age of 18.
4.5.3 Non-profit organizations and educational institutions offer youth civic literacy opportunities which tend to be rarely implemented within their community at large.

In the same way children are not encouraged to civically participate within the school context, students are also rarely privileged to enact their civic agency within their broader community. Angelina mentioned that when she shares the Convention with children during civic literacy conferences, students are often surprised that the Convention exists and that they too have a powerful voice in the civic sphere. Angelina furthered her point by stating: “children are not aware that they can civically engage in a purposeful manner outside of the school walls as permission and awareness to ask are not often given.” Fred stated that students who are engaged within working groups with the Toronto Youth Cabinet non-profit organization also find difficulty engaging in opportunities as they are far too few in between to come by and result in taking an extra-curricular role in their schedule. Another critical piece which Fred acknowledged is that “many of the civic agency opportunities available are targeted and limited to citizens that are 18+ years of age.” Fred and Angelina, thus, are given only slight assistance by avidly searching for non-profit organizations such as the TYC and CCLET, as well as creating meaningful opportunities for students to civically engage.

Research on youth civic engagement opportunities reflected the sentiments of both Angelina and Fred as students who are developing their civic capacity in schools quickly come to the realization that they are not regarded as citizens who have rights and responsibilities in this present moment (Osier & Starkey, 2006). The lack of room for critical dialogue and implementation of purposeful civic engagement is indeed counterproductive in the mission of empowering students to civically participate post their schooling years (Howe & Covell, 2005; Rowe, 2006).
4.6 Meaningful Implementation of Civic Literacy Intrinsically Motivates Students to Engage in Critical Dialogue and Enact Their Civic Agency in a Peaceful Manner.

Providing meaningful civic literacy opportunities is indeed dependent upon utilizing and prioritizing students’ voices within critical discussions and civic agency opportunities. Both Angelina and Fred stated that if students are aware of the purpose and the ways in which they personally can contribute to an issue that is of importance to them, they can indeed develop an intrinsic motivation to enact their civic agency in both prescribed and co-created opportunities. Moreover, by ensuring students are clearly able to identify the purpose and meaning behind each step in the civic engagement process, educators are more likely fostering the development of citizens who are engaged and enthusiastic in wanting to create positive change now and within their future. To foster said meaningful civic literacy opportunities, Fred and Angelina emphasized that students must be given ample opportunities to utilize their critical reasoning skills in discussions, propose potential solutions, as well as engage in self-motivated civic engagement initiatives which are meaningful and authentic to them and their learning.

4.6.1 Students begin to utilize critical reasoning when considering ways in which laws may infringe inequitably on one’s rights and freedoms.

According to both participants, having students engage in critical reasoning as part of their civic literacy development is a crucial component in having students develop an intrinsic motivation to enact their civic agency in a purposeful manner. Angelina believed that creating a safe space which encourages students to critically question the meaning of their rights and how they can easily be infringed upon is a necessary step to purposefully enact one’s agency. Angelina shared an example of a student asking what needed to be done to restore unity amongst
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Americans if Trump were to build a wall. Angelina stated that “it is big picture questioning such as the global impact of Trump’s campaign promises which demonstrates a clear understanding of one’s rights and responsibilities to engage in restorative implementation plans.” Fred also shared a similar belief in ensuring that students develop an in-depth understanding of their rights as current citizens by providing students opportunities to share their concerns with City Hall officials on laws and civic issues of importance to them. Moreover, Fred expressed that “witnessing students develop the confidence to engage in critical discussions with policy leaders on issues like the ‘Toronto Ravine Strategy’ demonstrated their understanding of the importance of enacting their rights and freedoms.” Developing an in-depth awareness of how to critically reason and engage with one’s rights and freedoms appears to set the stage for meaningful and purposeful enactment of one’s civic agency.

