MAKING A DIFFERENCE:
The Experience of Secondary School Students in a Social Action Group

by

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ABSTRACT

This grounded theory study examines the experiences of students involved in a social action group in secondary schools and shows that students "get involved" in social action because they wish to create a better and more equitable world for others. Family members and personal injustice are other motivating factors. Once students make the commitment to join a social action group, various facets to "working for the cause" emerged. These are establishing a supportive environment, and mentoring. The work of social activism involves several steps from identifying a problem, to raising awareness, with learning social and life skills and exposure to different ways of learning as important rewards. Also of importance is having opportunities to influence their schools and communities. A significant finding that emerged from this study indicates that involvement in social activism requires students to "balance tensions." Students became activists with a sense of idealism and optimism about changing the world, and face many obstacles. They want to make a difference, but were uncertain about making enough of a difference. Other tensions pertain to family influence, staff support, gender and peer pressure.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Elisabeth Jennissen, who taught me the importance of an education.

This thesis is also in memory of two special friends, who separately lost their lives in tragic car accidents in this past year; Trish Turner, and Jude Pustil

CHAPTER ONE

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

This thesis is an exploration of the experiences of secondary school students as members of a social action group. This topic is of particular interest to me professionally. For the past seven years I have coordinated a program called Healthy Schools in the Central Vancouver Island region. The Healthy Schools program is designed to provide students with opportunities to make decisions on health matters that are important to them. At the heart of the Healthy Schools program is a five-step process in which students identify and take action on health needs in their schools.

Health is defined broadly, and encompasses physical, spiritual, social, emotional, and intellectual well-being. Through the Healthy Schools program, students work collaboratively with other members of their school. They learn new skills and they learn that they have an important role to play in shaping their school environment. It has been exciting to be at the forefront of a program that builds youth capacity, and gives youth opportunities to have a stronger voice in their schools.

In my role as a Healthy Schools coordinator, I have worked with over 80 schools in four school districts. The schools that I have been in contact with range from small, rural, elementary schools to very large secondary schools. My connections with schools vary from working closely with schools in a hands-on way to having a more arms-length, consultative relationship. My main contact with students has been primarily through

Healthy Schools committees, or related groups such as peer helping groups or student councils. However, my work has also intersected with various social action groups that have taken a lead role in influencing their school culture (e.g. environmental, anti-smoking and anti-racism groups).

In my contact with these social action groups, I have been struck by students' eagerness to address inequities, and their commitment to making positive contributions to their school, and society. A number of questions have intrigued me about these youth. What draws certain students to become involved in social action? What do students gain from the experience of being a social activist? What is their perception of the outcomes of their work? What has the process of working with other students involved? What is the role of the school in supporting, or conversely inhibiting student-led change activities? What role do adults play in supporting student activism? A curiosity to find answers to these questions is what sparked my interest in pursuing this topic.

My interest in student social activism has to a large degree sprung from my work as a Healthy Schools coordinator. Although Healthy Schools has somewhat of a different approach than social activism, (i.e. it is more broad-based; it focuses exclusively on health; and needs are not predefined), there are some similarities. Both emphasize working towards social change, both focus on working collaboratively with others, and both focus on personal empowerment. In addition to Healthy Schools, my interest in this topic has also been influenced by my own personal experiences with community activism.

For the past two decades, I have been involved in various forms of political, and community activism ranging from forming a lobby group to challenge hospital birthing policies and practices, to being a longstanding board member of a feminist organization.

Most recently, I have been a member of the Lantzville Residents Association, and we have concentrated most of our efforts on battling re-zoning policies regarding a large-scale housing development project.

In my experiences as a social activist, I have learned a great deal about the process of effecting social change. I have been heartened at the way in which change can occur when people unite as a common force, and work towards a shared purpose and common goal. For example, by demonstrating outside of City Hall, signing petitions, and writing letters of protest, our Lantzville Residents Association was successful in reversing a re-zoning decision. The experience of challenging the status quo and influencing decision-making bodies is a powerful one.

Yet I know that there are many challenges in being a social activist. In my experience with the women's movement, we are often expected to speak with one united voice. The reality is that women have different life experiences, come from different social strata, and have different political agendas. In my other experiences with community activism, I have encountered many challenges. Often it seems people choose to become involved in a cause because of a singular issue, as opposed to making longstanding, systemic changes. Other challenges centre around recruiting new members, sustaining interest, and reconciling differences in philosophies. Depending on where one is situated in relation to the social issue, conflicts can arise around how to be most effective as a social change agent. Along a related vein, a longstanding dilemma is whether one can be more effective working "inside" a political system (e.g. government or agency employee), or whether change is more effective working from "outside" such as a lobby or special interest group. As with any form of group work, interpersonal factors

enter into social activism, and can influence what gets done. The reality is that people have different interests, and different styles of working as a group. Despite the many challenges that I have discussed with my own experience as a social activist, I see social activism and collective action as an essential vehicle for people to gain power in the face of what often feels like powerlessness.

Finally, my social work training has influenced my interest in social activism. An important aspect of social work is being aware of and questioning existing socio-economic structures and arrangements, and how these can lead to domination and oppression. Social activism is seen as a critical avenue in which to address inequities.

Although I have worked with students involved in social change (i.e. through Healthy Schools), I have not had the opportunity to explore the experiences of other student groups involved in similar processes. In my own experience, I have found schools to be rather challenging institutions in which to make inroads. Schools tend to be hierarchical, settings that operate in a controlled and top-down fashion. Greater emphasis seems to be placed on learning and attainment of knowledge, than the environment in which the learning occurs. What has been both fascinating and challenging to me is introducing change and student voice into a system that is adult-driven and intent on preserving the status quo. To some degree, there is an element of curiosity in my wanting to compare students' activist experiences with my own Healthy Schools' experiences. As indicated earlier, although my work has interfaced with social action groups to a minimal degree, I would like to know more about how they work, how students interact, how they effect change, and what the overall experience of being a social activist is like for them.

Throughout this thesis, the terms "social action," and "social activism" will be used interchangeably. Social action and social activism generally refers to a group of people organizing around a particular social need or problem that they wish to take action on or resolve. Lewis (1991) describes social action in a simple yet compelling way. "Social action includes those things you do that extend beyond your own home and classroom and into the "real world". These things aren't required of you. You don't have to do them. You do them selflessly to improve the quality of life around you" (p. 2).

There are a variety of social action groups in schools in the mid-Island area. For the purpose of this thesis, I limited my research to four social action groups in School District #68 (Nanaimo-Ladysmith). The two aspects of social action that were explored in depth were anti-racism and environmentalism.

This thesis is an exploratory study. It examines the experiences of eleven students from Nanaimo, BC who were involved in social action groups in three secondary schools. The research approach that was used was grounded theory. Essentially this approach generates theory from the data as opposed to approaching research with a predetermined hypothesis.

As a research method, grounded theory has its philosophical roots in symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism (SI) first appeared at the turn of the century with the work of John Dewey, Charles Pierce and William James. It gained in prominence in the 1960s as a branch of sociology and was developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, who were members of the Chicago School of symbolic interactionism (Osborne, 1994). SI theory is built on the notion that individuals cannot be studied in isolation, but rather need to be examined within the context of their social

interaction with others. According to Blumer (1969), the underlying assumptions of SI theory are:

(a) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings things have for them, (b) these meanings are derived from the social interactions one has with one's fellows, and (c) these meanings are modified through an interpretative process based on continuing action in, and interaction with the social world.

My reasons for selecting grounded theory were that I wanted to learn from students directly about their experiences with social activism. The focus of my inquiry was on understanding more fully how students worked together, how they interacted with one another, how they interfaced with the school, and the processes that they engaged in to effect social change. Given that the emphasis of my research was on process, action, and interaction, grounded theory seemed the logical research methodology that fit with my research question.

This thesis topic is expansive and covers a range of interlocking concepts. Within this topic, four key concepts will be explored: (a) social movement theory, (b) student activism, (c) youth participation and, (d) schools as sites for social change. Each of these concepts will be explored in considerable depth in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2). Following this, a chapter will be devoted to explaining the research methodology that was utilized (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 presents the data and findings of the study. Chapter 5 discusses strengths and limitations of the study, identifies areas for further research, explores anomalies within the findings, and looks at implications for policy and practice.

The significance of this study is in providing a better understanding of social activism in schools from the perspective of youth. Schools play a vital role in students'

lives. It is the location in which students spend much of their time, and it is the location in which students' values, beliefs, and attitudes are shaped. Social activism is an important aspect of learning, and an important aspect of being contributing members of society. Yet we know little about what the experience of social activism is like for youth, and we know less about how social activism works in schools. I hope that by uncovering students' experiences with social activism in schools, that this qualitative study will add an important dimension that is not present in the existing literature.

CHAPTER TWO: EXPLORING THE LITERATURE

This thesis is an exploration of students' experiences as members of a social action group in secondary schools. Since this topic encompasses several key elements, the literature search was narrowed to the four concepts mentioned previously: **social movement theory; student activism; youth participation; and schools as sites for social change.**

This discussion of social movement theory provides a broad, theoretical context. This aspect of the literature is intended to answer the question of "what is social activism?" The discussion focuses on a more discrete aspect of student activism. The exploration of youth participation literature provides an understanding of "why" social activism is important for youth and elucidates factors that influence youth participation. The last segment of this chapter explores literature on schools as sites for social change, and answers the question of "where does social activism take place?"

Before exploring the literature in detail, I need to point out that a fundamental debate exists about the application of literature to the implementation of grounded theory. The basis of the debate is preconceived notions, their development and influence on analysis. A key founder of grounded theory, Glaser (1976), cautions against reading literature in the substantive area for fear that this will bias the researcher in identifying preconceived concepts. Strauss and Corbin (1992) see a place for the literature, but caution against being too steeped in it so that it doesn't constrain discovery and sensitivity to the emerging concepts. They argue that concepts must earn their way into the theory. In spite of these arguments, the reality is that as a graduate student, it is virtually

impossible to not have some degree of prior exposure to the literature. Furthermore, the process of conducting grounded theory requires systematic and careful analysis of the data. This method of constantly comparing and contrasting the data guards against formulating preconceptions.

Social Movement Theory and Social Activism

The social movement literature provides the theoretical foundation for understanding social activism. Social movement theory is widely covered in a diversity of disciplines including social psychology, political science, psychology, economics, sociology, and Canadian social and political studies. The literature reviewed is from the 1980s onwards.

Two leading paradigms have dominated the study of social movement theory in the western world. The first paradigm, covered under a rubric of theories referred to as new social movement theory (NSM), began in Europe in the 1970s. At approximately the same time, a different theory called resource mobilization (RM) appeared in the United States. RM theory takes a microeconomic approach to social movements (Ferree, 1992). Emphasis is on how social movements mobilize and the material resources needed for a movement to pursue its collective goal. Resource mobilization theory is more restrictive than NSM theory with its emphasis on the "how" aspect of movement mobilization. It is for this reason I chose to focus on NSM theory.

Before discussing NSM theory, it is important to look at how social movements have been defined. There are a variety of definitions that have been put forward to explain social movements. Schwartz and Paul (1992) define a social movement simply as "mobilizing large numbers of people to directly effect social change" (p. 221). A more

elaborate definition advanced by Oberschall, (1991) renowned social movement theorist, defines social movements as "large-scale collective efforts to bring about or resist change that bear on the lives of many" (p. 2). Taylor and Whittier (1992) define a social movement community as "a network of individuals and groups loosely linked through an institutional base, multiple goals and actions, and a collective identity that affirms members' common interests in opposition to dominant groups" (p. 107). While there are variations within these definitions, implicit in each is the concept of movements as a collective of people who are committed to effecting social change and improving a particular social condition.

The 1960s and 1970s were the era in which diverse social movements emerged; the women's movement, anti-nuclear and peace activism, environmentalism, lesbian and gay liberation, anti-racism, human rights activism and, anti-poverty activism (Moers & Sears, 1992; MacDermid & Stevenson, 1991). The term "new" was attached to these movements to reflect a departure from the so-called "old" movements such as the labour movement (Bleyer, 1992), and orthodox Marxism which viewed movements in terms of economics and class exploitation (Canel, 1992).

In contrast to the earlier movements, the NSMs rejected the state and conventional politics as a means of creating social change (MacDermid & Stevenson, 1991). Instead, civil society was seen as the playing field for contesting social issues. The NSMs are a form of emancipatory politics aimed at challenging social structures, relations of power, and hegemonic practices that permeate everyday life. These movements brought social issues into the public realm that previously remained in the private sphere (e.g. gender, sexual orientation, reproduction). As Carroll (1992) points out, "by contesting the

discourses of capital, patriarchy, industrialism, racism and colonialism, and heterosexism, movements destabilize the identities of compliant worker, subservient wife, or closeted queer and create new ways of thinking about ourselves and the world around us" (p. 10).

Several other features characterize the NSMs. Participation is seen to have the dual benefit of eradicating oppression at a structural level, while simultaneously having a personal, transformative benefit (Lustiger-Thaler, 1992). The phrase, "the personal is political", coined by the women's movement illustrated that women's everyday reality (e.g. reproduction) is infused with politics, and politics in turn influence women's lives. Other key characteristics of the NSMs is their emphasis on people organizing around a particular social issue, and on people sharing a common, collective identity (Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Gamson, 1992).

The purpose of exploring social movement literature was to provide explanations for why people become involved in a social cause. The NSM literature clearly pointed out that involvement in a social movement often stemmed from struggles that individual's experience in their everyday lives (e.g. racism, sexism). By working collectively with others to challenge dominant assumptions and the dominant social order (e.g. patriarchy and capitalism), change will permeate from a personal level to a societal level.

Although much of the NSM literature focused on large-scale social movements, it was elucidating nonetheless. Schools are a microcosm of the larger community, and therefore reflect similar needs and struggles. In summary, there is a wealth of material on social movement theory that provides a broad theoretical context for understanding social activism by youth. The next section of this chapter will explore student activism.

Student Activism

There was an immense body of literature on student activism. Much of it, however, had a distinctly American bias and focused on student activism of the 1960s. I conducted a cursory search of this literature, but chose not to explore it in detail because the political context of that era (e.g. Vietnam war, student protests and civil rights movement) was incongruent with today's context. I did, however, locate one current study that examined the difference between students participating, and not participating in the 1960s student protests.

This study (Sherkat & Blocker, 1994) explored student activism by investigating several inter-related variables that are associated with the likelihood of engaging in social action: (a) socialization, (b) social psychological dispositions, (c) gender and, (d) social class. This longitudinal study produced the following important findings. These findings indicated that parents influence the social activism of their children, and that students from higher socio-economic classes are more likely to be involved in social activism, while students with a protestant religious background are less likely to be involved. A curious finding was that men were more likely to be involved than women. Whether this finding holds true for secondary students in the 90s remains to be seen.

The two major strengths of the study included: (a) the breadth of factors explored, ranging from individual socialization to the influence of social class, and, (b) that both youth and their parents participated in the study. One drawback, however, is that the authors made no distinction in the type of political participation in which upper class parents are involved. Supporting a political party is very different from organizing a protest. Their analysis also failed to examine other key factors that may be connected

with both class and gender such as having more time, and having greater access to financial resources and decision-making power. What I found useful about this study was that it addressed a variety of factors that influence student activism. For instance, there seemed to be a correlation between parent activism and youth activism. Similarly, factors relating to socio-economic class and gender have some bearing on who is likely to become social activists.

There was a paucity of literature on contemporary student activism. I located only three key sources. Two of these sources examined student activism in college settings. Loeb (1994), a journalist whose contact with students spanned over a period of many years, examined contemporary students' attitudes towards activism. His research illustrated that students' reluctance to become involved in social activism does not stem from apathy, but rather from such factors as: (a) work demands, (b) feelings of powerlessness, (c) cynicism around effecting social change, and (d) difficulty in selecting a cause to support. Loeb's research showed that students who were likely to become involved in activism shared two characteristics in common. First, they possessed the ability to identify with the needs of others. Second, they had a thorough understanding of the threats to the welfare of their own communities. The two key factors that motivated students to be social change agents were having family members who are strongly committed to civic responsibility, and exposure to college instructors who were able to inspire social action. Loeb concluded that contemporary students continue to pursue social activism, but unlike their 1960 counterparts, their activism is oriented more towards providing community service than large-scale social change.

Cartwright (1995), president of Kent State University, observed a similar pattern. She argues that a smaller, less visible group of students continue to organize on campuses throughout the United States. The causes that students rally around ranged from animal rights to campus recycling. These and other causes that students become involved with are less confrontational and less political than 1960s activism. A trend that Cartwright sees is that large numbers of college students get involved in community service by volunteering at social service agencies. The nature of social activism today seems to meet a different need than that of the 60s.

Loeb (1994) and Cartwright's (1995) have had extensive contact with students. Their arguments, however, are based more on trends that they observe, than on student interviews. It is noteworthy that both Cartwright and Loeb see a shift in student activism towards voluntarism and community service. This trend may be a reflection of economic times. Jobs are scarcer today than in the 1960s, hence volunteer work and community service have become prerequisites for entry into a competitive job market. These economic factors may shape the form that social activism takes today.

One final article that I reviewed, written by local peace activist, Ashford (1995), was particularly relevant to my thesis topic. Ashford has had extensive involvement with various peace and activist groups in schools and her writing reflects her practical experiences. Ashford is a strong believer in the empowering effects of student social action. According to Ashford when students are involved in social action in schools, they learn important citizenship skills and they gain a deep understanding of social issues. They also gain a sense of personal efficacy. An important but subtle point that Ashford

raises is that that the empowerment that students gain comes from the process of taking action, and not necessarily from achieving the desired results or outcomes.

In summary, there is a vast body of literature on student activism as with social movement theory. This literature however had a distinct American bias and tended to focus on the 1960s student protests, civil rights and anti-war activism. Little reference was made to student movements from other eras and other parts of the world. Sherkat and Blocker's (1994) study provided clues on the influence of gender, social class and, parental involvement. Both Loeb (1994) and Cartwright (1995) point to the changing face of student activism in colleges. Whereas 1960s activism was political and confrontational, fitting the political climate of the times, contemporary activism is more low-key and oriented to community service and voluntarism. Ashford (1995) illustrates the empowerment aspect of social activism for students. Aside from this article, we still know little about current student activism at a secondary school level.

Youth and Politics

There is very little in the literature that discusses youth participation from a more formal, political perspective. Only one book was located. The first chapter of this book, authored by Hudon, Fournier, Metivier and Hebert (1991), discussed young people's attitudes toward politics. These authors base their discussion on two studies that were conducted in Quebec. The first study was conducted in 1989 by the Canadian Youth Foundation; the second was conducted in 1991 by L'Action nationale.