Research touches upon the idea of developing a global awareness in so that students take on a more active role as citizens to diminish civic issues and, thus, bring about a better world (Davies, 2006). An essential element missing in the literature is the need to foster critical reasoning skills alongside students’ civic literacy opportunities to ensure that students are not only confident in their awareness of civic and global issues, but are also able to meaningfully advocate for equitable alternative solutions which are of importance to them. Angelina specifically mentioned the need to foster critical reasoning skills alongside civic literacy development as she had observed many students who had trouble problem-solving multiple ways in which to address conflicts in an equitable and lawful manner.
4.6.2 *Students develop an intrinsic commitment to enact their civic agency as citizens by spearheading dialogue and purposeful action plans.*

Participants indicated that witnessing students’ intrinsic motivation to enact their civic agency by personally creating opportunities for themselves and others was a clear indicator of their active engagement and commitment to enacting their rights and freedoms. Angelina observed this outcome when a small class of exceptional students contacted the funders of an organization that refused to accommodate their class size needs. This class entered the Canadian Civil Liberties Association ‘That’s Not Fair’ student agency contest and won. Angelina declared that

the perseverance and enthusiasm that class demonstrated in fighting for their rights so soon after I gave a presentation to their school on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms proves to show how well they understood their role as current citizens of change.

Fred witnessed a similar level of enthusiasm from students who took on a more passive and ‘follower’ position at the beginning of their time at the Toronto youth Cabinet, but have since flourished into working-group leaders which motivate and facilitate student-led working groups. Fred further described his point by stating that “students who develop both a critical understanding and personal meaning associated with their rights are inherently motivated to enact their agency and create a better world.”

Research emphasizes the outcomes of civic action initiatives which focused solely on the political and structural aspects of citizenship which resulted in students feeling forced to participate or disconnected to the purpose of their efforts (Davies & Issitt, 2005; Ichilov, 1990). Contrary to research, both participants observed the outcomes of students who voluntarily
engaged in meaningful civic literacy opportunities. A vital component missing in the literature on children’s rights and citizenship education programs is indeed the intrinsic motivation witnessed by educators and students alike when students took personal ownership of their rights by meaningfully enact their agency in a variety of domains. Both participants indicated they were not able to witness the outcome of long-term committed and intrinsically motivated citizens due to the nature of their role as educators within a non-profit organization context.

4.7 Conclusion

In accordance with the findings highlighted in this chapter, the creation of civic agency opportunities for students are co-created with the assistance of the educator or student self-directed as meaningful implementation of civic agency is indeed contingent upon students being knowledgeable about their rights and capacities as current citizens of change. The outcomes of these civic agency opportunities emphasize the vital importance for educators to infuse meaningful civic literacy practices, such as critical questioning and implementing created action plans, into their pedagogical approach as doing so intrinsically motivates students to engage in critical dialogue and enact their civic agency in a peaceful manner beyond their schooling years. In response to the looming implications and significance of these findings, the following chapter will address these findings in detail as well as provide recommendations for further research.

Both participants expressed that meaningful implementation of civic agency is contingent upon students being knowledgeable about their rights and capacities as current citizens of change. Fred and Angelina shared two ways in which to facilitate meaningful civic engagement opportunities both in and outside of the classroom context. The first, is to help develop students’ civic literacy skills via the act of open critical dialogue. The second, consists of the students
viewing the role of the educator as both advocate and facilitator of student-led civic agency initiatives. Fred and Angelina’s contribution to the literature is twofold as enhancing one’s civic literacy will not only assist in breaking down the cycle of youth disempowerment in the eyes of authority figures such as educators and city hall officials, but also in the eyes of youth themselves. Being cognisant of one’s rights as current citizens indeed intrinsically motivates students and educators alike to meaningfully engage with their rights beyond the classroom walls.

Another finding that serves as a large contribution to the existing research is that of how educators can effectively assess and evaluate students’ civic literacy development. Both Fred and Angelina agreed that the evaluation of students’ civic agency is indeed an ongoing, accumulative process which factors in critical questioning and civic agency engagement. As a result, the educator’s primary form of civic agency assessment involves taking anecdotal observations of students’ understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Another observation of students’ understanding of their rights and responsibilities can also be easily evidenced by their increasing desire to civically engage in a multitude of capacities. As indicated by both Angelina and Fred, witnessing students engage with their rights with the understanding that it is a purposeful life commitment versus viewing it as an extracurricular activity for their own benefit indeed demonstrates informed and active citizens of change.