Hudon and his colleagues point out some misconceptions about the political involvement of today's youth. While the general impression is that youth of today are indifferent, and apathetic towards politics, these authors disagree. They argue that youth

are engaging in a new form of political activity, and social activism that is more broad based, and less ideological. Youth tend to be involved in activities that are less likely to be affiliated with structured organizations, and established political parties. Instead, their political participation is more independent, and based on concrete, everyday matters. Young people are more likely to join smaller groups committed to causes that are more practical than utopian (e.g. environmental and humanitarian causes). This is consistent with the findings of both Loeb (1994) and Cartwright (1995) in which they point out that activism continues to exist, but it takes a different shape from the 1960s.

Tools needed to engage in social activism

In exploring the literature on youth activism, I located two sources that focused more specifically on tools needed to engage in social activism. Lewis (1991) points out that the process of being a social change agent involves several steps. These include choosing a problem, identifying solutions and evaluating outcomes. Much of Lewis's discussion centres on practical skills required to create social change. Some of these include writing letters to editors, dealing with public officials, developing surveys and petitions, and initiating and changing laws. Lewis's book is very much a how-to guide. It is targetted at children and interspersed with illustrations, worksheets, stories, and tips on how to become engaged in social action.

The second source, a guidebook jointly authored by a group of young people from the Youth in Care Network, and staff from the Canadian Mental Health Association, was similarly designed to motivate youth to become involved in social issues, social policies and programs that affect them. The authors, Eakin, Roeters and Szoke (1992), present their arguments in a fashion that is appealing to youth. The bulk of their discussion

provides tips on how to organize for social action. Following a problem solving approach that is similar to Lewis's (1991), this guidebook walks through the steps of carrying out social action: (a) defining a problem, (b) preparing for action, (c) developing and carrying out the action plan and, (d) evaluating the outcome. This book covers many practical details from facilitating a meeting to conducting research.

The works of both Lewis (1991), and Eakin and colleagues (1992) fill an important gap in the literature. These guidebooks are designed to inspire youth to be social change agents. They provide many tips and tools on social activism in a format that is practical, and user-friendly. Both guidebooks make a case for the importance of approaching social activism in a planned, organized and systematic fashion.

Importance of Youth Participation in Social Change

The literature reviewed thus far, has described social activism, how it is carried out in colleges, and in the political arena, and discussed tools needed to become a social activist. It is important now to turn the discussion to the rationale for student activism. I located several sources in the literature that present strong arguments for youth participation in social change. Within this discussion, I will also explore some of the factors that influence youth participation in social change.

A seminal article by Hart (1992) provided a theoretical overview of the importance of youth participation in effecting social change. Hart (1992) states that youth participation is a fundamental right of citizenship for youth, and is the basis of democracy. He argues further that by participating in social change, youth learn social competence and social responsibility, qualities essential to becoming contributing members of society. Through participation in projects which are genuine, and involve

finding solutions to real problems, young people develop important social and personal skills (e.g. problem solving, critical reflection).

The second source, written by Kohler (1983), similarly builds a case for the importance of youth participation. Having devoted most of her working life to youth participation projects, Kohler has a wealth of practical wisdom that she passes on to the reader. She argues passionately for developing youth capacity by providing them with opportunities to be involved in community projects. Kohler contends that youth need to have responsible roles that involve decision-making, and caring for others. She cites many examples of projects with which youth became successfully involved such as peer co-counselling and youth employment.

Kohler discusses several key elements that are essential to youth participation. These are:

1. the involvement of young people in responsible, challenging action
2. that meets a genuine need,
3. with young people having the opportunity for planning and decision-making that affects others
4. in an activity that has an impact on other (people or community) but definitely beyond the young people themselves (p. 67).

Kohler cites several reasons for the importance of youth participation in community projects. First, youth need to make meaningful contact with adults, who respect, and have confidence in them. Second, they need to develop a sense of responsibility that satisfies their need to be needed. Third, it is important for youth to feel valued for making a difference in the lives of others. Fourth, it is necessary for youth to

have the opportunity to make decisions based on real problems. In addition to making decisions, a mark of maturity involves dealing with the consequences of these decisions. Lastly, it is important for youth to develop confidence, and experience healthy pride from making contributions to their community.

A third piece of literature that I examined was a guidebook published by the Canadian Mental Health Association. Author, Catherine Hume (1995), discusses the ways in which communities, organizations and agencies can involve youth more effectively in decision-making. Hume defines youth participation as "involving, recognizing, and nurturing the strengths, interests and abilities of young people through the provision of real opportunities for youth to become involved in decisions that affect them at individual and systemic levels"(p. 3). She argues that most organizations, and services do not involve youth in their decision-making about programs, and policies for youth, hence they fail to meet young people's true needs and interests.

Hume's (1995) guidebook is based on the results of a one-year Youth Participation Action Research Project. In the course of her work with the young people involved in this project, two important points were raised by youth: one, the importance of developing real and meaningful relationships in working with adults, and two, the importance of being involved in decision making that is relevant and significant. Hume points to the importance of effective youth participation in that there is mutual learning from both youth and adults. Secondly, by working together responses are developed that are effective and meet youth needs.

Each of these sources has illustrated the importance of youth participation in community projects. Youth learn a myriad of skills ranging from citizenship to social

competence, and they learn that they can make a difference in the lives of others. The final body of literature that I examined regarding the value of youth participation was from developmental psychology. This literature illustrates that adolescence is a significant stage in the life of youth. It is a time in which young people develop a stronger sense of independence, and self-identity (Zimbardo, 1985). During adolescence, youth begin to explore values and priorities, and they begin to make choices about occupations and careers (Berk, 1993; Zimbardo, 1985). Berk (1993) states that adolescence is also a time when teens first develop a sense of idealism. Their cognitive skills are such that they begin to think more abstractly about the world around them. Their thinking shifts from the real to the ideal. It is at this stage that youth begin to develop a vision of a perfect world free of injustice, discrimination, and oppression (Berk, 1993). This is the stage when many youth first become aware of, and involved in social causes. Adolescence is also the stage in which peer influence is strong.

The developmental psychology literature would seem to suggest that exploring values, and priorities, and taking action in creating a just world are important developmental tasks. These tasks build youth capacity, and they also ease in the transition into adulthood.

Although the developmental psychology literature illustrates that adolescence is an important stage, much of the traditional literature fails to make any gender distinctions. I would like to explore this further as I believe that gender has a bearing on youth participation in social change. There is some literature to support this view.

A landmark book written by Gilligan (1982) looks at moral development from a different perspective. Challenging the traditional justice and rights framework as

proposed by Kohlberg (1981), Gilligan (1982) points out that moral development for women is built on relationships and responsibilities and on caring and concern for others. As Gilligan (1982) states:

> Women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care. Women's place in man's life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies. But while women have thus taken care of men, men have, in their theories of psychological development, as in their economic arrangements, tended to assume or devalue that care. When the focus on individuation and individual achievement extends into adulthood and maturity is equated with personal autonomy, concern with relationships appear as a weakness of women rather than as a human strength (p. 17).

Gilligan's (1982) research, while focusing exclusively on moral development, has been a hallmark in pointing out that there is another perspective ("a different voice"), that has been conspicuously absent in the annals of malestream academe. The imposing of a dominant ideology applies not only to developmental literature, but also to many other areas of knowledge creation. This will be explored further in the next section that discusses schools as sites for social change. Before moving into a discussion of schools, it is important to look at factors that influence youth participation in social change.

Factors influencing youth participation in social change

The literature showed that there are a variety of factors that affect youth participant in social change. Hart (1992) identifies four key factors: (a) social and emotional development, (b) perspective-taking, (c) social class and, (d) gender. From his experience in working with youth on community projects, Hart argues that children with a stronger sense of self-worth and social competence are more likely to participate. In terms of perspective-taking, Hart contends that this is tied in with a child's development, and the older a child is, the more easily they can take the perspective of

others. Hart alerts us to the fact that class plays a role in the degree to which youth participation occurs. In his observations, families of higher socio-economic status are more likely to value independence and autonomy in their children than do lower income families. Hart further points out, that in his view, boys are more likely than girls to be encouraged to be independent, autonomous and to assume decision-making responsibility. A similar point was made by Sherkat and Blocker (1994) in studying 1960s protests. Their findings indicated that women are less likely to participate in activism than men. I think it is questionable that this finding holds true for today.

Another key factor that influences youth participation in social change is the role of the adult (Ashford, 1995; Hart, 1992; Hume, 1995; Kohler, 1983; Loeb, 1994). Kohler (1983) argues that at the core of successful youth projects is an adult who has the interest in, and energy to work with youth. Attributes in adults that seemed to be most important "were those intangible personal qualities such as respect for young people's capabilities, sensitivity to their needs and feelings, trust in their ability to act responsibly, and the gentle use of one's own natural authority as an adult" (p. 98).

Hume (1995) indicates that adults have a key role to play in working collaboratively with youth. In addition to providing support and encouragement, and being a hands-on resource, adults can advocate for and facilitate the entry of youth into decision-making processes. Loeb's (1994) observations of college activism illustrated that college instructors played a role in inspiring social action in their students.

Ashford (1995) underscores the important role that teachers can play in supporting student activism. She points out in working with student activists, it is important for teachers to provide students with as much responsibility for the social action process as

possible. This means some initial involvement and direction giving, but gradually there should be a relinquishing of teacher control. Students identified several ways in which teachers could assist them in taking social action: (a) providing moral and emotional support, (b) assisting with networking, (c) assisting with grants and applications, (d) encouraging students to represent themselves at various stakeholder meetings and, (e) helping to acquire additional training, and skills such as group facilitation and public speaking. Students also indicated that they wanted teachers to be receptive to their ideas and not to protect them from failure. They also stated that it is vital that teachers maintain the continuity of social action groups from one year to the next.

Hart (1992) also discusses ways in which adults and youth can work together effectively. He has developed a continuum of youth participation that illustrates youth-adult power relations. Similar to Sherry Arnstein, (1969) Hart presents the levels of participation in the form of a ladder. In Hart's model, the lowest step of his eight rung ladder represents manipulation (i.e. children are consulted for input but given no feedback). The second rung (decoration) is where children are used to bolster adult causes. Tokenism, the third rung, is where children are given a voice but in essence have no power to influence decisions. Hart refers to the bottom three rungs of this ladder as levels of non-participation, and the top five rungs as levels of participation.

In rungs four and five adults assign, and inform youth of their participation, and there is consultation with youth. Initiating a project, but sharing the decision making with youth represents the sixth rung of the ladder. In rung seven, youth both initiate and direct community projects. According to Hart, the most optimal level of this ladder of participation is when youth initiate projects, but share decisions with adults (rung eight).

Hart's ladder is an important framework to refer to in understanding the different ways by which youth and adults can work together.

Much of the literature that has been discussed thus far has pointed to the significant role that adults play in supporting, guiding and inspiring youth in social action involvement. The literature also alerts us to be aware of possible obstacles. For instance, Hume (1995) discusses several factors that adults should consider in working with youth. These include: (a) allowing time to establish meaningful and respectful relationships, (b) involving youth in ways that are relevant to youth, (c) being flexible and adaptable, (d) preparing for youth turnover, (e) not imposing adult structures on youth, (f) being patient with a slow pace of change, and (g) setting meetings at times and locations that meet youth needs.

In summarizing to this point, the youth participation literature provides the rationale for why it is significant for youth to be giving and contributing members of society. Hart's ladder points to the fact that there are varying degrees by which adults and youth can work together. The ultimate experience is when youth are involved in real and meaningful ways, and in which they initiate ideas, but share the decision making with adults. The literature also illustrates that there are factors that influence participation, such as gender, social class and the role of the adult (Ashford, 1995; Hart, 1992; Hume, 1995; Kohler, 1983). The next section of this chapter will discuss the important role that schools can play in supporting social activism.

Schools as Sites for Social Change: Understanding Critical Pedagogy

The literature pertaining to schools and education is vast. I thus narrowed my search to one particular aspect of the education literature and that is critical pedagogy. To some degree, reference will also be made to feminist education theory.

I selected the critical pedagogy body of literature to explore in detail because if focuses on social activism as a vital part of students' learning. Critical pedagogy has variously been labelled as critical theory of education, radical pedagogy, popular education, emancipatory pedagogy, empowerment education, and the new sociology of education (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1994). For the sake of consistency, I will use the term "critical pedagogy".

Critical pedagogy theorists represent a small and left-leaning minority within the field of education. Although there are different strands under the general rubric of critical education, they hold a couple of key elements in common. First, there is a commitment to student voice and experience (Gore, 1995). Second, critical education is about self and social empowerment and the ultimate goal is to acquire emancipation and social transformation (Apple, 1990; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; Gore, 1995; McLaren, 1994).

Schools, culture and power

At the heart of critical pedagogy is the belief that education is a form of cultural politics (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1994). Contrary to what traditional educators espouse, critical theorists argue that schooling and education is not neutral and apolitical (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1994). Instead, they point out that there are strong links between knowledge and power (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1994). One of the main arguments that critical theorists have with mainstream education

is the way it carries out hegemonic practices. Anyon (1988) describes schools as "agencies of legitimation and control" that reinforce and transmit the ideologies of the dominant culture. Along a similar vein, Apple (1990) argues that schools act as powerful agents that reinforce the values and experiences of the dominant culture while suppressing and excluding the cultural experiences of subordinate groups. He further points out that much of what is taught in schools does not reflect the cultural experiences of disadvantaged groups such as various minority groups, women and the poor (Apple, 1990). Apple (1990), Giroux (1981) and McLaren (1994) raise important questions about what gets taught in the curriculum, what is considered legitimate, official and valuable knowledge, and whose interests are best served in the presentation of certain forms of knowledge. This is consistent with what many feminist academics have argued (Briskin, 1990; Gaskell, 1991; hooks, 1994).

There is a large body of feminist literature that critiques schools for the myriad of ways in which they oppress girls and women. For example, feminist scholars have been critical for the way in which the curriculum reflects "malestream" knowledge. In other words, this is knowledge that is built on male experience and male assumptions (O'Brien, 1991). School textbooks typify men in dominant and powerful roles in the public domain, while women assume the invisible, secondary roles in the private and domestic domain of the home and family. Science and history books show men as the explorers, the leaders, the inventors; in general the "doers". Women, in contrast, are often invisible or if present, they assume subordinate or peripheral roles (Rich, 1985). This sends a message to students that it is only male values and experiences that count and are worth learning about (Spender, 1982; Stanworth, 1983). In many respects, involvement in

social activism provides students with opportunities to be exposed to other forms of knowledge that do not exist in the mainstream curriculum.

Apple (1990), Anyon (1988) and Giroux (1981) are particularly critical of the way in which schools reproduce and legitimate class relations. They point out that practices such as tracking or social grouping tend to reinforce class differences. It is primarily the poorer and working class students who are placed in vocational streams, thereby restricting their social mobility. Anyon (1988) contends that upper middle-class students are taught to aspire to professional careers while their poorer counterparts believe that they "deserve" menial jobs. McLaren (1994) argues that schools reinforce inequalities by serving the interests of the wealthy and privileged.

Theorists such as Apple (1990), Giroux (1988) and McLaren (1994) are critical of traditional, mainstream education for the way in which it promotes capitalist values. They argue that much of education emphasizes control and efficiency and prepares students for the world of business and industry. Schools are structured in such a way that emphasis is on competition and self-serving individualism rather than collectivity and social solidarity (Giroux, 1988). Besides promoting a capitalist ideology, these theorists (Apple, 1990; Giroux 1988; McLaren, 1994) argue that traditional curriculum is guided by principles of technical rationality, and scientific management with considerable emphasis on attaining only cognitive skills. Social activism then is the antithesis of individualism. A key principle is people working collectively to resolve a social problem.

Anyon (1988) raises concerns about many of the everyday practices of schools. She argues that schools function in a top-down way thereby reinforcing unequal power relationships. Students learn early in their schooling career that the teacher is the person

with the power. This unequal dynamic is so ingrained in the schools' operation, that students come to understand and accept it as natural and inevitable (Anyon, 1988). Anyon further believes that through practices such as grading, testing and evaluating, students' worth tends to be measured by their academic ability. When students do not fare well academically, this is rationalized by educators as a personal failing or psychological inadequacy. Anyon (1988) argues that this teaches culpability and places the blame and responsibility on the student rather than the institution.

Giroux (1988) lodges a related attack against traditional classroom education. He argues that schools are factory-like, conservative settings that socialize students to conform to the status quo. Emphasis is on obedience, efficiency and control rather than risk-taking and critical thinking. Social relations are structured in a hierarchical and authoritative way with the teacher as the expert (Giroux, 1988). Freire (1970), well-known Brazilian educator and founder of critical pedagogy, makes a similar argument. He critiques traditional education for its 'banking'-style approach in which teachers deposit gems of information and facts to obedient students in a passive manner. Freire (1970) and Giroux (1988) both agree that traditional education reinforces passivity, docility and silence in students. It seems that the social organization of schools does not encourage students to challenge the status quo, thus making social activism in schools an interesting phenomenon to study.

Just as there has been considerable scrutiny of the formal curriculum from critical education theorists, the hidden curriculum has also received intense scrutiny. Giroux (1988) describes the hidden curriculum as "the unstated norms, values, and beliefs" that are transmitted to students and shape their learning in ways as powerful as the formal

curriculum. The hidden curriculum has also been referred to as the more informal, organizational and social relational dynamics of classroom life (Giroux, 1981). Examples of what students learn through the hidden curriculum include such principles of conduct as conformity, obedience, punctuality, and respect for authority. Students also learn that schools are evaluative settings in which they are measured individually, but also in relation to one another. They learn that schools center around a division of power, in which students are powerless, while the teacher is powerful. As Giroux (1988) points out:

> The hidden curriculum often acts at cross-purpose with the stated goals of formal curriculum, and rather than promoting effective learning, it vitiates such learning. Under such conditions, subordination, conformity and discipline replace the development of critical thinking and productive social relationships as the primary characteristics of the schooling experience (p. 51).

Feminist education experts have been particularly critical of the impact of the hidden curriculum on girls. They illustrate how the hidden curriculum privileges males and encourages the invisibility of females. Boys learn early in their schooling that it is acceptable for them to dominate discussions, to challenge authority, and to demand and receive more attention from the teacher (Baksh & Martin, 1992). Similar behaviour in girls is discouraged or rebuked. Instead, the hidden curriculum teaches girls to be quiet, soft-spoken, passive and conformist (Baksh & Martin, 1992).

Both Giroux (1988) and Apple (1990) raise concerns about current trends in education. In particular, they strongly oppose the shift towards making curriculum more centralized. They argue that a centralized curriculum does not take into consideration the individual needs of students and schools. Instead curriculum objectives are determined by experts who are distant from the realities of classroom life. The impact that this has on teachers is that it separates the conception of thought and knowledge from execution.

In essence this disempowers and deskills teachers and turns them into "high-level technicians" (Giroux, 1988). Social activism is hence an avenue for students to step outside the bounds of the curriculum, and to learn and take action in new and different ways.

The potential for what education could be

There is a contingent of critical theorists who have concerns about mainstream education, yet are optimistic about schools as sites for social change (Anyon, 1988; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1994). Essentially, they take a dialectical approach to schools. In other words they see schools as sites of domination on the one hand, and liberation on the other (Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1994). Anyon (1988) believes that the classroom is a key starting point to achieve meaningful social change. She argues that introducing curricular activities that illustrate opposing cultures and competing ideologies will help to expedite a "climate of change".

Giroux (1988) contends that schools should be democratic public spheres in which teachers and students work collectively to fight against oppression, and social injustices in order to achieve an emancipatory society. Giroux (1981) sees the role of teachers as that of being "transformative intellectuals". In other words, the role of the teacher is to provide students with the critical consciousness, knowledge, and thinking skills to be to be social change agents. He argues further that teachers must make classroom knowledge relevant to students' lives and everyday experiences.

Freire (1970) contends that critical pedagogy should be a participatory and interactive process between teacher and student, and in which students are enabled to be an integral part of creating their own education. A Freirean approach to education is built

on problem solving based on the knowledge, language, and lived experiences of students. This way of teaching weaves academic material in with students' realities and with broader socio-economic conditions in society.

bell hooks (1994), a black feminist educator and social critic who has been strongly influenced by Freire, puts out a passionate appeal for education reform in some of her writing. hooks argues that education is not a one-way exchange between teacher and student; rather it is a collective experience in which "everyone influences the classroom dynamic". hooks argues that the classroom should be a "radical" space that liberates, and transforms the social and political conditions that impact on students' lives (hooks, 1994). These are precisely the goals of social activism.

A gap that I noticed in the critical education literature was that no reference was made to the practical aspect of how to make critical pedagogy a reality in today's schools. I felt excited about the possibility of what schools could be, and at the same time overwhelmed at how to make it happen. In order for critical pedagogy to be implemented, a major paradigm shift within education is needed. Education would need to be seen as more than preparing students for employment, and the business world.

After extensively reviewing this body of literature, I was left with the question of how to educate the educators. I have yet to talk to a teacher who knows about critical pedagogy. If this approach is to make its way into classrooms, teachers need to be exposed to this way of thinking. Is this part of their college, and university training? Does this worldview ever get discussed at professional development days? These points were not discussed in the literature.

Another limitation of the literature was no reference was made to recruiting teachers on the basis of their embodying a certain philosophy or value system (e.g. the philosophy of education, student empowerment). Thus, it seemed to me that there is a chasm between the academic "ideal" world, and the everyday "real" world of teaching. On a related note, I found the global education literature to be practical, and very relevant to this study. I am hopeful that this is where inroads will be made in the future.

Global Education

As is evident from the preceding discussion, there is a wealth of literature on critical education. I was able to locate a few sources in the education literature that balanced theory with a practical application. In particular, I found global education to be quite relevant.

The focus of global education is on supporting students to look at and understand the world around them. Students are encouraged to view themselves as world citizens, who are concerned with universal human rights and human relations. Although global education is not synonymous with critical education, they share some common features. For instance, global education encourages students to dissect global and world issues and to take action to address these issues. Fowler and Wright (1995), strong proponents of global education, make a case for the importance of building global education into all aspects of the curriculum. They argue that while there is a natural marriage between global education and social studies, global education should not be limited to one subject (such as social studies) but rather should be incorporated into all aspects of the curriculum (e.g. social studies, geography, home economics, language, literature, and law).

Selby (1995), foremost scholar in the field of global education, also argues for the importance of global education. He outlines five key elements that are essential to global education. These include system consciousness, perspective consciousness, awareness of the health of the planet, involvement consciousness and preparedness. Many of these elements reflect the same values as social activism.

In a related but broader vein, Gale Smith (1995) outlines three themes that should constitute a pedagogy of global education. The first theme centers around global education as a political/moral project. By this, Smith refers to global education projects as needing to be morally sound and politically committed to transforming existing society. The second theme is based on pedagogy as relationships. Smith (1995) contends that teachers are charged with the social responsibility of educating young people. As such, they should be striving for relationships built on an ethic of caring, nurturing, and valuing individual worth. Furthermore, teaching should take place within a classroom environment that is supportive and affirming. The third and final theme discussed by Smith is teaching in a way that builds on participatory, collaborative, and student-centered practices. She argues that teachers should not have 'power over' students, but rather should work towards inviting students to be co-creators of pedagogy. This can be done by encouraging students to generate ideas, and having them come up with possible explanations and solutions. Overall the three themes that Smith discusses are consistent with critical education theory, and fit well with the goals of social activism.

In summary, it was useful for me to become familiar with both the global education and critical pedagogy literature. In terms of critical pedagogy, I appreciated the hard-line questions that were raised around the politics of mainstream education. Many

of the concerns and issues that were discussed, are questions that I too have had, both professionally and as a parent of children in the public school system. In particular, I don't see schools as neutral and apolitical, but rather environments in which students are highly controlled and strongly indoctrinated. Much of that indoctrination is of a conservative and patriarchal nature. Social activism, thus, is an avenue for challenging the dominant social order in schools, and questioning the status quo.

What I appreciated most about exploring both the global education and critical education literature, is that it was very relevant to my thesis topic. It was refreshing to come across such a vast literature that discusses schools in the context of being sites for social change. What this validated for me was that student involvement in social action is a very important aspect of learning, albeit one that, in my opinion, is not given much recognition in our current school system.

I was somewhat perplexed by the fact that the critical theorists (i.e. Giroux, Apple, McLaren) made repeated references to the role of hegemony in terms of class, race and gender. Considerable discussion and analysis was given to class without a corresponding emphasis on race and gender. There is a large body of feminist education literature, and there is also much in the anti-racism literature that raise critiques about schooling that are similar to critical pedagogy. Yet no reference was made to this literature. Despite these criticisms, critical pedagogy theory was relevant to understanding the roles that schools can play in transforming social conditions.

Summarizing the Literature

The four bodies of literature that I reviewed were relevant to my research question in distinctly different ways. The literature on social movement theory provided an

overarching theoretical context. In particular, the New Social Movement theory provided a framework for understanding the basis for social activism. People become involved in social activism to address a social problem that has some bearing on their lives. I discovered there is a paucity of literature on contemporary student activism. The vast body of literature on 1960s activism is out of context with today's political and economic climate. Two of the current sources that I located discuss social activism in colleges. While there may be parallels between high school and college activism, Ashford's (1995) was the only article that I located that focused on activism in public schools. Thus, my research can make a contribution in this regard by helping to fill the knowledge gaps. I also discovered from the vast body of literature reviewed, that none of it captures the firsthand experiences of social activists. This is another area in which I think my research can make a contribution. The two sources in the literature that examine current activism are an important start in showing that the face of activism is changing. My study will augment that body of literature.

The third body of literature that I explored was youth participation. The literature clearly showed the importance of youth making contributions and participating in a social cause. Participation meets a variety of developmental needs for adolescents such as sense of idealism and altruism, as well as social affiliation needs. The social science literature clearly points to the empowering effects of participating in social change, as it gives youth a sense of control of their lives. Youth participation however must be real and genuine, and not reflect tokenism. Reviewing this body of literature alerted me to key factors such as the role of adults in working with youth, and the influence of gender, and class on youth participation. Social action groups comprise both genders, and they work

in close affiliation with an adult teacher sponsor. These aspects of the literature were fundamental in shaping my thoughts in investigating social activism in secondary schools.

The final body of literature that I examined pertained to schools as sites for social change. The form of activism that I plan to study was located within schools, thus a strong familiarity with literature pertaining to schools was essential. Both the global education, and critical pedagogy literature provided me with insights into the possibility of how social activism can be incorporated into students' learning. The critical pedagogy literature pointed out the limitations of mainstream education in terms of how schools are structured and knowledge created and transmitted to students. It also showed that schools have a vital role to play in creating opportunities, and supporting students in their efforts to work collectively to transform conditions in society.

In summary, having reviewed these four bodies of literature, I came to several conclusions. One, I realized that the literature on secondary school activism is non-existent. Two, I was not able to locate any aspects of the literature that specifically address the experience of being a social activist. Three, there is little literature on contemporary student activism. Four, the literature clearly points to the myriad of benefits for youth to participate in a social cause. Five, the literature shows that schools have an important role to play in providing opportunities for students to be social change agents. Given these conclusions, I believe that my research focuses on an important aspect of activism, and that it provides a unique contribution to gaps in our understanding of how activism works in secondary schools.

CHAPTER 3: GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY

In the introduction, I indicated that through my work with Healthy Schools, I have come into contact with various student groups committed to taking action on causes within their school or community. I have often wondered why certain students become involved in these causes, and others do not. I have also wondered about the processes that students work through in taking action on a social cause. A desire to find answers to these and related questions is what prompted this research study.

After exploring the qualitative research, I decided to use grounded theory as the research method. Grounded theory is an inductive approach which focuses on the richness of human experience, and understanding the situation under investigation from the research participant's own frame of reference. Elements of grounded theory included action, interaction and social psychological processes. I concluded that a grounded theory methodology closely matched the purpose of this study.

Framing the Research Question

The research question that was investigated was: What is the experience of participating in a social action group for students in secondary schools? Within this question, there were several objectives of the study. These were:

(a) to understand why students become involved in social activism

(b) to discover the process of students working together to carry out social activism in schools

(c) to explore some of the outcomes of social activism for students

Selecting the Participants

Prior to selecting participants for this study, an application was made to the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Committee. Once this application was approved, authorization to interview students was obtained from the School District # 68 (Nanaimo-Ladysmith) School Board office. Similarly, approval was sought from the administration of each of the three participating secondary schools.

The sampling technique that was used was purposeful selection. The value of purposeful selection in grounded theory is that participants are selected on the basis of being knowledgeable about, and able to provide rich insight into the social phenomenon under investigation. For this study, students were recruited to specifically meet the following criteria:

1. to possess the ability to critically examine and reflect on activist experiences
2. to be to be involved in a social action group for a minimum of one year
3. to be able to volunteer one to two hours of time for interviews

Participant recruitment varied but was primarily third-party. In other words I made contact with the teacher sponsors affiliated with each of the respective social action groups and requested that they in turn solicit students according to the above criteria. I depended on these sponsors to forward student information sheets and statements of understanding (see appendix A and B) to prospective participants. Students interested in participating in the study were asked to give the statement of understanding to their parents. Both information sheets explained the purpose of the project and outlined the fact that interviews would be conducted and audiotaped. Students were informed that their names would not be used, and that they could withdraw from the study at any point.

Four students contacted me by telephone indicating that they wanted to be interviewed. Two of these students heard about my research through their teacher sponsor affiliated with their group, and two others heard about it from their peers who had been interviewed. Five students were recruited as a result of direct contact with students at their school. Two of these five students offered their names to the teacher sponsor who in turn introduced me to them. The three other students were recruited following a presentation I made about this research project at meetings of two of the social action groups. The final two students were previously known to me from my work as Healthy Schools coordinator. Both had indicated an interest in participating in this research project one year earlier.

Although I recognized that at least several students would be interviewed, I had no set number of students in mind prior to beginning the research. In keeping with a grounded theory approach, the sample size was not pre-determined, rather was controlled by the emerging theory. I stopped interviewing students when I felt I had gathered enough data to begin to develop a theory. Sampling could have continued to reach full theoretical saturation, but was stopped due to time constraints. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

A total of eleven students were interviewed. Five students were involved in environmentalism; six students were involved in anti-racism. Coincidentally, one student was a member of both an environmental and anti-racism group. Participants were not selected on the basis of gender or race. The gender composition of the sample included eight females, and three males. Five of the six students involved in anti-racism were students of colour. Although secondary school in School District # 68 comprises grades 8

through to grade 12, research participants were in grades 10, 11 or 12. One student was attending college.

Collecting and Analyzing the Data

The primary form of data collection was individual, face-to-face interviews. Initial interviews began in November, 1997 and were completed in February, 1998. Follow-up interviews were held in May, and June, 1998. Initial interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by me within a few days of the actual interview. One interview was not transcribed immediately because of Christmas break. Field notes were also taken during and immediately following interviews. These served to highlight key discussion points and were a means of recording observations. These observations and insights were part of the data base and were included in the analysis.

The duration of interviews ranged from one-half to one hour. All interviews were conducted at a time of day and school term that was most convenient for students. Two interviews were conducted during the students' school day. The other interviews were conducted either at the end of the school day or at lunch. In one case, an interview was held before school/college began. The choice of interview location was determined by the students. Eight students chose to be interviewed at their school, while three requested that the interview be conducted at the researcher's site of employment.

Interviews were conducted using an informal, guided interview format. In other words, a series of open-ended questions were developed in advance. Considerable leeway was given to the sequencing of questions so that interviews could be conducted in a more free-flowing and conversational manner. Questions varied slightly from interview to interview in order that they reflect concepts that were beginning to emerge from the

data. A sample interview schedule is included in appendix C. With grounded theory, however, questions are constantly revised and being added to as emerging concepts appear. For instance, early in my interviews, students used the words "not cool" to describe other students' perception of their social activism. I began to incorporate this into future interviews by framing a question to this effect: "A few students have commented that students see being a member of your group as 'not being cool'. Would you like to comment on this?" This is an example of theoretical sampling. In other words, codes elicited from the raw data that appear to have theoretical relevance are used to direct further data collection.

The main thrust of the research questions focused on the following:

(a) a description of the purpose and activities of the social action group,

(b) factors that motivated students to be involved in activism,

(c) the impact that the social action group had on the school or community,

(d) the impact that social activism had on students personally,

(e) specific successes or challenges that students experienced as a result of being involved in a social action group,

(f) factors or structures in the school that supported students in their activism.

Conducting grounded theory

The research methodology used in this study was grounded theory. Grounded theory is used to examine "social or social psychological realities by identifying processes at work in the situation being investigated" (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992, p. 1357). As its name implies, the underlying premise of grounded theory is to "ground" the theory in the actual data collected, in contrast to testing a theory that is preconceived or predefined.

With grounded theory, data collection, coding and analysis occur simultaneously. The researcher's role is to interpret what is going on in the data by constantly comparing, and contrasting concepts until patterns emerge. Grounded theory research is non-linear in process. Instead it is an iterative process in which the researcher follows leads gleaned from the data and continuously defines and redefines concepts and their inter-relationships in relation to the data.

In generating theory, the researcher analyzes the raw data by comparing incident to incident. As the process continues, incidents are compared to concepts. Finally, the researcher compares concept to concept (Glaser, 1978). This will be elaborated upon further in this chapter. It is for this reason that grounded theory has also been called "the constant comparative method." The end result with grounded theory is to generate a theory around a core concept. The core concept is a central and recurring theme that links the data together, and explains much of the variations in the data. It becomes the basis for theory generation (Hutchinson, 1986). A special type of core concept is the Basic Social Process (BSP). What distinguishes the BSP from core concepts is that it is illustrates social processes over time.

Grounded theory has its roots in the symbolic interactionism (SI) school of sociology. SI examines the meanings of events to people, and the symbols used to communicate meanings. Meanings are seen to be socially constructed in the process of social interaction. Two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) first developed grounded theory. Together they published a book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967. Grounded theory was later refined by Glaser (1978, 1992), Chenitz and Swanson (1986), Strauss (1987), and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Thus, this study fits

well with the theoretical perspective of SI in that it looks at the meaning of social activism for students. This study examines social activism within the context of schools, and within the context of students interacting with students and staff.

There are several steps involved in constant comparative analysis. These are coding, categorizing, memo-writing and memo-sorting. Examples will be used to illustrate how the research was conducted at each of these steps.

Step one of data analysis begins with open or level I coding. This coding technique has also been called in vivo or substantive coding. Essentially, this process requires carefully combing through the raw data line by line and sentence by sentence in order to capture the main incidents. With open coding, key words or phrases used by the participant are recorded in the right hand margin of the transcribed text. These words are often recorded verbatim, and the researcher tries to preserve the participant's own language.

I will use an example to illustrate how open coding was conducted. For instance, when asked to describe their social action group, students often made comments to this effect: "we meet weekly", "our meetings are informal and fun", and "we all get along". Students might go on further to say: "we learn from each other", "our teacher sponsor helps us with ideas", and "retreats are helpful to learn new ideas". Each of these phrases (incidents) is recorded in the right hand margin of the transcribed text.

At the next level of coding, level ll, the data is brought to a more abstract level. Each incident is compared to other incidents and the researcher begins to look at how data can be grouped or condensed into larger categories. Throughout this process the researcher asks, "What category does this incident indicate" (Glaser, 1978, p. 57)?

Referring to the previous example, the first three phrases (incidents) could be placed in a sub-category called "building community", while the latter three would fall into a sub-category called "mentoring".

The final level of coding, level lll or theoretical coding, is when connections and relationships between categories are explored. Again with the previous example, other incidents might fall into other categories such as what students learned from the experience of being a social activist. This category could be named "reaping the rewards". A final category could be "doing the important work" of social activism. At a more abstract level all of these categories could fall under a larger concept of "working for the cause". Table 1 provides a pictorial representation of this example.

Table 1: An Example of Using Grounded Theory

Working for the cause (theoretical construct)

Building a community (category)	**Mentoring (category)**
• meet weekly (incident)	• learn from each other (incident)
• have fun (incident)	• sponsor gives us ideas (incident)
• all get along (incident)	• retreats are helpful (incident)

It is important to remember that in coding and analyzing data, the researcher is looking for patterns and inter-relationships and a theory emerges against which concepts are compared for goodness of fit. Not all concepts are woven into the final theory or core concept.

An important adjunct to data collection and analysis is memo-writing. For this research project, memo-writing was in the form of a journal. Questions, thoughts, ideas, and insights that surfaced while transcribing or coding the raw data were immediately

recorded. Glaser (1978) refers to this as "capturing the frontier of the analyst's thinking." In addition to capturing ideas, memos were useful in helping to reflect what was learned and in beginning to develop hypotheses from the data. Furthermore, memos provide a chronology of the research process, often referred to as an audit trail. Sorting through the memo fund and comparing core concepts was a vital part of theory construction.

In her article, "Grounded Theory: The Method", Hutchinson (1986, p. 195) outlines the steps involved in carrying out grounded theory (see table 2).