Educators’ comfort level and interest in enacting and advocating for civic agency opportunities for their students is also growing despite not having received any formal exposure to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in their own schooling. This new finding is pertinent to the existing research as civic literacy and meaningful civic engagement opportunities can indeed empower adults to begin engaging or re-engaging with their rights as citizens and
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providing those missed opportunities for youth. Fred and Angelina similarly became heavily involved in civic agency initiatives after engaging in a hands-on and experiential civic engagement experience that were of meaning and purpose to them. For educators who demonstrate a commitment to fostering democratic spaces and promoting civic literacy opportunities for their students, Fred and Angelina advised to encourage disagreement, critical questioning, and self-reflection as key components to help develop one’s civic literacy.

In terms of factors and resources available for educators committed to children’s rights and democratic citizenship education, Angelina and Fred emphasized the incredible importance for educators to be completely transparent and sensitive to students’ previous civic experiences and the potential risk that may be involved when enacting one’s rights and responsibilities as active citizens of change. This finding is an important addition to research as remaining transparent and sensitive to how rights are not equitable represented and respected indeed need to be a necessary addition to the civic literacy discussion. Hands-on and purposeful resources, according to both participants, are mainly found via non-profit organizations and educational institutions whose programming materials are in alignment with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Ethical Framework of Decision-Making. Moreover, another undeniably valuable resource bank, according to both participants, comes from the knowledge and insight of selective colleagues, professors, youth, and fellow advocates who assist in the co-creation and delivery of these civic literacy materials. Fred and Angelina confirmed the notion that meaningful implementation of civic literacy and engagement opportunities indeed can achieved by remaining transparent and sensitive to students’ experiences as well as by accessing selective resources which align with the Convention and the Ethical Framework.
Fred and Angelina also brought attention to the challenges associated with taking on the role of children’s rights advocate by sharing their experiences of trying to convince adults of their valuable contribution as stated under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Moreover, both participants also highlighted how these misconceptions regarding youth capacity limit opportunities for students to civically engage in as a result. Angelina also added that when limited or surface-level civic engagement opportunities are students’ reality, students lack the ability to engage and develop their civic literacy. These findings are indeed a valuable contribution to the existing literature as Fred and Angelina reinforced the importance of seeking quality resources which are in alignment with both the Convention and the Ethical Framework to help students develop their civic literacy via critical dialogue and engage in meaningful civic engagement opportunities.

Lastly, Fred and Angelina stated that the outcomes of meaningful implementation of civic literacy intrinsically motivates students to engage in critical dialogue and enact their civic agency in a peaceful manner. Both participants witnessed this finding by seeing students begin to utilize critical reasoning when considering ways in which laws may infringe inequitably on one’s rights and freedoms. Moreover, outcomes of meaningful democratic citizenship education also take form of students developing an intrinsic commitment to enact their civic agency as current active citizens of change by spearheading dialogue and purposeful action plans. This new finding is indeed a meaningful contribution to the research as being cognisant of the positive change that can take place when children’s rights are respected and meaningfully infused in a safe and democratic learning environment.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I begin by providing a clear overview of the main findings and the importance this serves to the literature and topic at-hand. Next, I discuss the overall implications of my research intended for the broad educational community as well as directed towards my personal position as both an educator and researcher. Following, I provide a list of recommendations in light of the findings directed specifically to the broad educational community—including faculties of education, schools, and educators as a whole—to be take into consideration. Additionally, I propose areas which are in need of further research within the field. Lastly, I conclude my research by contributing my final comments, share my new insights from engaging in this work, as well as reinforce the significance of my findings to this particular field of research and to the broader educational community.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

As highlighted in the previous chapter, I organized my key findings from the research data in the following six themes:

1. Meaningful Implementation of Civic Agency is Contingent upon Students being Knowledgeable about Their Rights and Capacities as Current Citizens of Change.

2. Participants’ Evaluation of Students’ Civic Agency is an Ongoing, Accumulative Process which Factors in Critical Questioning and Civic Engagement.