Table 2: Grounded Theory

Process	Product
1. Primary literature review	Discovery of sensitizing concepts, gaps in knowledge
2. Data collection: interviews, observations, documents	Masses of narrative data
3. Coding: coding paradigm, axial coding, constant comparative method	Level l codes- called in vivo or substantive Level II codes- called categories Level lll codes- called theoretical constructs
4. Memoing	Theoretical ideas
5. Theoretical sampling	Dense data that lead to the illumination and expansion of theoretical constructs
6. Sorting	Basic social psychological process (BSP)- a central theme and/or Basic social structural process (BSSP)- a central theme
7. Selective coding based on BSP	Theory delimited to a few theoretical constructs, their categories and properties
8. Saturation of codes, categories and constructs	A dense, parsimonious theory covering behavioural variation: a sense of closure
9. Secondary literature review	Discovery of literature that supports, illuminates, or extends proposed theory
10. Writing the theory	A piece of publishable research

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the term that Lincoln and Guba (1985) use by which to judge a research process, and its product. This term is the equivalent of the term "rigour" which is used in quantitative or scientific research. Many of the canons and methodological procedures of quantitative research (e.g. reliability, validity, generalizability, and objectivity) do not fit a qualitative inquiry. As Sandelowski (1986) points out, qualitative research "emphasizes the meaningfulness of the research product rather than the control of the process" (p. 29). Qualitative researchers have developed substitute terms for the language of positivist research. For instance, Lincoln and Guba (1985) have developed their own set of parallel terms to include credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is the term that is used to replace internal validity in quantitative or positivist research. A qualitative study is credible when the descriptions and interpretations of a researcher match the realities of the respondents. In qualitative research, there are various techniques that can be used to ensure credibility of interpretation. The techniques that were used in this study were peer debriefing, prolonged engagement and member checks.

Peer debriefing occured in the form of consulting with colleagues for feedback on data analysis. It also occured in the form of regular contact with the University of Victoria Grounded Theory Club (GTC). The GTC, which consists of School of Nursing faculty, and graduate students from various social science disciplines, meets biweekly. The focus of the GTC is on the teaching and learning of grounded theory through

mentoring. Regular contact with the GTC played a significant role in assisting with data analysis and interpretation.

My engagement with students for this study was over the course of eight months. I have had prolonged engagement with schools, however, as a result of the past seven years of working as a Healthy Schools coordinator. This experience has given me insights into the culture of schools, and it has also provided me with first hand experiences with students involved in influencing change.

Conducting member checks was the other strategy used to ensure credibility. This was handled by providing students with opportunities to respond to a preliminary round of data analysis. A short, four-page summary was made available to each student, in order that they could check for accuracy of interpretation. Seven students were involved in face-to-face follow up interviews, and an eighth student gave feedback over the telephone.

Confirmability and Dependability

Confirmability and dependability are similar to objectivity, and reliability in positivist inquiry. Confirmability refers to ensuring that data and interpretations accurately reflect the experiences of the research participants, as opposed to constructions of the researcher. There must be scrupulous adherence to the data themselves. The process of conducting grounded theory in which the data are collected and constantly compared against each other for "fit" ensures credibility.

Another aspect of confirmability is illustrating how the data can be tracked to their sources, and what research process was undertaken to develop theory. This aspect of confirmability has also been referred to as auditability. In other words, by keeping a

clearly laid out record of the steps in the research process (i.e. conceptual development of the research inquiry, raw data, data reduction and analysis, memos), an outside reader or researcher should be able to easily follow the progression of the research (Maxwell, 1994; Morse, 1991; Sandelowski, 1986).

Dependability is the method by which the researcher provides evidence that if a study were replicated with the same or similar research participants in the same context, its findings would be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Providing an "audit trail" which gives an account of the research process is the means by which dependability can be built into a study.

Transferability

The term transferability parallels the generalizability criterion that is used in quantitative research. The researcher is responsible for providing adequate description of the findings of the study and their interrelationships and intricacies to the degree that the findings can be applied in other contexts or with other respondents (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). The two strategies that were used in this study to ensure transferability were thick description and purposeful sampling.

Fit, Work, Relevance and Modifiability

Glaser (1976) discusses four criteria for judging grounded theory; *fit, work relevance* and *modifiability.* With a grounded theory, categories must *fit* the data naturally without any forcing into pre-conceived categories. *Work* refers to the fact that a theory should explain "what happened, predict what will happen and interpret what is happening" in the inquiry (Glaser, 1976, p. 4). By allowing core concepts and categories to emerge from the data, the researcher achieves *relevance.* Finally, Glaser points out that

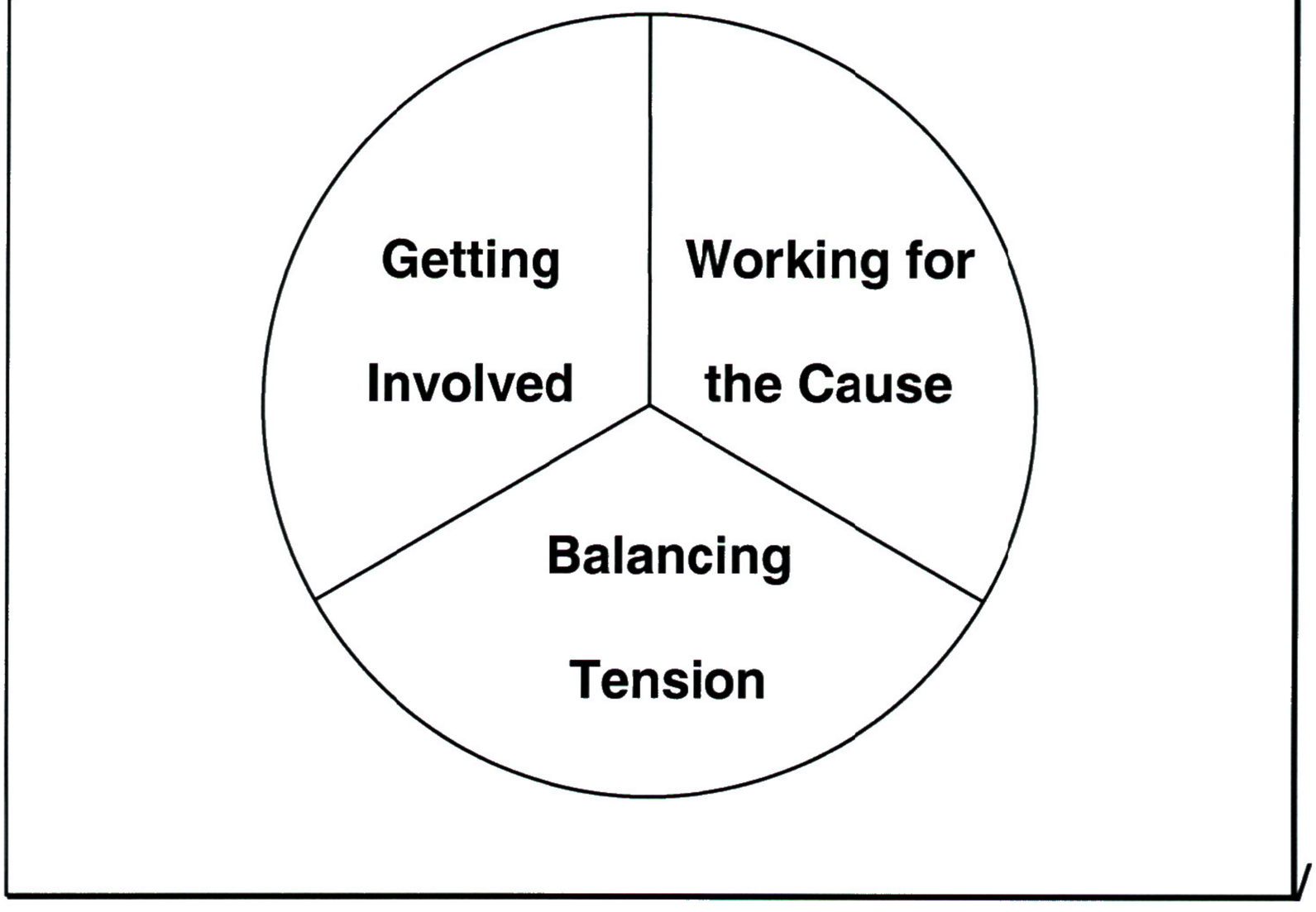
theory development is a *modifying* process. A theory should be adaptable to new concepts that are generated from the data and allow for qualification of what came before without losing what has been generated.

In summary, this chapter has described the steps involved in conducting this study, using a grounded theory methodology. Individual interviews were held with eleven students. By hearing from students themselves, this study has produced some revealing findings on what the meaning of social activism is for students, and what it is like working within the context of a school. The findings will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: HEARING FROM ACTIVIST STUDENTS

In conducting grounded theory, the analysis culminates in the identification of a central theme, or core concept within which the researcher shows inter-relationships between several key categories. The core concept that emerged from the data was students' interest in and commitment to making a difference. The key inter-relating categories that comprised this core concept were *getting involved in the cause, working for the cause,* and *balancing tension.* Figure 1 is a pictorial representation of the core concept and key categories.

Figure 1: Making a difference: The core concept



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: THE CORE CONCEPT

I always wanted to change the world. I still do. I want to make a difference! I want to make it known that I was here and I did something! I just want to help others.

The above quote by Carla was a recurring theme that appeared throughout all interviews. (Pseudonyms will be used to protect students identity). Students participated in social activism out of a deep-felt concern about social conditions in the world around them. Specifically students in this study were committed to addressing racism, and preserving the environment. They wanted to take action on making the world a better, and more equitable place for themselves and for future generations. They wanted to make positive, and lasting contributions to their schools, communities, and to the broader global community.

An avenue for **making a difference** was to *get involved in the cause,* and students did this by joining a social action group. *Getting involved in the cause* is one of the three inter-relating categories that emerged from this study. There were two facets to *getting involved in the cause.* The first pertained to the motivational factors that inspired students to become involved in social activism; the second facet pertained to the processes that facilitated students' involvement in social activism.

Once students joined a social action group, there were a variety of aspects entailed in *working for the cause.* For instance, students did not immediately launch into doing the work of activism, but a process evolved by which students worked together. In working together, students first established a working tone or conditions by which they carried out their activism. I have referred to this as building community. In the process

of being social activists, students received support and guidance from each other and from key staff sponsors. They learned new skills and strategies on how to be activists. In other words, mentoring was an important aspect of *working for the cause.* There were many facets to doing the important work of social activism. This work varied depending on the social cause, the school, and the students involved. Finally, *working for the cause* also had its intrinsic rewards. While students appreciated the sense of giving, and altruism, in return they reaped rewards.

Although students were committed to **making a difference,** and creating a more fair, and equitable world, they were often surprised at the complexities of social activism. They were internally motivated to be social activists, but experienced many external constraints and pressures in almost all facets of their activism. Thus, being a social activist involved a constant juggling and *balancing of tensions.* This is the third category that will be discussed.

GETTING INVOLVED IN THE CAUSE

The first category that I will discuss is *getting involved in the cause.* Students' initial interest in activism was sparked by such factors as family influence, a personal experience with a social injustice and being inspired by others and events. These motivational factors are what triggered students' interest in pursuing social activism. Once they made the commitment to join a social action group, there were various processes that facilitated students *getting involved in the cause.* These included friendships, staff inspiration, and developmental factors. The motivating and facilitating factors will be discussed in more detail below.

Motivating reasons

Students' involvement in a social cause was often spurred on by different reasons. Several students were influenced by parents. A few students had personal experiences with a social injustice. A couple of students wanted to *get involved in the cause* for no singular reason, but as a result of a variety of events and circumstances in their lives. The discussion below will elaborate on each of these motivating factors.

Being Influenced by the Family

The influence of the family was a primary motivating force for many students, particularly for students involved in environmentalism. Several of these students made comments to the effect that there were certain values within their family that were cherished (e.g., closeness of family members, interest in the community, and environmental practices in the home). It seemed that many of these students came from middle-class homes in which there was a high degree of social and global awareness. A few students indicated that their parents were active, and involved community members. Students seemed to emulate values that were role-modelled by their parents. Amy described the influence of her family in the following way:

> Because my Mom has always been like, "recycling is important, and use the backside of your paper, and save it." And I don't know I think I have been encouraged from a young age to sort of watch out for the environment. Like, I used to go on nature walks with my Mom when I was younger. I think that it depends on your parents and your whole family and how you grow up. Like somebody whose parents are you know fast-food freaks every night, and you know throw away all the cartons, and all that stuff. I think that sure they probably know subconsciously that saving the environment is important but they haven't really been taught that maybe I should do something about it. So I think it really depends on your roots, where you come from.

Thus, Amy was taught about being aware of the environment by her family at a young age. Another student, Jess, observed that the members of their environmental group were unique in that they all got along very well with their parents.

> But all of us get along with our parents…..And I like adore my Mom. My friend, J. adores her parents. Everybody likes their parents.

It is noteworthy to point out that two other students made special reference to the important role that their mothers played in influencing their attitudes towards environmentalism.

> My parents- they've always kind of raised me to be really aware of what's going on in the world. And both of them really care. And my mother especially. She's always giving me articles and stuff to read.

As Jenny pointed out in the above quote, her parents, and mother in particular, were instrumental in keeping her informed of current events and global affairs. This motivated her to become a social activist. Not all students were inspired to social activism as a result of their family influence, many became involved in social activism as a result of having experienced some form of injustice.

Experiencing Injustice

Not surprisingly, several students that were involved in anti-racism did so in response to their own personal experiences as victims of racist thinking and behaviour. Mandeep describes experiences that led him to become involved in social action.

> I would just get harassed about being East Indian. Because I had a turban when I was little. And kids would just come up to me and knock it off and just call me "Hindu" and disrespect me about my culture and religion and stuff like that. And the last couple of years, I just got fed up with it and set my mind to making a difference in what's going on.

Thus, for Mandeep being teased as a child spurred him on to social activism as an adolescent. Another student, Tien had the following to say about his involvement with an anti-racist group:

> I do it just, you know, to help other races that comes [sic] to Canada or in B.C. And I try to make it better for everybody. I don't want people to fight because of the races.

Students such as Mandeep and Tien were concerned about paving the way, so that other students, and other cultures would not experience the same obstacles as they had.

Being Inspired by Others and Events

A few students referred to outside events as factors that motivated them to become social activists. Two students indicated that their involvement in social activism came as a result of being inspired by other people. Carla describes an incident in which she read an article in a newspaper about a young person being involved in social activism. This seemed to have a significant impact on her.

> I remember there was this one time- this boy at the age of 12 or something. I don't mean now. This was a couple of years ago. He was doing a big project for something. He was on the front page and it was about children or children's hunger. Something. And then at the end it said. "If you believe in something you know, you have every right to make that publicly known. And you have every right to like, you know, to get people together and go about trying to change. And it's an issue that you think you can change and that it's a concern to others." That had a big effect on me.

Carla seemed particularly inspired by the role that youth can play in leaving a mark, as in evident by her comment. "I want to make it known that I was here and that I did something." A second student, Kimiko, commented that her motivation to join an anti-racism group was as a result of secondary school students coming to speak about anti-racism when she was in elementary school. Another student,

Laura, felt that there was no single factor that triggered her social activism. Rather, it was the culmination of a number of things that she read about in the newspaper, saw on the news or heard about in her classes that motivated her to become involved in environmentalism.

Thus, it would appear that there is no single factor that motivates students to become involved in social activism. Students whose parents were involved and active community members tended to model their parents. This seemed to be more strongly the case for environmental students. Other students such as Mandeep, and Tien were drawn to social activism because of their own experiences with racism. A few students could not identify any single factor that inspired them to being a social activist, but rather it was a culmination of events and circumstances that influenced them. There was, however, more to social activism than why students became involved, there was a process that enabled students to "get involved" in activism. This will be discussed below.

Facilitating Processes

Once students made the decision to become involved in social activism, there was a process that helped to facilitate their involvement in social activism. The specific factors that enabled students to become social activists were friendships, staff inspiration, and developmental factors.

Friendships

Friendships were a key facilitating factor for many students. Several students commented on the fact that although they were interested in a particular social cause, they would not have joined without a friend. Joining with a friend provided students with a

source of security and support. In the quote below, Jenny talks about how she and Carla joined their social action group together:

> I just heard about it [*meeting of social action group*] over the announcements, and I didn't know what it was. And I think Carla asked me if I wanted to join, and I guess that I said that I'd been thinking of it. So we decided to go one time and we've been going ever since.

Jenny went on to say later in the interview that she felt that she would have been viewed as a "loser" if she had joined a group on her own. Other students referred to the fact that it was "intimidating" to join a group where you knew no one. Hence, joining with a friend alleviated tensions around trying something new.

Staff Inspiration

In a couple of cases, key staff were influential in encouraging students to join a social action group. Two students who had experienced racism joined a social action group after having been approached by their school counsellor. She encouraged these students to join an activist group because she believed that they could add a particularly unique perspective. Both students participated in a student panel aimed at educating people about racism. By discussing their first-hand experiences with racism, they were able to transform a negative experience into a constructive learning opportunity.

In addition to encouragement, some staff were a catalyst for youth involvement because of the way in which they interacted with students. It was not so much what they said, but how they were with students that attracted students to *get involved* in a social action group. Harpinder discusses the influential role that her peer helping teacher had on her:

> She's like my motivator, more like a role model to me. Just because she's like a peer helper teacher and a human services teacher, and you see the way that she attracts the students. She cares more than she teaches. She cares more about the students than she cares more about the teaching.

It is clear from Harpinder's comments that it is "how" this teacher works with students that is an incentive for students to join a social action group.

Developmental Factors

Several students commented on the fact that *getting involved* in a social action group was contingent on age. In other words, they felt that it was difficult to elicit the interest and commitment of younger students (i.e. Gr. 8 and 9 students). Laura discusses her experiences in having joined a social action group when she was in Gr. 8.

> In Gr. 8, I kind of knew about it. I think I went to one meeting, but I didn't really know anybody in it, and everybody was older and it was intimidating.

Laura did not remain with the group because she felt uncomfortable mingling with older students. Several other students echoed a similar sentiment. As discussed above, the idea of mixing with older students is both frightening and intimidating to younger grades. Kimiko observed that as students became older, they were less concerned about what others thought of them, and more concerned about wanting to support a particular cause. Hence, it would appear that involvement in social activism is related to students' development and maturity.