3. Interest Amongst Educators to Enact and Advocate for Youth Civic Agency Opportunities Emerged Without Having Received Democratic Citizenship Education in Their Own Schooling.
4. Transparency and Sensitivity Regarding Potential Risk and Difficulty Involved in Enacting One’s Rights is a Necessary Factor to be Addressed in All Civic Literacy Initiatives.

5. Educators Take on the Role of Advocate to Diminish Misconceptions Regarding Youth Capacity by Providing Youth with Purposeful Civic Engagement Opportunities.


In accordance with much of the existing research, the findings in this research study highlight the urgency for students to learn about their rights as current citizens as stated under the Convention of the Rights of the Child both in and outside of the classroom via meaningful civic agency opportunities. Both participants reinforced the importance of providing civic agency opportunities which have a meaningful connection to the students’ lives as students will likely be more motivated to continue engaging in this work beyond their classroom days. Both participants further stated that an authentic manner to infuse civic literacy in the lives of students begins via the act of student-led open critical dialogue with the educator taking on role of facilitator when needed. Moreover, Angelina emphasized the importance of the educator to not only taking on role of facilitator in civic agency initiatives, but also serve as advocate to ensure students are engaging in meaningful opportunities which surpass surface level engagement but rather support their civic literacy development. With this relevant and recent research in mind, it is of great importance for school communities to become cognisant of the ‘not-yet’ approach taking place in schools (e.g., Osier & Starkey, 2006) and work towards creating an open and democratic learning environment by actively utilizing their own voices to bring about positive change to serve as an example for their students. Indeed, demonstrating and providing authentic and
purposeful enactments of one’s rights assists students in developing the capacity to critically question the inequitable powers that infringe on one’s rights and freedoms and effectively address these issues in a lawful and respectful manner.

Despite much emphasis placed on the importance of providing civic agency opportunities in a meaningful and authentic manner in conjunction with meeting provincial curriculum expectations, the question of how to effectively assess and evaluate these civic agency opportunities is still a prominent question left unanswered amongst the existing literature. This research study provides an initial effort in bridging this gap in the literature. Both participants responded to this gap by stating that it is complex, multi-layered, and needs to be personalized to fit the individual needs of each student. One effective manner suggested by both participants is the recording and monitoring of students’ interactions, statements, and actions via anecdotal notes to assess overall personal growth in both civic literacy and engagement. This finding is a significant contribution to the research as it begins an action-based discussion which speaks in response to the challenges raised in the literature of implementing civic agency opportunities within an educational setting. Howe and Covell (2009) categorize these challenges in the following three ways: lack of capacity building, lack of application of best practices, as well as a lack of an effective values framework. Hughes and Sears (2006) and Mark Pike (2007) also add to this list by mentioning that an effective citizenship education program requires clear goals and expectations, as well as support for such opportunities to be implemented in a meaningful and personalized manner.

In contrast with much of the existing and most recent research, the findings in this research study highlight the notion that educators can indeed develop an intrinsic motivation and interest to enact their civic agency as adults as well as provide their students with equivalent
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opportunities despite not having any previous exposure to the Convention of the Rights of the Child in their upbringing. Both participants emphasized that a common manner to become engaged and aware of one’s own rights and of the rights of children is by beginning to actively participate in hands-on and experiential civic agency opportunities in one’s community. Both participants further this statement by acknowledging the importance of infusing critical inquiry within democratic spaces as it allows individuals the opportunity to disagree, self-reflect, as well as remain open-minded throughout the learning process both in and outside of the school walls. This new finding is an extremely valuable contribution to this ongoing discussion as it reinforces the idea that an interest and self-awareness of one’s rights and freedoms and those of others can indeed emerge and be ignited in the later years. Moreover, this finding suggests that instilling an intrinsic motivation and lifelong interest to enact one’s civic agency is not solely contingent upon being exposed to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, but equally dependent on engaging in personally meaningful and relevant civic agency opportunities that create a lifelong impact.

Another largely evident gap missing in the research to-date is that of the multiple resources available in alignment with the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the underlying factors needed to be taken into consideration before engaging in civic agency opportunities. Both participants voiced the importance of placing transparency at the forefront of all civic engagement initiatives as despite following the lawful procedures, issues can arise when protecting one’s rights and freedoms under the Charter. Moreover, remaining sensitive and self-aware to individuals’ past lived experiences with the law is also an extremely important factor to be cognisant of when critically discussing possible civic action plans and solutions. Both participants also point to a large list of non-profit organizations and educational institutions which offer programming materials in alignment with the U.N Convention on the Rights of the
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Child and the Ethical Framework of decision-making. Fred and Angelina, additionally discuss the valuable resources which come from the knowledge and insight of selective colleagues, professors, youth, and fellow advocates who assist in the co-creation and delivery of materials and services in alignment with the Convention and Ethical Framework. These findings indicate that there are indeed a host of valuable resources in alignment with the Convention and Ethical Framework that are easily accessible and geared towards all ages.

In addition to the addressed curriculum and implementation issues in the current literature concerning citizenship and children’s rights education (e.g., Howe & Covell, 2009; Hughes & Sears, 2006; Pike, 2007), both participants spoke to implementation challenges that are a result of adult misconceptions regarding youth capacity. In Angelina’s experience, many educators reinforce the ‘not-yet’ approach which deters youth from actively participating in meaningful civic agency opportunities within the school environment. Fred, moreover, highlights that these misconceptions regarding youth capacity hinder the quantity and quality of youth-led civic engagement opportunities both in and outside of their school communities at large. In response to these challenges, both participants vocalized the importance of providing youth with accessible hands-on and experiential capacity building opportunities as a way for both students and educators alike to witness the strong capacities of youth to bring about meaningful positive change. Additionally, both participants emphasize the significance of these proposed youth capacity building opportunities to surpass surface-level engagement to ensure students are receiving engaging and purposeful civic engagement opportunities in accordance with their rights under the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. The manner in which educators respond to citizenship and children’s rights programming and implementation issues is a significant contribution to the literature as the majority of the current research mainly addresses
the challenges regarding effective and meaningful implementation of student-led civic engagement opportunities (eg: Ichilov, 1990; Davies & Issitt, 2005), and not ways in which to address or approach the challenges presented.

In response to much of the literature stating limited knowledge regarding the outcomes of democratic citizenship and children’s rights education (e.g., Davies, 2006), both participants spoke to this gap in the research by providing insight to their personal experiences. Angelina and Fred emphasize that approaching democratic citizenship and children’s rights education in a meaningful manner intrinsically motivates students to engage in continuous dialogue and enact their civic agency in a peaceful, purposeful, and informed approach. Moreover, students also begin to utilize critical reasoning beyond first their civic engagement opportunity when considering ways in which the law may infringe on one’s rights and freedoms both on a local and global scale. These findings on the outcomes of democratic citizenship and children’s rights education are indeed a notable addition to the literature as it addresses and contributes to the current limited research discussing the outcomes of youth being informed of their rights and engaging in their civic agency as active citizens of change. Moreover, these findings re-ignite the conversation to include not only the importance of informing students of their rights, but to also highlight the outcomes and positive impact that result when students are given the opportunities to civically engage in and outside of their school community.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I respond to the findings collected from this qualitative research study by outlining the implications this has on both the broad educational community—including schools, school boards, researchers, educational professionals, parents, and non-profit youth-centered organizations—and my own pedagogical lens moving forward as a teacher and as a researcher.
5.2.1 Broad: The education community

In alignment with the most current literature on democratic citizenship and children’s rights education, strong misconceptions regarding youth capacity hinder students from being both informed and civically engaged in their rights which are protected under the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (Osier & Starkey, 2006; Howe & Covell, 2005; Howe & Covell, 2009). In light of these most-recent findings which confirm this recurring ‘not-yet’ approach held by many educators both in and outside of the school community (VanSiedright & Grant, 1994; Alderson, 1999; Hughes & Sears, 2006), it is imperative that all educators—school board officials, researchers, educational professionals, parents, and non-profit youth-centered organization members—educate themselves on the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child to not only be cognisant of their rights, but to also meaningfully bring about awareness via purposeful youth-centered civic engagement opportunities. Moreover, it is the role of the educator (educational professionals and community members alike) to inform youth of their rights and treat them as individuals who are worthy of these rights within their classrooms and community at large as indicated under the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Actively respecting and infusing children’s rights can indeed unfold by providing youth with opportunities to witness and experience their rights and responsibilities, and create opportunities for youth to develop and practice their capacities to respect human rights of all those around them and act upon their responsibilities in a purposeful and meaningful manner.