In summary, the data showed that students first become motivated to be involved in social activism for varying reasons. Once the seed has been sown in terms of interest, there are factors that mobilize students into *getting involved in a cause*. Friendships, staff inspiration, and developmental factors are important aspects of *getting involved in*

the cause. It is important to point out that in addition to the motivating and influencing factors that inspire students to social activism, schools provide opportunities for students to engage in social activism. In other words, there are existing social action groups in place in schools, that students can join as an avenue for conducting their activism. The next section will discuss the process by which students carry out the work of social activism.

WORKING FOR THE CAUSE

The second category in **making a difference** is *working for the cause.* This section of the chapter will illustrate the different phases that are a part of *working for the cause.* For instance, building community, is the foundation by which students come together, and develop a sense of cohesiveness. Once a community is built, mentoring is the process by which students learn new skills. This helps to sustain students' commitment to activism. Doing the important work is the nuts and bolts of activism. This refers to the actual work of activism that evolves through different stages from planning projects to carrying out various activities. These stages do not unfold in a perfectly linear fashion, however there is somewhat of a progression in how social activism is carried out. Finally, reaping the rewards refers to the benefits or outcomes of social activism for students. Each of these four sub-categories will be discussed in more detail in this chapter.

Building Community

Many students commented on the sense of community that developed within their social action group. It seemed that certain conditions needed to be in place for students to work effectively as social activists. Establishing a congenial and trusting environment

was an important first step in building community. Several students commented that they liked the fact that they met weekly. Having regular and close contact with other students who shared similar beliefs, and values was important to students, as Amy states below:

> People in the group think the same way. They have the same ideas and are basically out to do the same thing. Like we all want to raise awareness about our cause.

Amy's comments illustrate that students who are drawn to social activism share similar values and are motivated by the same goals.

Students often commented that one feature that they liked about their group was that it attracted students from varying grades. It seemed that younger high school students particularly appreciated opportunities to mingle with and be valued by older students. Students felt that this broke down age barriers. Outside of student council, it would seem that little opportunity of this type exists in schools.

Another method of building community was establishing a tone by which students could function together in a group. Aspects of building community included working in ways that suited students. Several students commented that they liked the fact that their meetings were casual, informal, loosely structured, and fun. In addition to the political activity of their group, social action groups seemed to meet other needs for students such as keeping active, and involved. Several students remarked that their groups provided them with opportunities to socialize, and to have fun. Kimiko describes her group in the following way:

> It's a social thing too. It's not.. It is a club. It is a meeting. And we do gossip and stuff. And it's fun and you feel like if you do something then hopefully it's an added benefit than if you just sit around and do nothing. You're just another person. I like to do stuff with my time. I don't like to just sit around.

Kimiko's comments reflect the fact that an aspect of building community is working in an enjoyable environment. Another student, Laura made a similar comment. She indicated that their social action group had a positive energy that attracted other students to their group

> I think we had a lot of energy last year and that attracted people. You'd go to the meetings and you'd have fun, and we always did have fun too. It was never formal, like, we'd get things done but it would always be anybody could speak or what not. It was always laid-back. And we were doing positive things, so a lot of people wanted to be part of this.

As Laura's comment indicates, an aspect of building community is setting a tone that is informal and positive.

One of the greatest sources of support for students involved in activism was the encouragement that students within a group gave to one another. In general, there seemed to be a high level of acceptance, understanding and nurturing that took place within these groups. The following is a description of the support that Justin received from his social action group:

> It was good for me because I had a lot of stuff on my chest. Like, I just needed someone to speak to, and I guess, that the group was, I don't know, they listened and heard what I had to say.

Building a community meant working in a setting that was open and supportive, as Justin pointed out. Harpinder described her group as a "big, safe group or haven" in which students sought refuge. She also remarked that being a part of a social action group gave her courage. Kimiko made a similar comment:

> It's like a really safe environment, so you can talk about the different things, and people know what you are talking about when you talk about situations.

She went on to say that being a member of a social action group provided her with opportunities to share experiences, and ideas with other students. Several students referred to the bonding that occured as a result of being in a group in which students shared similar experiences, and were committed to the same goals. Many students felt that their social action group provided them with a sense of belonging, and identity.

It would seem that building community is the foundation for *working for the cause*. Having certain conditions in place such as a supportive and congenial environment, an informal working tone, and an opportunity to share experiences and receive support were important elements in building community. Mentoring was another aspect of *working for the cause*.

Mentoring

Mentoring is the means by which students received direction, guidance and learned new skills to become social activists. Often, it was the older, more experienced members of a social action group that shared their knowledge and expertise with students who were new to the cause. Sharing information, assisting in overcoming obstacles, and learning the ropes were a few examples of how mentoring took place. Not all mentoring was student to student. In fact, adults played an important role in mentoring. The next section will discuss these two forms of mentoring: (a) youth to youth mentoring, and (b) adult to youth mentoring.

Youth to Youth Mentoring

By being involved in multi-aged activities, older students were able to mentor younger students. In addition to the ongoing and informal support, much of the

mentoring occured in more structured formats such as through youth retreats and workshops and through peer helping programs.

Students welcomed opportunities to participate in youth retreats, and workshops. Connecting with other like-minded students gave them a sense of validation, and legitimacy as Jenny describes in the following quote:

> It's just.. like I mentioned to you that we went to that Red Cross seminar and I was just, I've never been so amazed in my life. Like, it was just.... Because I've always felt like kind of out of place. Because I always think different things. Like everyone is concerned about what they are going to do the next day or something, whereas I think about other things as a whole and ... other people. And I went to this symposium and everyone thought the same thing. They didn't believe the same thing necessarily but everyone was concerned with the same issues.

Retreats also equipped students with ideas, resources and practical tools to use when they returned to their respective schools. It gave students a chance to learn from each other and an opportunity to network with other secondary schools.

One of the greatest benefits of retreats is that they provided the opportunity for student-to-student dialogue. Students particularly appreciated retreats that were organized and facilitated by youth. It is clear from Harpinder's comments that students responded well to a student-friendly setting:

> Last year there was a student forum like that too. Except last year we weren't really.. Last year I didn't really like it because there were tables, there were chairs. It was just too concrete sequential. It was more adult oriented. It was adults talking to us. And telling us what we should be like but it is really us that have to live with it. We live in the environment. We go to school and stuff. And this year was different because it was students talking to students and we had abolished the table rule. We had absolutely no tables. We maybe had two to put stuff on. We just had a circle of chairs because we felt like that a circle is never ending sort of thing.....It was. just a

> lot easier talking to students-talking to students. And we basically facilitated it. There were three adults at the time but they basically were part of it too. And people felt a lot more comfortable just coming out and talking to kids their own age instead of someone talking to them.

It would appear from Harpinder's comment that the ways in which retreats are structured both physically, and emotionally set a tone that is conducive to youth dialogue.

Another benefit of retreats is that students had the opportunity to meet, and become better acquainted with students outside of a school setting. Students seemed to appreciate opportunities in which they could connect with other students in a deeper and more intimate level. Sarah describes her experiences at a retreat in the following way:

> Like at the retreat too as well. Here are all these strangers that you don't know, or you are acquaintances with and you get right down and you start talking about all the prejudiced things that have happened to you or the racist comments that have been thrown at you. And everybody opens up. It's a subject that you either are very close about and you won't talk about or it's very open and you just share a bond with everybody. That's the thing that probably profoundly affected me the most. How all these people, all these different cultures, all these different races, all these different opinions can come together. And everybody is just so, I don't know connected. I guess that's what you could say.

Sarah indicated that retreats provide opportunities for students to develop deeper connections with one another.

Similar to retreats, peer helping programs played a major function in mentoring students, and supporting social activism. There appears to be no universal way of delivering peer helping programs in schools; rather it is left to the discretion of individual school counsellors. Generally it seems that peer helping programs offer skills training in areas pertaining to self and others. There is a strong emphasis on interpersonal communication. Peer helping seems to be predominantly available to the older grades in secondary schools (i.e. Gr. 11 and Gr. 12). In some schools it would appear that peer

helping is offered as an extra-curricular course, while in other schools it is part of the curriculum.

One school was very innovative in how its peer helping program became a vehicle for activism. Essentially, peer helping was offered as a course that was divided into two major parts. The first component focused on skills training and skill attainment, while the second component had a direct application to social issues. The teacher sponsor was particularly astute at raising students' social consciousness and critical thinking. Students learned about oppression, the different "isms" and power relations in society. By taking on a project aimed at diversity and racism, students were then able to apply critical thinking to real situations that they faced. Thus, for this school, their social action group was not separate from, but rather was a by-product of their peer helping program. The role of the teacher was significant in first providing students with knowledge, and then establishing opportunities for this knowledge to be put into practice. The importance of adult mentors will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

An important aspect of peer helping is that it instils in students a belief in themselves and a belief that they can make a difference. Harpinder talked about the important discovery she had made about herself. In addition to clarifying values, peer helping gave her insights into the kind of person she wanted to be.

> I think peer helping taught me a lot about what I wanted to be. I didn't want to be the passive person and I didn't want to be the aggressive one. I wanted to be the assertive person that could get what they wanted without having to upset people.

In addition to helping clarify values as Harpinder indicated, peer helping programs also provided students with the opportunities to take on leadership roles, and to test out

ideas. In some respects, it would seem that peer helping served as the training ground for students to be social change agents.

Adult to Youth Mentoring

In addition to the mentoring that existed between students, most students commented on the significant role that adult mentors played in keeping them motivated as social activists. Adult mentors were most often the teacher sponsor that was affiliated with the social action group. However students referred to several other school staff that played a significant mentoring role (e.g. Social Studies and Biology teacher, counsellors, peer helping teacher, and inner city support worker). Harpinder was particularly inspired by the female vice-principal of their school.

> I think that Ms.__plays a big role. Because she's a woman, and she's dynamic. Like she totally empowers us to do things, and whenever we think we can't do it, like I'm in peer helping too, and there is so much networking between groups and stuff. And whenever we think we can't do anything, she just sort of tells us that we can do it. And I… actually she's like a real role model too for us.

Like Harpinder, almost all students spoke about their mentors in very favorable terms. They saw their mentors as champions of students' rights and strong believers that students can make a difference. Students often remarked on how valuable it was for them to hear positive feedback from their mentors to the effect that they were performing good work, and that it was students like them that made a difference. The following quote is an illustration of the support that Tien received from his mentor:

> Well, it's just the way they talk to me like emotionally. They really touch me. They help me to believe in myself in a way. J. especially. She talks to me so many times. Like before… just before Christmas, like a month before Christmas I have so much problems. And I don't know, if it weren't like for her I would be out on the street now.

Students described attributes that their mentors possessed in very positive ways. Comments that were made painted a picture of mentors being sensitive, kind, easy to talk to, approachable and balanced in their approach to life. A couple of students stated that their mentors were gentle and laid-back and tended not to get easily upset or "stressed out". Several students made remarks to the effect that their mentors were ideal role models for them.

In follow-up interviews with students from one social action group, they all agreed that one of the aspects that they appreciated most about their mentor (peer helping teacher) was her ability to establish a level playing field when interacting with students. They liked the "equal" relationship that they had with her, and they liked the fact that they called her by her first name. "She treats you as a person. She doesn't treat you as a person younger than her." Students from another social action group felt that their mentor (staff sponsor) was the vital force behind their group. They saw their mentor as the glue that helped to keep their group together. They described their mentor as intuitively knowing when to jump in and help out, and when to step back and let students take ownership of their activities.

An essential role that students saw their mentors playing was that of resource person to their group. Mentors supported students in a variety of ways: locating and connecting students with community resources; arranging guest speakers; bringing in relevant newspaper articles as a catalyst for discussion; and accessing information through the Internet. Often mentors were indispensable in paving the way for students in the school and in the community.

Hence, mentoring served an important role in *working for the cause.* Students learned from each other and they learned from key adults. Through more structured mechanisms such as peer helping programs and retreats, students learned new skills, thereby enabling them to carry out the important work of social activism.

Doing the Important Work

Another important aspect of *working for the cause* is doing the important work. Students became involved in a host of activities, and projects that were a part of social activism. Aspects of their work included planning projects, taking on projects, raising awareness, advocacy, and influencing the culture of the school. Each of these will be discussed in this section of the chapter.

Planning Projects

An important feature of social activism was the process that groups went through in making decisions about the activities and projects with which they would become involved. Several students discussed the fact that they started their school year with a review of what had been achieved the previous year, then they made plans for the upcoming year. Students generally seemed to engage in a process of brainstorming ideas, then narrowing down to those ideas that were the most workable, and had the greatest support. Sarah discusses their group's planning process in the following way:

> At the beginning of the year we had about twenty good ideas and we said, "OK why don't we break them up into certain ideas and get people to go on the ones that they are most concerned with and the ones that they think they can help out with the most, and the ones they want to help out with the most."

Sarah felt that their group worked more effectively, and were able to accomplish more by working in small sub-groups, and by working on several ideas simultaneously.

For the most part, students felt that the projects and activities that they became involved with were student-initiated. In some cases, their staff sponsor played a role in suggesting ideas to the group, and in giving feedback on the logistics of how to implement ideas.

Taking on Projects

A key aspect of doing the important work was the actual projects and activities that social action groups took on. Some of these projects were directed at the immediate school environment, while others were aimed at the community or at society as a whole. Examples of projects organized by environmental students at the school level included recycling projects, Use Less Stuff days, Earth Day awareness, and litter clean-up projects. Students from one anti-racism group were successful in introducing a zero-tolerance racism policy into their school. Students from the other anti-racism group organized an awareness campaign, whereby students and staff signed pledges indicating their personal commitment to ending prejudice and racial discrimination.

Doing the important work often extended beyond the school, and into the neighbourhood or community. One group of anti-racism students was particularly innovative in forming an education panel to raise awareness about racism. They presented to staff at their school, and to various community groups. By telling stories of their experiences with racism, they felt that they had been able to convey their message very effectively to a wide audience. Students from both anti-racism groups felt that they had branched out beyond their school by offering workshops, and presentations to neighbouring schools in the district. Students learned from each other, and support networks were developed between schools. Both environmental groups felt that they had

developed partnerships with various resources in the community. This ranged from establishing contacts with the media to developing alliances with other environmental groups in the community (e.g. The Georgia Strait Alliance).

In terms of a more global focus, both environmental groups took on projects aimed at the Third World. Organizing a thirty-hour famine to raise awareness around world poverty was an annual event that both groups sponsored. One of the environmental groups launched a major community campaign in which they collected supplies for an overseas orphanage. They also raised funds to support a foster child. Students derived great satisfaction from being a part of a group that was committed to a social cause.

> I like being a part of things and knowing what's going on in my school, community and the world.

An aspect of doing the important work for Jenny was feeling that her efforts were connected with the larger, global community.

In general, there was a difference in the scope of projects undertaken by the environmental groups, and the anti-racism groups. The environmental groups seemed to have a broad and encompassing mandate. Jess summarized the purpose of their group as, "We're just all for recycling and the world." This statement reflected the breadth of their mandate. Amy indicated that their social action group primarily emphasized environmentalism, but to some degree they were also an outdoors club. Since the focus of these groups was broad, it seemed that they were somewhat of a catchall for a diversity of projects. In contrast, the two anti-racism groups focused more specifically on raising awareness around racism within their school and community.

Raising Awareness

Another important aspect of doing the important work included raising awareness about their social action group, and cause. Within the school, students tended to rely on the P.A. system as a means to welcome new students, and to advertise what their group was working on. One environmental group used a bulletin board as a means of displaying their projects. Three of the social action groups discussed setting up tables in the hallways of their schools to promote special events or projects (e.g. Thirty-hour famine). A couple of students commented that they were more likely to elicit students' interest by having display materials that were more visual, and hands-on.

Outside of the school, students frequently used the media as a source of promoting their social activism. As Laura stated:

> We were in the paper many times. At least, almost ten times at least last year, for different, for a variety of different reasons. Everybody reads the paper, so we had to be reaching some people.

According to Laura, making use of the media helped to forge connections with the community, and it raised the profile of their social action group.

Another avenue for raising awareness was retreats. These were often held in order that students could learn more about a particular social issue (e.g. racism). Some retreats were aimed specifically at a school, while others were district wide.

One social action group raised awareness in the form of an education panel. This panel made presentations to an assortment of audiences such as school staff, parents, and community groups. Students gave definitions of racism, and they discussed their experiences with racism. Sharing first-hand experiences seemed an effective way to raise awareness. Thus, an important aspect of doing the work of activism involved keeping

people informed of what their cause represented, and what their groups were involved with.

Advocacy

Advocacy was another key element of doing the important work. Students became involved with projects that ranged from advocating for changes in school policy (e.g. zero-tolerance racism policy) to lobbying for protecting endangered species. The two anti-racism groups concentrated much of their efforts on protecting the rights of others. Kikomi had this to say about the advocacy and education that their group became involved with:

> It's kind of like a known thing that making racist jokes is wrong. Insulting someone because of their sexual preference is wrong. We've made it clear to people that yeah, you may not like it but we are not going to tolerate it, you know.

Kikomi saw advocacy as an important area in which their social action group could expand. In the quote below, she discussed the difficulties of confronting racist comments.

> It's more like..standing up for. When you're in a group, and it is hard when you are in a group to hear somebody say, like, somebody says a racist joke which someone else might find offensive. And then say "I don't like that or that's not really appropriate." That's hard, but we… and that's sort of the point of getting more and more people into ____(social action group), so that they all can hopefully contact you when they come across the situation. They'll say something and then hopefully people will think about it more and maybe say it from there and…And so it's more a word of mouth and teaching people to stand up for their rights…

Kikomi seemed to be hinting at the need for their group to expand its membership in order that they could be more of a vehicle for advocacy.

Influencing the Culture of the School

Although not explicitly stated by students, an important facet of doing the important work of social activism was the influence that their social action groups had on the culture or climate of their schools. Students played an important role in influencing policies, and practices within the school. For instance, they were instrumental in raising awareness around environmental awareness and they instituted such environmental projects as recycling. Anti-racism activities were directed at establishing a tone in the school that accepted and honored ethno-cultural diversity. Mandeep felt strongly that the zero-tolerance racism policy that was instituted at his school was in response to the education and promotion of anti-racism by his social action group.

> In a couple of my classes last year, I could tell by the teacher that…I heard a whole bunch of racist comments towards the First Nations. And I know the teacher heard them but he didn't really speak up about it. He didn't try stopping them. After the panel discussion, you'd hear the same comments being made but the teacher saying. "Stop that. If you say that again, you are going to the office."

It was gratifying for Mandeep to see staff take immediate action on the concerns that their social action group had raised.

The discussion in this section has focused on doing the important work as a sub-category of *working for the cause*. When students engage in social activism, they seemed to follow a process. This included collective planning, and decision-making around priority areas for action. This culminated in various types of social action ranging from projects directed at the school to addressing global concerns. Other facets of activism included raising awareness, advocacy, and influencing the culture of the school. Through

the process of being involved with social activism, students learned a great deal, and they reaped rewards in return. These will be discussed in the next section.