An extension to this conversation that has not been addressed in the previous literature is that of the initial interest of children’s rights and civic agency amongst educators and their previous exposure, if any, to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and civic engagement opportunities. A key finding from this research study has indicated that previous
exposure to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child alone is not a sufficient strategy to ignite a purposeful lifelong commitment to engaging in one’s rights and responsibilities as current citizens of change. Both participants in this research study emphasize the importance of educators (professional educators and community members alike) to provide these purposeful civic engagement opportunities for their students. Being informed of one’s rights and freedoms under the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child indeed serves as a bridge for students to participate and initiate meaningful and hands-on civic engagement opportunities throughout their lifetime. In light of these findings and the most current literature, both participants spoke in regards to the significance of educators taking on an active leadership role for their students to model by valuing and utilizing their own voices to civically engage both in and outside of the school walls (MacMath, 2008). Providing an environment where students and educators alike can participate and witness first-hand the value and intrinsic motivation behind engaging in their rights indeed fosters a democratic and outward-looking classroom which views all shared experiences and forms of knowledge as equally valuable and relevant to their learning (Davies, 2006; Schultz, 2007; MacMath, 2008).

5.2.2 Narrow: Personal professional identity and practice

From a young age, I have always been extremely privileged to have been encouraged by my parents and fellow community members to participate in a variety of meaningful civic engagement opportunities right at my fingertips. I believe that as a Primary/Junior educator who wishes to provide a similar experience for my students while also actively informing them of their rights, it is of utmost importance to remain cognisant of my privilege of being invited and engaged in said opportunities throughout my childhood and still to this day. Moreover, I aspire to demonstrate my commitment to children’s rights and youth civic agency by utilizing my own
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civic agency to positively bring about change via spearheading civic engagement initiatives as well as participating in equally meaningful hands-on and experiential civic opportunities.

In light of the findings of this research study, I also aspire to further conduct research within the field of children’s rights and youth civic engagement to bring misconceptions regarding youth capacity to the forefront. I will do so by working closely with the educational community as a whole to gain further insight on ways for both educators and students alike to develop civic literacy skills, engage in critical discussions, as well as critically consider possible solutions which least infringe on the rights of those involved and society as a whole. From there, I will strive to create a compilation of accessible resources for both educators and students to access and add to from their own lived experiences and research.

Lastly, my goal as an educator who values the rights and capacities of children, is to create an outward-looking democratic classroom environment which results in co-learning experiences and shared knowledge from both the student and educator. Moreover, I will ensure to provide students with ample opportunities to engage in critical discussions, civic agency opportunities, problem-solving possible solutions, as well as to engage in and contribute to research. This outward-looking democratic classroom environment will indeed be the pedagogical lens I will utilize and critically reflect on when making decisions which will make an impact on the lives of both my students and myself as an educator and current citizen of change.
5.3 Recommendations

Below is a list of recommendations for faculties of education, schools, and educators as a whole to take into consideration and implement within their everyday lives with respect to the findings in this particular research study.

5.3.1 Faculties of Education

- It is of utmost importance that pre-service educators are not only informed of children’s rights which are protected under the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, but are equally aware of their own rights as current citizens that have the right and privilege to civically engage to bring about positive change in their lives and in the lives of others.
- Children’s rights and democratic citizenship education needs to be an integral component of all teacher education courses and brought to the forefront when considering significant pedagogical decisions.
- Pre-service educators need to be explicitly given opportunities to learn how to critically engage their future students in discussions, problem-solving strategies, examining possible solutions which least infringe on the rights of others, as well as ways to participate and spearhead civic engagement opportunities which are of interest to them.
- Pre-service educators need to be provided with the learning environment which allows them to learn and create their own strategies and opportunities which reflect a democratic or outward-looking classroom that respects the capacities of children and their rights to civically engage.
5.3.2 Schools

- It is of imperative importance that principals, who serve as the role-models of educational institutions at large, value the rights and capacities of children and implement their legal role as stated under the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child to ensure all staff are supported and aware of civic duties by providing ongoing professional development opportunities which focus on democratic citizenship education and children’s rights. Moreover, it is vital that principals ensure that this goal is implemented school-wide and heavily supported within the school community.