Reaping the Rewards

Another sub-category of *working for the cause* is reaping the rewards. This essentially refers to "what's in it" for students to participate in social activism. Students often referred to a variety of positive outcomes, or rewards that they gained from the experience of being a social activist. These ranged from skill acquisition to the personal sense of pride, and satisfaction that students experienced upon seeing a project reach fruition. As Jenny pointed out:

> It makes you feel good just knowing that you are making a difference and knowing that you are actually helping people out.

Other rewards that were gained in *working for the cause* included learning in a different way, assisting with future careers, and having commitment in their lives. Each of these will be discussed in the next section.

Learning new skills

One of the many rewards that students reaped from being involved in social activism was the acquisition of an assortment of skills. Many of these skills were of a social and interpersonal nature such as listening, communicating, empathizing, and being assertive. For many students, peer helping programs and retreats served to introduce and reinforce these skills.

Two students commented on feeling more courageous and assertive as a result of being involved in activism. "Having more backbone" is the expression that Harpinder used to describe this. A few students commented on having acquired public speaking,

and public relations skills. Two students played a prominent role as spokespersons for their groups. They had considerable contact with the public and in one case with the media. Sarah had the following comment to make:

> I like public speaking, and I guess teaching people, that's a big part of it. And I also like, also the feeling, you know. I helped someone.

Thus, for Sarah, there were many benefits to being a member of a social action group. Having opportunities to educate others was a key benefit.

Other rewards that students gained as a result of their activism were group and team skills. They learned to share ideas, solve problems, and make decisions collectively. It was also an opportunity for students to learn skills around working out relations. By implementing projects and working towards a common goal, a sense of unity and cohesiveness developed within groups.

Leadership is an another important area in which students felt that they had enhanced their abilities. They demonstrated leadership in almost all facets of their activism from getting a group started to sustaining membership. Two students indicated that they chaired weekly meetings. For several students leadership was in the form of organizing, and leading student workshops or retreats. Harpinder's quote illustrates the powerful impact that leading a retreat had for her:

> It was.. it was really good. I left there just feeling like I was on clouds. Everyone came up and people were hugging. People that didn't know each other before. It was only a day long thing. It went from 9:00 till about 2:00. People who were just.. it was just really intense. People that didn't know each other in the morning- and people came from different schools were hugging and sitting with each other by the time it came to leave. I don't know what happened. Maybe it was the way that we facilitated it…….And it was good and now we've got networks in the different schools now too. It was great! That was a great experience! It really was!

The excitement and pride in having led a day-long retreat is clearly evident in this quote. Harpinder seemed to recognize that her style of leadership and facilitation helped to create an inclusive, and welcoming environment.

Closely paralleling leadership is the notion of citizenship. Students seemed to derive great pride and satisfaction from being involved in activities and projects that were real and meaningful, and had an impact on the lives of others. Several students remarked that they appreciated being a part of a group or cause that was committed to the betterment of society. Through constructive and caring service, students felt that they were **making a difference,** and making positive contributions to their schools, communities, and to the broader, global community. Some of the rewards that they reaped from their social activism was a stronger sense of responsibility, competence, and self-worth. Being involved in activism provided students with opportunities to take risks, to make mistakes, and to test beliefs and values.

More generally, a couple of students commented on the empowering effects of being a social change agent. Jess described it this way:

> And you know, you also learn the power that you have in yourself. That you can do something!

Sarah felt empowered by being a part of a panel that provided awareness and education. Presenting information to staff and educating them on racism was one of her most positive experiences as a social activist.

> It was just, it was umm. It was good because what we were saying everybody wasn't just sitting there and saying, "Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah." Right. Like they were actually in there saying their views. And you know what do you say about this and you know. It wasn't... we weren't just telling them. They were totally participating, and either agreeing or disagreeing. And it was great to hear

> their opinions, whether they were happy with what we were doing or not…….It was just great. Everybody was.. you couldn't stop people from talking. Everybody just wanted to talk about this and that and join in with their own stories and their personal views and that. It was just an adrenaline rush to have like everybody just so into it, you know.

For Sarah, having been part of a panel presentation in which staff and students exchanged ideas openly, and dialogued on equal terms was very exhilarating. She described it as the pinnacle of her social activism experience. Teachers were no longer the experts, but in this case it was students who were instructing teachers. This example is also an illustration of other ways in which learning can occur, and leads into the next section of the discussion.

Learning in A Different Way

Another rewarding aspect of social activism was that it exposed students to a different way of learning. Students liked the fact that they were dealing with real situations that they deemed to be important, as Carla's comment shows:

> You are not learning to get good grades. It's the fact that you are learning for the sake of learning. It's our choice. We are learning to help ourselves and to help others.

Carla seemed to indicate that there are other forms of learning that are equally valuable to academic achievement.

Harpinder stated that by being involved in her school's anti-racism group, she learned a great deal that she otherwise would not have been exposed to through school texts, as the following quote demonstrates:

> _____(social action group) has taught me a lot of things. It has taught me about things that have happened in history. I have learned about what has happened at internment camps from _____. He's one of the chair-people or whatever for the Race Relations Committee. I've learned so much about stuff that I would otherwise not have learned about in

> school texts or stuff. Because you don't learn about… you learn about slave trades and stuff in the books here, and you don't really learn about what really went on.

Similar to Carla, Harpinder recognized that social activism provided her with a different way of learning than what she was usually exposed to in classrooms.

A few students involved in anti-racism commented that they had a greater understanding of race relations, and power and oppression because of their social activism. Two students indicated that their involvement in an anti-racism group had challenged them to examine their own prejudices and biases. Carla discussed the fact that her knowledge of other cultures had expanded as a result of a foster child project that their environmental group became involved with:

> I don't know I just think it's such a worthwhile thing. I think it's made us all realize that and I mean even the fact that we send money to our foster child in another country. It's something that I mean, that we have so much more than so many people. And it also gives you a sense of culture. Seeing the different- how we take things for granted. How our lifestyles compare to others.

This aspect of learning was similar to the goals of global education, in which students relate their experiences with the broader, global community.

Retreats also provided students with a different way of learning. Jenny described her learning experiences in the following way:

> And the way we learned, and the way they went about teaching it was so…like we learned about land mines and refugee camps. The way they taught it was we got involved.

Jenny appreciated the fact that learning for her was tied in with real events that were occuring in society. Similarly, she appreciated the fact that retreats provided opportunities for students to learn in a more experiential, interactive and hands-on way.

Kikomi stated that she appreciated some of the activities that were offered at retreats (e.g. warm-up exercises, games and role plays). She felt that by participating in role plays, she had a better understanding of other people's viewpoints. She also appreciated the fact that retreats provided students with opportunities to learn from each other, as described in the following quote:

> In talking with people you can get solutions to..Like if you run into a situation, and you don't know whether you have dealt with it the way you should have, and you just want to discuss it. Like people can give you other ways on how you can deal with it differently in the future.

Thus, the learning strategies applied at retreats seemed built on participatory problem solving based on real situations. This style of teaching provided a more powerful, relevant, and lasting form of learning for students.

Assisting with Future Careers

Another reward that students reaped from their social activism was that it assisted them in clarifying future goals and careers. Mandeep stated that as a result of being a part of an anti-racist group, he was clear that he wanted to be involved in a profession in which he would be helping people. Social work was the future career that he was contemplating. A couple of other students commented on the fact that their experiences in a social action group was something that they could include on their resume. They saw this as beneficial in assisting them with future employment. Laura stated that her involvement with an environmental group was a means to earn work experience hours through the Career and Personal Planning program (CAPP). Hence, one of the rewards of social activism was that it provided benefits in terms of clarifying future careers, and it assisted with finding employment.

Having Commitment

One of the intrinsic rewards of social activism was that it gave students a sense of commitment. They liked being committed to a cause that extended outside the realm of their immediate lives. Jess observed that commitment was the singlemost important aspect that she gained from being involved in her social action group.

> It showed me that there's like… like last year and this year, we were a little committed group, that lost people and gained people. We are like the little engine that could. We like… we just keep going, even though we know that we are not doing that much. We are just committed people. And I like having commitment in my life. I like having schedules. I like having straightforward things. I like having a plan. I like things to be daily the same things. And it just makes you feel like there is something in your life that you are very committed to!

In addition to commitment, Jess appreciated the fact that her social activism provided her with structure.

In summary, an important aspect of *working for the cause* for activist students was that they reaped some rewards in return. They learned a host of new skills, and social activism assisted with future employment goals. Furthermore, students were exposed to different ways of learning that provided them with a greater degree of satisfaction and meaning than traditional, classroom instruction. The next section will explore some of the tensions that students experience in being social activists.

BALANCING TENSION

The third and final category that will be discussed is *balancing tension.* The data clearly showed students' strong commitment and dedication to **making a difference.** Their motivation to be social activists was driven by a sense of idealism and optimism. Yet, their involvement as social activists was not always as ideal as they had anticipated.

In fact, there were many tensions and obstacles that they faced at all phases of their activism. For instance students experienced tensions around joining a social action group. They wanted to be different, yet did not want to be seen as different. Once involved in a social action group, they experienced tension around whether they were making a difference. They became social activists because they wanted to make a social contribution, but often questioned whether they were making an impact. They liked staff support and recognition, but did not like to be seen as "brown-nosers". For most students, the experience of being a social activist seemed rife with contradictions. These contradictions are outlined in Table 3. This table shows that there are differences in the tensions experienced by students involved in anti-racism, and students involved in environmentalism.

The sub-categories of *balancing tension* that will be incorporated into this discussion are making an impact, being a member of a social action group, dealing with peer pressure, families influencing social activism, and gender affecting social activism.

Table 3: The Paradox of Social Activism

ENVIRONMENTALISM		
Underlying Issues	**Motivating Forces**	**Inhibiting Forces**
Making an Impact	Wanting to "do good" and be respected by other students.	Are we making a difference? Students don't know we exist.
Being a member of a social action group	Liking to be part of a small, dedicated, supportive group.	Why only us? Why aren't more students involved?
Dealing with Peer Pressure	Wanting to join a social action group; Wanting their own unique and different image.	Wanting to hang out with friends; Not being seen as "cool", yet wanting to be seen as "cool".
Receiving support from staff	Seen by staff as socially conscious; Presenting a good image of teens.	Not wanting to be seen as a "brown-noser" or teacher's pet.
Gender Affecting Social Activism	Appreciating that there are a few guys in their social action group	Why don't more guys join?
ANTI- RACISM		
Making an Impact	Commitment to changing racist attitudes and beliefs.	Questioning whether attitudes are changing.
Being a Member of a Social Action Group	Liking to mix with other grades and liking to join a social action group with a friend.	How to involve younger grades? Friends stick together and interfere with the functioning of the group.
Receiving Support from Staff	Staff respect us for taking on a cause and standing up for our beliefs.	Staff don't like it when we rock the boat; Pressure to fit "perfect student mold"
Gender Affecting Social Activism	Males caring about helping others.	Getting teased about doing "girl's work".

Making an Impact

The first sub-category of *balancing tension* is making an impact. Students became involved in social activism because they were committed to a cause in which they felt they could **make a difference**. They wanted their efforts to be noticed in their schools, and they wanted to feel that they were making a lasting contribution. Yet they continually struggled with whether they were being effective in making an impact.

The data showed that students approached activism with a sense of hope and idealism. Once involved in social activism, however, this sense of idealism tended to dissipate, as activist students began to realize that not all students embraced their cause as fervently as they did. This was particularly apparent with the students who were involved in environmentalism. An area of tension for many of these students centred around their group's visibility, and profile within the school. Jess believed that students in general were unaware of the existence of their group:

> They don't just really know that we exist. They just know of the things we do.

Jess went on to explain that she felt that most students believed it was staff that organized many of the activities that they as students had planned. Jenny, who was involved in a different environmental group from Jess, commented on the impact that their group had on the general population of their school. She felt that on the one hand students as a whole respected what their group stood for. On the other hand, she felt that students were rather "indifferent" to what they did. The ambiguity around making an impact was clearly evident in one of Jess's other comments. She wanted to believe that it only takes one person to be a catalyst for change, yet she questioned this logic.

> I know people say that one person can make a difference. But it has to take about one million people thinking that I am one person and I can make a difference. If there is just one person in the world, nobody cares if that one person is going to make a difference.

There seemed an element of disillusionment in Jess's comments. She is committed to the ideology of social change, but recognizes limitations around effecting change one person at a time.

Two students involved in the same anti-racism group questioned the degree to which they had made inroads in their school. Tien thought that racist attitudes had shifted in staff, but he did not see the same shift occuring among students. Sarah was somewhat disappointed by the fact that racism awareness had increased in their school, yet she felt that racial incidents continued.

Students involved in social activism in general seemed to struggle with the dilemma of believing they were **making a difference** but wondering if it was enough of a difference. They questioned the overall impact that their social action group was having on their school.

Being a Member of a Social Action Group

Being a member of a social action group is the second aspect that will be discussed in relation to some of the tensions that students experienced as social activists. Students derived many benefits from being a member of a social action group. For example, several students commented on enjoying the friendly, informal atmosphere of working in a small group. Harpinder described it as being a member of "one big happy family". Conversely, students faced several challenges.

One of the challenges pertained to drawing in new members and sustaining student interest. Again, this was a concern that was voiced mainly by students involved in environmentalism. Students grappled with the fact that they represented a small segment of the total school population. Jenny indicated that there were only twenty students in her social action group, despite the fact that their school's population consisted of over a thousand students. Jess had a similar complaint. She stated that there were 1200 students in her school, yet only a handful of them were committed to joining a social action group. There is an element of defeat in her following comments:

> No new people have joined this year. And two people have dropped out. It's sad. Nobody really cares.

Jess's disappointment in shrinking numbers in their social action group is clearly apparent. A third student, Carla, went on to say that she wished that more students would become involved that weren't "only thinking of themselves, and what they are going to do on Saturday night". To some extent, students like Carla seemed to imply that they don't want to be the same as other students. Rather, they want other students to be the same as them.

Many student activists appreciated the fact that their group was comprised of students of varying ages and grades as this provided opportunities for younger students to learn from older students. Yet, concern was expressed about the fact that few grade 8 and 9 students joined a social action group. Several students reflected back to their own experiences at that age, and felt that it would have been "too intimidating" to a join a social action group with older students. One student indicated that she would feel "inferior" mingling with students older than she. While activist students liked inter-grade

mixing, they were cognisant of the fact that the school culture has a hierarchy of its own that creates barriers between grades.

Friendships were a pivotal factor that closely tied in with membership in a social action group, and was an area of tension. Most students stated that they felt more secure joining a social action group with a friend. One of the anti-racism groups was comprised of several sub-groups of friends. One environmental group consisted of a handful of students who all joined at the same time and all were very close friends. Although not stated by the students themselves, the tightness of this group seemed in some ways to act as a deterrent for new members to join.

Most students saw friendships as a positive factor that supported student activism, but three students had different opinions. Two students held similar views in that they believed that students often seemed reticent to step outside the bounds of their friendship, thereby limiting the degree to which they became engaged in meaningful activism. Mandeep believed that when various cliques formed, this undermined the efforts of the entire social action group.

Along a related vein, Laura felt there were advantages to being in a social action group without friends, as she indicates in the following quote:

> I don't think I act that differently from my best friend, personally. But I know that there's a lot of, there can be a lot of tension, if one friend doesn't believe something, and the other does. The other might not want to voice it, you know, because they don't want to cause any tension between the friendship and whatnot. But with just individuals, we don't have any ideas about each other. So, we're all kind of learning, and we're all really open to discussion.

Laura believed that she would feel more inhibited by having friends in her social action group. Further along in the interview, she referred back to this point, and made the following comments:

> I think the friend thing, it does better. Because you don't have to live up to what some of your friends might think you are. People put on acts for different kinds of people. It's not bad. It's just the way humans are. But if you go into a group situation where you don't know anything about anyone, you can start off brand new, fresh. Just be your own being, whoever you want to be.

Thus for Laura, there were certain aspects of friendship that she felt interfered with people being themselves in a social action group.

In summary, friendship appears to be a complex factor. Many students derived support and security from joining a social action group with a friend. However, students such as Laura and Mandeep felt that friendships interfered with the work of social activism. In addition to the role of friendships, students also struggled with how to raise the profile of their social action group, and how to involve more students.

Dealing with Peer Pressure

Another area in which students *balanced tension* was in dealing with peer pressure. Students wanted to be different, yet they did not really want to be seen as different. This appeared to be more the case with students involved in environmentalism. These students felt that the student population as a whole generally appreciated that their group existed, but had a rather negative perception of being a member of such a group. Several environmental students made comments to this effect: "we are not the cool kids", "it's not seen as cool to be helping others", "it's not cool to participate in something that is good" or "we are not the most popular kids".

Closely paralleling the notion of "cool" was the idea of seeking their own image and identity. One environmental student, Jess, struggled with the fact that their group was not seen as "cool". Yet, she felt proud that members of their social action group were not swept up by trying to maintain a glamour girl image, as the following comments indicate:

> We don't wear makeup. And we don't wear the really cool clothes, and we don't buy expensive things just for the sake of having them to look cool. We are just very into being ourselves and being individuals, and original and stuff like that.

The comments made by Jess and other environmental students reflect the peer pressures that many adolescents face. On the one hand, they want to develop their own identity, and on the other hand they feel pressured to conform with peers.

Carla grappled with the fact that her thinking, and view of the world was quite different from peers her age.

> Because I've always felt like kind of out of place. Because I always think different things. Like everyone is concerned about what they are going to do the next day or something, whereas I think about other things as a whole and .. other people.

Carla felt out of step with her peers, and this caused her consternation. She felt that she was more "other" oriented than her peers.

Two students commented that they were very committed to their cause, yet at times felt conflicted about wanting to be doing other things with their peers. Laura describes the following situation:

> My friends would say "I'm going to the mall at lunch", and what not. I would say, "I have to go to _____(social action group)", and I'd be all down, but then I'd get there and I'd say, what am I talking about. This is great!

Laura was conscientious about her activism, but nonetheless wondered if she was missing out on some of the fun of being with her friends.

Being involved in activism, and being different from other students appeared to be more of a struggle for students involved in environmentalism. While they were committed to being a member of a social action group, they also experienced tension around being seen as different.

Receiving Support from Staff

Another area of tension for students was their ambivalence regarding staff support. Most students felt that school staff were supportive of their social action group. Staff sponsors in particular played a fundamental role in this regard. Staff generally viewed social action groups positively and saw them as avenues for students to be involved in socially redeeming activities, and constructive community service. A couple of students referred to the fact that their activism helped to dispel negative stereotypes about teenagers as this comment by Laura demonstrates:

> I think the staff really respect us. I think that, you know, we're not just teenagers going out and getting drunk and failing our tests and that. We're doing something for the community and for our school that's going to make it better in a big way. Because it is something that our school really needs.

Laura's sense was that staff respected them when they presented a productive image of teens.

Jess alluded to the ambivalence that she experienced around how staff viewed their social action group. On the one hand, she felt that they presented a positive image of teenagers but on the other hand she struggled with the notion of being seen as a "brown-noser".

I think that they personally like it. It's more like you are a little brown-noser or pet or whatever because they know. "Oh, look, it's a little good group, and they are doing good things." I personally know that Mr._. Don't use his name! He's one of those teachers who is like "Ohhhh", but when he comes in here he is all like smiling and he's like "You guys are good and that's good that you are doing this." I think that teachers like it when students do good things.

Jess seemed to hint at an attitude of paternalism shown by this particular teacher. She went on to explain that had she joined another group that was less socially conscious, that they might not have received the same degree of support from staff. She seemed to imply that social activism was supported by staff when it was not a direct challenge to the way the school operated.

Mandeep felt somewhat conflicted about the support that he received from staff when he first became involved in a social action group. He and other students formed an education panel aimed at raising awareness about racism and other forms of oppression. They made a presentation to staff, and they felt that staff appeared reluctant to hear what they had to say about racism. "They didn't take us seriously at first." Mandeep implied that there was some guardedness shown by staff when students challenged some of the practices and attitudes within the school. Thus, it seemed that when activism was directed outside the school, and was not a threat to the way the school functioned, that it was condoned. However, when it began to encroach on school territory, and presented a challenge to the status quo, it was seen less positively. It was no longer seen as socially redeeming but as rocking the boat.

A tension that Sarah experienced as a social activist was in being expected to fit "the perfect student mold". Because her skills were strong as a leader, a peer helper and a facilitator, she felt that there was pressure placed on her by teachers to demonstrate

equally strong skills in all other areas of her schooling. For Sarah, there seemed to be some tension around wanting to be different and go against the grain, yet meet expectations that staff had of her. This seemed to be a key paradox for many students involved in social activism. They joined a social action group to be different and to challenge the status quo, but in so doing, they become more accepted by teachers.

Several students from both anti-racism and environmental groups felt that they generally received accolades from staff regarding their social activism. Yet, this sentiment was not shared among all teachers. A few students had encountered pressure from teachers to the effect that their social activism interfered with homework and classroom attendance. It would seem that for some teachers, social activism was not valued as an important aspect of learning.

A couple of students cited incidents in which they felt at odds with the support that staff were giving. For instance, Amy appreciated the role her teacher sponsors played in providing ongoing support. Yet, in the following situation, she felt pressured to take on a project that staff wanted their social action group to become involved with (i.e. selling seeds door to door). She comments:

> Something that relates more to us. I think that they (*staff)* are like…..They are really encouraging and really trying to get us to do things. But I think that the stuff that they are trying to get us to do, is not really what we want to do.

Thus, Amy experienced some sensitivity around adult-student power dynamics. Harpinder expressed similar ambivalence in feeling pressured to meet adult demands. She discussed her experience with being on a school district Race Relations Committee:

> It seems too much now that it seems that teachers and adults

> rely too much on doing it themselves, it seems to me than letting us do it……. Umm. I'm part of the school district Race Relations Committee. And I find it kind of ironic that it's for students and yet there are only two students- kids that are liaisons- that sit on it. I find it annoying. I don't really like to be on the committee. I got volunteered to do it. But it's…..every one makes the decisions, and then they ask us our opinions, after everything is already made.

Harpinder seemed to be referring to the fact that student participation on this committee was more one of tokenism than meaningful consultation.

In summary, students indicated that there were many areas of tension in terms of the support they received from staff. They often struggled with the "brown-nose" image that staff had of them. In the process of trying to be different and strive for change, they were often more accepted by their teachers. Some of the tensions that students experienced were in feeling that their social activism was not valued as the "real work" of education. Another area of tension was in feeling pulled to be involved in activities that staff saw as important, as opposed to what students valued. Thus, there was a delicate line in terms of how students felt supported, and how they felt co-opted.

Families Influencing Activism

Another tension that students often balanced was the influence of the family. Several environmental students talked about the role of the family as a positive force in motivating them to become involved in social activism. Students involved in anti-racism tended not to speak of family influence in the same way. For a couple of students, being different from their families was their motivation to join a social action group, as Harpinder discusses below:

> I think in our interview last year I mentioned how my parents, my family are quite introverted and I am the only extravert in my family. I think a need to be different was just some kind of internal

> thing, where I was…..A need just to be different from people as a whole. In my culture, a lot of women are seen to be typically quiet. We don't say much and we don't do much. It made me angry and I felt like I needed to be different. And it was just waiting… it was just waiting to come out.

Thus, social activism provided Harpinder with an avenue to be different from her family as well as her culture. A second student, Sarah, involved in a different anti-racism group stated that one of her motivations for being involved in anti-racism was in wanting to be different from her parents. She felt that her parents' racist attitudes were somewhat of a contributing factor for her being involved in social change.

Harpinder made a couple of astute observations about parents' responses to student activism. She felt that a few parents were rather cynical about whether students in fact could make a difference in changing racist attitudes. She also indicated that her own parents felt that she was "too wrapped up" in her social action group. Thus, for these students they were torn between wanting to take action on a cause that they felt strongly about, and not feeling supported by their parents.

It would be interesting to explore these parents' attitudes further. I wonder if their reservations about social activism are based on their own experiences in combatting racism, or if they hold views similar to what several students encountered with teachers. In other words, did parents too see social activism as not the "real work" of education.

Gender Affecting Activism

Another tension that students balanced was gender. Gender impacted on social action groups in a number of ways: (a) the composition of the group, (b) assumptions around social activism being women's work, (c) female activists' attitudes towards male involvement in social activism, and (d) the power of female activism.

In terms of gender composition, three of the social action groups were comprised mostly of women. One group was exclusively women. One of the anti-racism groups seemed to have more of a gender mix. Students often commented on the fact that they would like to see more males involved, but recognized this as a challenge. As Amy commented:

> A lot of the stuff that we want to do, guys wouldn't want to do. So we kind of need the other perspective.

It would have been interesting to have explored with Amy what she meant by the "other perspective", and if the "other perspective" would have altered the type of activism that their group became involved with.

From the perspective of males, those that joined a social action group were often teased about their involvement. One student stated that he was referred to as "gay". Another student stated that he was teased about being involved in "girl's work". Thus, males often heard pejorative remarks about their involvement in social activism, reflecting an attitude that social activism was viewed as women's work, and as such was work that was devalued.

The young women who were involved in social activism seemed to have mixed sentiment about males joining their group. At times they acknowledged that they would like to see more males in their group. At other times, they seemed frustrated at the prevailing male attitude toward their group as Amy's comments suggests:

> I think that a lot of guys think that "oh, well, recycling and cooking and sewing is stuff for … I think that people are all still kind of stereotyping, you know. Like a typical girl thing to do. I think that even though like that they don't really mean to be sexist or anything, they still sort of think that "I am a guy and I am not going to join an environmental group". I think it's got something to do, you know with

> the way that they have been brought up.

This comment again seems to reflect a notion of environmentalism being affiliated with the private domain of the home and family, and therefore women's work.

When I posed the question to several female students as to why they thought more males did not join their social action group, they came up with a variety of responses. Jess felt that there were males who cared about their group but would not join because it was not seen as "big and buff". She went on to say:

> They just don't think it's cool, and it's also not brave for guys to be in an environmental club. You know, recycling and stuff- "who cares about the world".

Amy expressed a sentiment that was different from Jess's. She believed that a lack of male interest in environmentalism was due to males having other activities to be involved with. She states:

> I don't know. It's not that they don't care but they just would rather be out playing hockey or rugby or hanging out.

Jess felt that because there were no males in there group, it was difficult to attract males. " I think that guys are not joining because there are no other guys." She went on to explain that the image of the women in their group would not have attracted males. "We are not exactly all like sexy women or something."

Other views posited by students indicate that they thought males don't join a social action group because they are "insecure," and "embarrassed" about joining, and they don't want to be seen as "different". Carla's comments below indicate that she believes females are more outspoken and less reserved than males.

> Boys tend to stick together. Girls speak out more. Boys are more kind of hiding behind each other.

There seems to be an interesting gender shift in terms of the assertiveness and confidence shown by these young women.

On a related note, Harpinder spoke with pride about the fact that their social action group comprised mainly women:

> Because there's normally people that think that women in society should be quiet and keep to themselves and stuff. And then there is us and we are totally just like - we are like women's spearhead. We spearhead everything!

Harpinder seemed to be in tune with the nuances of patriarchal conditioning, that assumes that public and leadership roles belong in the hands of men. She spoke with pride about the power of women to spearhead various activities in her school.

The issue of gender raised many tensions for students involved in social activism. Students liked that there were males in their group, yet they felt frustrated that more young men did not join. There were areas of tension around activism, and particularly environmentalism, being seen as the work of women. Finally, while women were the leaders, and promoters of social activism, this is work that seemed not to be valued.

The discussion, thus far has centred on the myriad of tensions that students confronted in being social activists. To a limited degree, students discussed ways in which these tensions were addressed. For instance, they often talked about the importance of their social action group as a vehicle for support and debriefing. Kimiko commented on the fact that her social action group gave her "courage", and it also provided her with strategies to deal with situations better. The adult sponsors or mentors to the social action groups played a significant role in providing support to students. As

hands-on resource persons, they provided guidance and practical suggestions to students on how to deal with tensions as they arose. Students also indicated that they instilled in them a belief that they could make a difference, and this provided them with the extra confidence to *balance the tensions* of being an activist. Finally, a couple of students indicated that the intrinsic reward of doing something that was important to them, and in which they felt they were making "small" changes provided them with some degree of satisfaction that offset some of the tensions of social activism.

This discussion has begun to explore some of the processes of how students *balanced tension*. However, the data in this area is thin, and therefore the category of *balancing tension* is not fully saturated. In retrospect, it might have been useful to pose questions to students on the strategies they used to *balance tension.* Despite this limitation, the data cleared show that *balancing tension* is an important and unexpected process of social activism.

Summary

Students participated in social activism because of deep concerns about others, and the health of the planet. In particular, the two social concerns that they addressed were racism and environmentalism. Students join a social action group because they want to **make a difference** and they want to create a better and more equitable world**.**

Making a difference was the core concept that emerged from the data. *Getting involved in the cause, working for the cause,* and *balancing tension* were the inter-relating categories that illustrate what **making a difference** means to students.

Students indicated that there were a variety of factors that motivated them to *get involved in a cause* such as inspiration from family, and personal experiences with

social injustice. After the decision was made to join a social action group, there were factors that facilitated their *getting involved in a cause.* These included friendships, inspirational staff, and developmental factors.

Once students made the commitment to join a social action group, there were various facets to *working for the cause.* For example, building a community in which students could work together and support one another was an important starting point. Once engaged in activism, the support, and guidance, and mentoring that students received from each other, and from staff sustained them in their social activism. There were many steps in the process of doing the important work of social activism. These ranged from planning activities to raising awareness about their social cause. Being involved in social activism was not a one-way street in which students did only giving. There were many rewards that they reaped in return. They learned a myriad of skills, and the experience of social activism was an empowering experience for students. They learned that they can influence their schools, and communities.

There was, however, a paradoxical nature to social activism. Students participated in a social action group with high hopes, and ideals. They wanted to make a difference, and in the course of being social activists, they found themselves *balancing tension.* These tensions ranged from questioning whether they were making an impact to confronting peer pressure. An aspect of *balancing tension* that is not fully explicated in this study is how students manage tensions. This study provided a start in terms of understanding how students manage tension, but there is more that could be explored in this area.

It is important to point out that the three categories *getting involved in the cause, working for the cause, and balancing tensions* may appear as a linear process but are not. In actuality, the process of social activism in this study was iterative and circular both within and among categories. For example, in *working for the cause,* doing the important work, was an outcome of building community, and mentoring, but it was also a process for reaping rewards. In making comparisons among categories, it was evident that *balancing tension* was a sub-theme that permeated all phases of activism. When students first chose to join a social action group, they *balanced tensions* around whether they should do so alone or with a friend. In *working for the cause* and implementing various projects and activities, students often had doubts about the degree to which they were making an impact on other students and their school. Hence there is a back-and-forthness, a circular iteration, within these three identified categories that is difficult to capture in a linear writing style, but was a key element of how the three categories functioned.

This summary has provided a brief overview of the data findings. The next chapter will discuss the significance of these findings in more detail. The discussion will also address policy and practice implications.

CHAPTER FIVE: DATA DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This concluding chapter will focus on four key elements of my study. First, I will discuss limitations, and strengths of the study, and explore areas for further research. Second, there will be a discussion of the characteristics of social activists. Third, anomalies within the findings will be discussed, and where applicable related to the literature. The final portion of this paper will explore policy and practice implications of student social activism.

Research Limitations, Strengths and Suggestions for Future Research

One of the limitations of this study was the small sample size. However, by interviewing a small group of students, who were purposefully selected on the basis of being "good informants", I was able to get a thick, and detailed description of students' experiences with social activism. In subsequent studies, it might be possible to broaden the understanding of social activism by interviewing students with more varied and conflicting experiences.

Another limitation of the study was that the primary method of data collection was interviews. It would have been useful to supplement interviews with other forms of data collection such as participant observation, and to carry this out over a longer time frame, such as a school year.

Finally, a limitation of this study was premature closure due to time constraints. Hutchinson (1986) points out that this often occurs with theses and dissertations. The core concept of **making a difference** and the inter-relating categories were clearly delineated, but theoretical saturation was not reached in places. In particular, the theory was thin with regard to *balancing tension.* This aspect of the study provided a clear and

insightful description of the challenges of activism, but was lacking in interpretation. It would have been useful to have a fuller understanding of the process that students go through to manage the tensions they experience as social activists. Again, this could be an area for further study.

This study was an important step however, in exploring social activism in secondary schools, a subject of limited investigation. As such, it would be a springing off point for further research in many areas. In addition to examining the tensions of activism in more detail, it might also be useful to explore one type of activism across many schools. It might also be useful to compare students' perceptions of activism with the perceptions of their parents, or staff sponsors. This study focused on social activism within the context of a social action group. There are very likely other forms of social action that could be investigated that are handled on a more individual or classroom basis. Lewis (1991) discusses some of these in her guidebook (e.g. writing letters to municipal leaders, signing petitions). A further area of research could compare activism in schools with activism in communities or compare youth activism with adult activism.

In spite of limitations and possibilities for expanded research, there were many strengths about this research project. By interviewing a comparatively small sample, in an in-depth way, I was able to collect data that was rich in description. Furthermore, conducting interviews with students themselves enabled me to gather first-hand information. The very process of having students discuss their experiences was empowering for them. It gave voice to their experience, and validation to their work. Students repeatedly mentioned that they appreciated discussing their experiences. It

would seem that opportunities to share their stories are very limited. In my opinion, this was a major strength of this research project.

Research on contemporary student activism is surprisingly sparse. This study will add to this body of literature. What was learned about student activism in schools can be applied to comparable situations (e.g. community activism). Clearly, what is missing in the current literature is a discussion of the experiential aspect of social activism. This undoubtedly is the biggest contribution that this research can make.

Who are the social activists?

The data showed that there are a small, but spirited group of youth who become involved in social activism in secondary schools. The students that participated in this study shared many characteristics in common. In addition to their dedication, they were articulate, insightful, and self-assured. This is consistent with Hart's (1992) findings in which he indicates that youth with a stronger sense of self-worth, and social confidence are most likely to participate in community activism. The female students that I interviewed seemed particularly confident.

In addition to the positive image that staff had of these activist students, they also had a positive image of themselves. A few students used such adjectives as "smart", "open-minded", "secure", and "well-balanced" to describe themselves. A couple of students indicated that they were the kind of people who liked to have commitment, and structure in their lives. Several students indicated that they led busy lives, and social activism was one of many extra-curricular activities that they juggled.

Jess commented on the fact that members of their social action group were unique in that they all got along well with their families. Several young women were particularly

influenced by their mothers. This is an area that merits further investigation. Several students involved in environmentalism noted that they were not the "cool" or "most popular" students in their school. Instead, they seemed to be the kind of students who could move in and out of social groups with ease. As Jess described it:

> We are just sort of the medium people that are friends with everybody. There's no really way up there.

Jess seemed to be implying that the activist students in her group had average social status. While their social status among their peers may have been average, as Jess implied, they seemed to have considerably higher status among teachers. Activist students were diligent, conscientious, and showed considerable commitment to social causes. In many respects, these students would likely be seen by staff as the "natural leaders" of their schools.

Examining the anomalies

There were certain aspects of the findings that warrant further discussion because of their anachronistic nature. Four areas will be discussed: (a) the role of gender, (b) contrasting the two forms of social activism, (c) the meaning of social activism, and (d) the tensions of social activism. The role of schools in supporting activism is also an anomaly, but will be discussed in the next section.

The Role of Gender

The role of gender was an aspect that intrigued me throughout the interviews. Although three of the eleven students who were interviewed were male, this is not an accurate representation of the male to female ratio of involvement in social activism in schools. In fact most of the social action groups were largely comprised of women. One

group was entirely female, and another group had one only one male in it. I have observed a similar pattern in my work with the Healthy Schools program. It is mostly females who take on the leadership challenge of addressing change in their schools. This seems to be in contrast with Hart's (1992) finding in which he indicates that males are more likely than females to assume decision-making responsibilities. It is important to remember that Hart's analysis is more theoretical than empirical.

An important aspect of social activism was related to the work of building community, and building relationships. Again it would seem that these relational values were associated with women. Males who were involved in social activism were teased that it was "a girl's job". Girls themselves often felt conflicted. In many ways they wanted more males involved, and in some ways they seemed resigned to the fact that males were involved in higher priority activities. The importance of learning values centred around caring, cooperation and connection have long been espoused by feminist theorists as important aspects of learning and knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule; 1986).

This begs the question of "why is it that predominantly young women join a social action group?" Is it that social activism is seen to be women's work, as some of the students implied? Amy indicated that environmentalism was perceived as "girl's work", and as such was seen as an extension of the work that women carry out in their homes. If social activism is seen as women's work, which is devalued, and rendered invisible within a patriarchal culture, this might explain why it held such little appeal for males. It is interesting to note that while women are expected to "do" the domestic work, and be the nurturers and caregivers, the young women in this group were independent and strong

leaders, qualities that are opposite to what our patriarchal culture expects of women. There is much in the gender area that warrants further exploration, but this extends beyond the scope of this thesis.