- Principals need to be in continuous communication with school staff at large in regards to ways in which they can best support them in their efforts to develop the civic literacy of their students, suggest meaningful civic engagement opportunities, provide new strategies supported by research to effectively create democratic classroom learning environments, as well as serve as an example and mentor available to provide individualized assistance.

- Principals need to openly invite the entire broad educational community to actively participate and contribute ways in which to better support students on their quest to develop their own voice as current citizens of change both now and in the future.

5.3.3 Educators

- Educators need to act as a role-model for their students by utilizing their own voices as current citizens of change by both participating and spearheading civic engagement opportunities both in and outside of the school community.

- It is vital that educators are actively cognisant of their reflexivity and the ways in which this may impact their pedagogical choices as well as the learning environment of their students.
• Educators are indeed encouraged to incorporate democratic teaching strategies, such as an outward-looking classroom, which heavily encourage students to share their lived experience and prior knowledge as it will be equally valued as significant knowledge to that of traditional academic resources and authority figures.

• It is imperative that educators not only inform students of their rights as current citizens of change as outlined in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, but to also facilitate opportunities for students to develop their civic literacy (critical discussions, problem-solving possible solutions, engaging in hands-on and experiential civic agency opportunities) to ensure that students are well-equipped and intrinsically motivated to civically engage both now and in the future. Moreover, it is extremely important that these capacity building opportunities are meaningfully integrated within daily classroom practices as well as reflect students’ interests and lived experiences.

• Educators need to participate in professional development opportunities as well as engage in further research for supports to best cultivate a democratic or outward-looking classroom learning environment which respects, informs, and encourages students to utilize their voices as current citizens of change in a purposeful manner.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

As previously mentioned in the literature review, a large portion of children’s rights and democratic citizenship education research is quite scarce and outdated. I believe that a larger contribution of longitudinal studies investigating the outcomes of students being informed and engaged with their rights as current citizens of change would significantly assist in filling this gap which has only begun to be addressed in this particular research study. Moreover, in accordance with both of my participants, I believe that research investigating hands-on and
experiential resources and strategies which assist students to develop an intrinsic motivation to expand their civic literacy capacities as well as participate in civic engagement opportunities would also be incredibly valuable for educators who are both new or seasoned in engaging in this work. Furthermore, it would be valuable information to research personal experiences of educators (encompassing both highlights and challenges) who facilitate youth civic engagement opportunities in a variety of contexts (school, community, non-profit organizations, etc) to explore the diversity of experiences and what can be learned to heighten our understanding of children’s rights and democratic citizenship education and to better support students as they begin to engage in their rights as current citizens of change.

5.5 Concluding Comments

After engaging with and contributing to the research on children’s rights and citizenship education, I feel even more intrinsically motivated to engage in further research to address gaps in this important field of research. Moreover, it became extremely apparent to me that as I began to further delve in the research, the more I stumbled upon information that I was not aware of which resulted in me compiling a long list of burning questions I wish to further explore. Indeed, committing to researching this particular field of study is truly a form of civic engagement in itself as I am not only enhancing my own understanding on the topic but also providing the larger audience new information to consider while participating in civic engagement opportunities and their role as current citizens of change. I believe that this research paper indeed presents the case of why informing and providing children with civic engagement opportunities both in and outside of their school community is of immense importance. Bringing to light the importance of exploring explicit outcomes of respecting and supporting students as they engage in their rights as well as clarifying many strong-held misconceptions regarding youth capacity is indeed our role not only as educators, but as citizens on this earth.
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Date:

Dear ______________________________,

My Name is Marissa Cumming and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on learning how a sample of elementary educators create opportunities for their students to enact civic agency, and to learn what outcomes they observe from their students as a result. I am interested in interviewing elementary teachers with at least five years of teaching experience and who are committed to education for democratic citizenship. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.
CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AWARENESS: FOSTERING A DEMOCRATIC PLATFORM