Contrasting the two forms of social activism

An important feature that was uncovered in the data was the contrasting experiences of students involved in the two forms of social activism. Generally, it seemed that environmental students seemed less satisfied with their social activism than their anti-racism counterparts. It is interesting to examine this from the perspective of how the two sets of students became involved in social activism. It would appear that the environmental students became involved out of a more general sense of wanting "to do good" and save the earth. Being involved in environmentalism was a positive feature that was a continuation of practices in their home. In contrast, students involved in anti-racism seemed more drawn to activism as a result of a personal hurt or injustice. They approached activism from a position of negative experience vs. the positive experience of their environmental cohorts.

In comparing the differences between these two forms of social activism, some explanations can be postulated. One, anti-racism appears to be more topical and more socially sanctioned. Political correctness is more aligned with current social norms. Therefore, the response to it would be more positive. In contrast, environmentalism has been in existence for the past three decades and is more likely to be incorporated into students' lives and internalized in their value system. Similarly, because environmental awareness has been strong for some time, there is a question of whether it might be perceived as outmoded by some students.

Two, there is the question of social geography. The two secondary schools that formed anti-racism groups were inner-city schools that are located in an area of Nanaimo where there is a greater ethno-cultural mix. One of these schools in particular is situated in a neighbourhood where there has been considerable racial tension and prejudice. Thus, the interest in anti-racism shown by the students could be a response to a need that is reflected in the community.

Three, there is the role of the family. As indicated in the previous chapter, it was the environmental students who spoke most often and most favourably about the influence of their families. Many of these students came from middle-class homes in which environmentalism was reinforced, and in which parents were active and involved community members. Youth then tended to mirror the values that existed in their homes. This is consistent with Hart's (1992) finding in which he points out the correlation between social class and activism. His research indicated that families of higher socio-economic status are more likely to encourage activism in their children. Loeb (1994) and Sherkat & Blocker's (1994) findings illustrate that students are more likely to become activists if their parents have been activists. For students involved in environmentalism one wonders about whether the social recognition and validation that they received from their families may have compensated for their perceived lack of recognition from other students.

The meaning of social activism

In the process of conducting this research, two questions seemed unresolved in my mind: (a) Did the students that I interviewed see themselves as social activists? (b) Is the nature of social activism changing?

Although students were not explicitly asked whether they defined themselves as social activists, they were asked to describe the nature of their involvement within a particular group or social cause. Early in my interviews, I began to wonder whether students perceived themselves as social activists, and whether they related to the political nature of their work. For instance, when I posed the question of the purpose or function of their group to one environmental group, I was surprised at students' responses. In describing their social action group, a couple of students tended to speak rather vaguely about their social action group. For instance, Jenny stated that their group "worked for change and awareness". Jess described it as, "we work on things that are most important to us and what we really want to get done." I needed to probe more deeply with both students to get specific information on the philosophy or mission of their group.

Over time, It struck me that what was important for students such as Jenny, and Jess was not necessarily what their group represented, as the fact that social activism provided an avenue for social contact with other like-minded students. In some respects, the relational aspect of "being" in a group seemed as important as the political aspect of what they were "doing". In other words, it seemed that students were drawn to social activism out of a need to take action, yet an important element of taking action and sustaining student interest was their social interaction with other students. The meaning that youth derived from their social interaction with other activist students is as an illustration of the underpinnings of symbolic interactionism.

I also wondered whether the face of social activism is changing as Cartwright (1995), Hudon et al. (1991), and Loeb (1994) seem to suggest.

Hudon and associates discuss the fact that today's social activism is more practical, and oriented to everyday matters than to ideology. To some extent, this is the pattern that I observed with student activism. For example, students involved in environmentalism often took on projects that related to the everyday nature of their immediate environment (e.g. recycling pop cans, litter cleanups). As indicated earlier, students were somewhat pragmatic about the fact that social activism was a benefit to them in seeking employment. Hence, while social activism may be motivated by a sense of idealism, there are practical benefits to being a social activist.

It also seemed that the line between social activism and community service is somewhat blurry. Many of the activities that the environmental students took on were of a community service nature as opposed to political. A couple of students indicated that was what most important to them about being involved in a social action group was having a sense of purpose, and commitment. The cause that they were involved with seemed secondary to the fact that they had opportunities to be giving, and contributing members of society.

Exploring the tensions around social activism

An important finding revealed in this study is the paradoxical nature of social activism. Many of the tensions that students experienced related to their interactions with other students, but many of the tensions pertained to interactions with school staff, and schools as a whole.

In terms of their interactions with other youth, students wanted to **make a difference**, yet they did not want to be seen as different. Although, they liked to go against the grain, and have their own unique image, there was a price to pay. Students

expressed dissatisfaction at being perceived by other students as not "cool". Students often felt pressured to conform with their peers. For example, Laura stated that she often felt tugged between wanting to be with her friends, and at the same time wanting to be with her activist group. In some respects, activism seemed to interfere with her friendships, and several other students indicated that friendships often interfered with the work of activism. This too is an area for further exploration.

The tensions that students experienced extended beyond peer interaction, and into the realm of adult interactions, and the school as a whole. For the most part students felt very supported by staff. Students were particularly enthusiastic about the role of adult mentors in lending support, and guidance. This finding is well substantiated in the literature (Ashford, 1995; Hume, 1995; Kohler, 1983; Loeb, 1994). But youth sometimes felt tension around expectations that other school staff had of them. For example, by serving on a district-wide Race Relations Committee, Harpinder indicated that this met more of an adult need than a student need. In fact, she inferred that her role on the committee was as a "token" student. Hart's (1992) ladder of participation clearly explicates differing levels of participation. Decoration and tokenism are at the bottom of the ladder, whereas youth-initiating ideas but working collaboratively with adults is at the top of the ladder. Both Kohler (1983), and Hume (1995) argue that successful youth participation is contingent upon youth being involved in projects that are relevant, meaningful, and meet genuine needs.

Students expressed tension with staff in other ways. The students of one anti-racism group sensed that staff were threatened by their efforts to educate them about racism and other forms of oppression. In some respects, it seemed that social activism

was well received by staff when the efforts were expended outside the school. However, when activism efforts were directed internally and began to challenge school policies and practices, it was perceived as a threat. This has also been my experience in working with the Healthy Schools program. When students work on projects that "add" positively to the health of the school (e.g. nutrition, fitness), they are supported. However, when they begin to question "existing" policies and practices (e.g. student-unfriendly climate, decision-making practices, handling of discipline), there is much more staff resistance. Hence, it would seem that one of the paradoxes of social activism is trying to effect change within systems that are intent on preserving the status quo.

Another challenge for students in being social activists was in having to "sell" the importance of social activism to teachers. Several students encountered resistance from staff around their activism interfering with schoolwork. It would seem that for many teachers, the "real work" of education is what they provide in classes. Social activism occurs outside of the classroom and it is driven by students. Therefore, it is not seen as the "real work" of schools. Critical pedagogy theorists have much to say about this. They are critical of schools for the way in which they perpetuate practices with the teacher exerting power and the student as the passive, powerless learner (Anyon, 1988; Apple, 1990; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; hooks, 1994). They see a role for students as co-creators of knowledge, and a role for schools as sites to promote social change. According to critical pedagogists, social activism is precisely what schooling should be about. The Global Education literature was very useful in illustrating how social action can be incorporated into the curriculum (Fowler & Wright, 1995).

In examining the myriad of tensions students faced with social activism, I found myself reflecting on my own experiences with social activism. I could relate to students' sense of idealism around addressing inequities, and wanting to make a difference. Youth have idealism and they possess naïve optimism. In many respects this is what draws students in to become activists, and this is what fuels their activism. However, I have wondered about such factors as age, maturity, and life experience. In my own experience, I have found that my sense of idealism has altered the longer I have been a social activist. I think I have become more realistic about the degree to which one can effect social change, and the pace with which change happens. In other words, I think with age we learn more about how to make a difference, and hence tailor our expectations accordingly. Thus, I think that developmental factors, as pointed out in the developmental psychology literature also have an influence on how students view, and engage in activism (Berk, 1993; Zimbardo, 1985).

Policy and Practice Implications and Recommendations

Students involved in social activism gave a clear and strong message that they want to make a difference. In spite of the many tensions and challenges that they faced, their commitment to social activism remained strong. In the process of being social change agents, students valued working and belonging to a social action group. They liked the informal dynamics because they were able to conduct their activism in a relaxed, and collegial atmosphere, and they liked the support and learning that they received from mentors. Students indicated that it was important for them to participate in projects that were real and meaningful, and in which they had a hand in developing solutions. The literature on youth participation clearly points to the importance of youth being involved

in social change (Ashford, 1995; Hart, 1992; Hume, 1995; Kohler, 1983). There is much that we can learn from the findings of this study that have policy and practice implications. I will discuss these below, and propose recommendations throughout.

In terms of policy implications, several students questioned the value of what they were taught in the curriculum. Much of what they learned in schools did not seem relevant to their lives. These students appreciated being involved in a social action group because it provided them with practical opportunities to deal with "real" social problems and "real" solutions. This important finding reinforced the importance of critical pedagogy theory. In other words, much of what students discussed in terms of powerful learning had to do with transforming social conditions in society. This is the basis of critical pedagogy (Anyon, 1988; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 1984). Hence, social activism would appear to be one avenue for meeting the goals of critical pedagogy.

It would seem that an area for change in schools could be in making learning more relevant to students' lives. This, I realize, is a very tall order. Yet schools have a necessary role to play in providing a balanced education. Students should learn about a variety of human experiences (e.g. marginalized groups), and they should be taught about the values of justice, fairness and equality. An important aspect of education is teaching students to be critical thinkers, and teaching students to understand and take action on social problems. More avenues need to be made available for students to pursue this form of learning.

Another important starting point is building on what already exists in the curriculum. Global Education is beginning to make inroads in schools, and the goals of

global education are closely aligned with social activism. Ensuring that this becomes and remains an active part of the curriculum is important. I also think that there are opportunities to merge social activism through the work experience component of Career and Personal Planning (CAPP). I wonder if students could earn hours or credits for their social activism, or other related forms of community service.

An avenue for lobbying for changes in the curriculum could possibly be channeled through teachers' organizations. The BC Teacher's Federation has been influential in developing programs and materials that address racism, and gender issues. Perhaps, they could be a play a similarly active role in developing materials relating to social activism. At a school board level, policies could be instituted that support social activism as part of a well-rounded education. Just as school boards have gone to great lengths to preserve band programs, sports, and drama, I wonder if social activism could be supported in the same way. In terms of decision-making in the policy arena, I think students should have a more active role in having a voice on decisions that affect them on a daily basis. It seems that few school boards have students on them. Are there other avenues for students to influence policy and decision makers (e.g. education committees, accreditation teams)?

I recognize, however, in order for changes to be made to existing policies and practices, a paradigm shift is required, whereby education is seen as more than imparting academic knowledge. I think that starting small might be best. Having students present the value of their experiences with social activism to various school groups, and decision-making bodies (e.g. Parent Advisory Councils, school boards, professional development committees, school staff and administrative officers' meetings) could be a small, yet significant step. The data showed that students valued social activism as an important part

of their learning, and they gained skills in a myriad of ways. This information needs to be shared with others. It also showed that social activism is an anomaly in a system that is resistant to change. Shifting attitudes is no minor undertaking, and needs internal champions.

On a more practice-oriented note, I wonder if more heed needs to be given to some of the findings of this study. Students indicated that they appreciated more informal, social, and loosely structured ways of working. This is an important reminder for those of us who work with youth. Students also appreciated opportunities for inter-grade mixing, and opportunities for student-to-student dialogue. Retreats were seen as an important avenue for this. Schools are structured along lines of age, and grade, and it seems there are minimal opportunities for multi-grade mixing. Student council is one avenue for this, but numbers are restricted. It would seem that more opportunities need to be made available for students to work collaboratively both in and outside the classroom. Learning from each other was an effective and powerful form of learning for students.

I also believe that stronger connections need to be forged between schools and the community. In many respects, I think that schools are very insular social structures. Teaching occurs in the isolation of a classroom; and schools are monolithic institutions. Again, I think CAPP programs could be an avenue by which to integrate school, and community. I also believe that there are ways in which greater partnering, and mentoring could occur between schools and community groups. Student groups could learn from existing social action groups that are committed to similar goals. Perhaps there is a place for social workers and other community service workers to take on a more active role in forging connections between schools and communities.

I think that there are other community organizing endeavours that could use an infusion of youth energy and enthusiasm. For instance, city planning departments frequently encounter controversial social issues (e.g. housing) that could benefit from youth participation. There seems to be no shortage of community consultation groups, and processes that are in need of volunteers. Similarly, non-profit societies and agencies are frequently in the market for enthusiastic and resourceful volunteers. As the literature has pointed out (Hume, 1995; Kohler, 1983), these endeavours must be meaningful, and reflect what youth want to be involved with.

I feel that my discussion thus far has made suggestions for how "others" can incorporate social activism into schools. I recognize that there is a natural marriage between social activism and my own work in Healthy Schools. Both are oriented to student empowerment through social change. I believe that I can make inroads in promoting student activism in my own work. I interface with a host of players within the school system ranging from students to trustees. Thus, I am presented with many opportunities to promote youth participation and empowerment.

The findings of this study will help me also in my daily work. For instance, students indicated that they appreciated the role that adults play in providing support and guidance. They like, however, this support and guidance to be offered from the sidelines, rather than from centre stage. Activist students also appreciated working in small, informal settings. Being involved in social activism was a powerful, relevant, and exciting way to learn. Conversely, social activism was fraught with tensions, and complexities. There is much to be learned from these tensions for both youth and adults who work with youth.

Summary and Conclusion

This research project was a strong learning experience. I learned that students involved in social activism are a small, but dedicated group. Students participated in social activism because they care about **making a difference.** This was the core concept that emerged from the data. *Getting involved, working for the cause,* and *balancing tension* were the inter-relating categories that illustrate what the experience of **making a difference** means to students.

Students indicated that there were a variety of factors that influenced them in terms of *getting involved* in a cause. Inspiration from family members was a key motivation for many students, as was a personal experience with social injustice. Once students made the commitment to join a social action group, there were various facets to *working for the cause.* For example, building a community in which students could work together and support one another was an important starting point. Once engaged in activism, the support, guidance and mentoring that students received from each other, as well as key adults in their school helped to sustain their commitment to social activism.

There were many steps in the process of doing the important work of social activism. These ranged from planning and implementing projects to raising awareness about their social cause. Being involved in social activism was not a one-way street with students only giving. They reaped rewards in return. Working with other students in a small, informal group provided students with a sense of belonging, and camaraderie. In many respects, it seemed that the "belonging" to a social action group was as important as the actual "doing" aspect of social activism. The experience of social activism was empowering for students. They learned a myriad of skills ranging from public speaking

to group facilitation. They learned that they can influence change in their schools, and in their communities.

There was, however, a paradoxical nature to social activism. Students became engaged in this form of political activity with high hopes, and ideals, and often were faced with many obstacles along the way. Hence *balancing tensions* was an integral aspect of social activism. Some of these tensions centred around disillusionment around the degree to which they were effecting social change. Other tensions pertained to gender and peer pressure. Students often felt like lone voices in a wilderness of students.

It would seem that we have a long road ahead to change the perception of social activism as a "fringe" activity to a valuable tool for addressing social problems. There is much work to be done to shift attitudes so that social activism is seen as "real" learning. What this study showed is that students are deeply committed to being involved in social change processes. They want to be a part of creating a better and more equitable world. They want to make a difference!

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET

STUDENTS

- **Have you been involved in a group In your school that is committed to working on a particular social issue, cause, or inequity (e.g. environmentalism, anti-racism, global concerns)?**
- **Are you interested in discussing your experiences (e.g. What your group is about? What you have worked on? What is has been like to be a part of this group?)**

I am working on a research project that is looking at the experience of secondary school students who have participated in social change in their schools. The research project involves interviewing several students individually. Interviews will be audiotaped and some notes will be taken during the interview. The information that I am gathering will become part of a Master's degree thesis (Social Work) at the University of Victoria.

It is important that you know that the information will be kept confidential. Your name and the name of your school will not be used in writing up the results. Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary.

If you are interested in participating in this research project, please contact me as soon as possible.

Tina Jennissen
Home: 390-3445
Work: 755-6200

APPENDIX B

INFORMATION LETTER-STATEMENT OF UNDERSTANDING

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS EXPERIENCES WITH SOCIAL ACTION

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of secondary students involved in social action in their schools. To carry out the research, it is important to hear about the experiences directly from students themselves.

Participation in this study will involve interviewing several students individually so that they can discuss their social action experiences with researcher, Tina Jennissen. Conversations will be audiotaped and transcribed into notes. These tapes will be erased and the written data destroyed within a few months of completing the research.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Students can choose to stop participating at any time without explanation.

Information gathered will be kept confidential. Student names will not be used in writing the results. A code number will be used to protect privacy. Interview results and audiotapes will be kept secure in a locked filing cabinet in a locked room in the researcher's home.

The information gathered will become part of a Master's degree thesis (Social Work) at the University of Victoria. If you have any questions or you want more information on the study, please call Tina Jennissen at 390-3445 (home) or at 755-6200 (work).

APPENDIX C

Sample Interview Question Guideline

1. Tell me very briefly about the social action group that you are involved with. (What it's about? What it stands for? Activities that you've been involved with?)
2. Have you seen any changes in your school or community, as a result of some of your group's activities? Could you comment on these?
3. Are there any successes that your group has experienced, that really stand out for you? Can you comment on these?
4. In doing the work that your group has done, can you comment on any challenges or barriers that stand out for you?
5. Where has your group received the greatest support or encouragement?
6. How did you come to be involved in this social action group? (Where did that interest first come from? Or what sparked that interest?)
7. What do you get out being a part of this social action group?
8. Is there anything else that you'd like to tell me about your involvement with this social action group? (Any major points that I might have missed? Any major highlights that you would like to discuss?)
9. Can I call on you later if I need clarification on anything that we have discussed today?
10. Do you know anyone else who I can talk to that has also been involved in this social action group, and would like to share their experiences?

VITA

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Given Names: Tina G.

Place of birth: Macklin, Saskatchewan

Date of Birth: November 16, 1953

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University of Victoria	1985 to1990
University of Victoria	1994 to 1998
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Title of Thesis:

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: The experience of secondary school students in a social action group

Author: [redacted]

Tina Jennissen

Date: Aug. 31/98