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Marissa Cumming

Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Marissa Cumming and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ____________________________________________

Name: (printed) _____________________________________________

Date: ________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introductory Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn how a sample of elementary educators create opportunities for their students to enact civic agency, and to learn what outcomes they observe from their students. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on background information, perspectives/beliefs, practices, supports and challenges, as well as next steps. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Background Information**

1. Can you describe for me your current position?
   a. What grades / subjects do you teach?
   b. Which have you previously taught?
   c. Do you fulfill any other roles in the school? (e.g. advisor, counsellor, coach etc.)
2. For how many years have you been teaching?
3. Have you always taught at the same school? How many schools have you taught in?
4. Can you tell me more about your current school? (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities)
5. As you know, I am interested in learning about the topic of children’s rights and civic agency. Can you tell me more about what experiences contributed to developing your interest in this topic, and which helped prepare you for teaching these topics?
   a. Personal experiences?
   b. Educational experiences?
   c. Professional experiences?
6. In your own recollection of K-12 schooling, do you recall learning about children’s rights? What, if anything, do you recall learning?
7. And what about civic agency? Did your teachers create opportunities for you to learn about and enact civic agency?

**Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs**

1. What does the term “children’s rights” mean to you?
2. You have identified as someone who prioritizes education for democratic citizenship as a component of your philosophy of education. Can you tell me more about what this means
to you, and how you understand the relationship between democratic citizenship and children’s rights?
3. And where does civic agency fit within this framework?
4. Why do you believe that it is important to educate students about children’s rights, civic agency, and democratic citizenship?
5. In your view, is it common for elementary school teachers to address these topics? Why do you think it is / is not common?
6. From your perspective, what are some dominant beliefs and assumptions about children that proliferate in schools and society?
7. In your view, how can schools challenge some of these assumptions?
8. From your perspective, how does teacher authority in classrooms exist alongside teaching students about their rights and agency?

Teacher Practices

1. If I were to spend a day in your classroom, what indicators would I see that you are someone committed to education for democratic citizenship? What would I see and hear?
2. How do you teach about the topic of children’s rights?
   a. What are some of the key instructional practices that you enact?
   b. What curriculum do you connect this topic to and why?
   c. What are some of your favourite resources that you use? *listen and then probe re: books, children’s literature, music, websites, videos, guest speakers
   d. How do your students typically respond to learning about children’s rights? What indicators of learning have you observed?
   e. Can you provide with some specific examples of how you have taught about children’s rights?
      i. What were your learning goals?
      ii. What opportunities for learning did you create?
      iii. How did your students respond? Have you witnessed a growth in students understanding of their rights?
      iv. How did you assess these lessons? What did you assess?
3. And what about civic agency? How do you create learning opportunities for students to understand this concept and enact civic agency in practice?
4. Where in the curriculum do you locate this work?
5. What resources do you use? *listen and probe re: all resources mentioned above + field trips / community organizations etc.
6. Can you provide me with some specific examples of lessons that you have taught focused on civic agency, broadly, and children’s civic agency more specifically?
   i. What were your learning goals?
   ii. What opportunities for learning did you create?
   iii. How did your students respond? Have you witnessed a growth in students understanding of their civic agency?
iv. How did you assess these lessons? What did you assess?

7. How, if at all, has your approach to democratic citizenship education changed over time and why?

8. What are some of the factors that you consider when teaching about children’s rights and civic agency?

9. How, if at all, do students’ identities impact your approach to teaching these topics?

Supports and Challenges

1. What range of factors and resources support you in teaching about children’s rights and civic agency? (e.g. supportive admin, particular organizations, school community, demographics of students)

2. What range of challenges do you encounter when fostering opportunities for students to enact their civic agency? *listen first, then probe as necessary re: responses from parents, colleagues, administrators

3. How do you respond to the range of challenges that you encounter?

4. How might the education system further support you in meeting these kinds of challenges?

Next Steps

1. What additional learning opportunities do you recommend for educators who are committed to teaching about children’s rights and civic agency?

2. What advice do you have beginning teachers who are committed to teaching about children’s rights and for children’s civic agency?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.