

Beyond Facts and Acts: The Implications of 'Ordinary Politics' for Youth Political Engagement

KRISTINA LLEWELLYN AND JOEL WESTHEIMER, *University of Ottawa*

ABSTRACT In this article, we demonstrate that students have a keen interest in “ordinary,” every-day issues that affect their lives, and have civic assets deriving from their daily experiences. Both findings showcase the importance of moving beyond civic education based on either of two assumptions: first, that youth lack knowledge (facts), or, second, that youth lack civic experiences (acts). Data from this article was collected in a two-part study of the state of civic education in Canada. Part of that research was an exploratory case study, based on interviews and observations with students in Ottawa, Ontario. This article is a re-analysis of in-depth interviews with 16 students, 12 female and four male, based on a biographical interpretive method. Our re-analysis of the data from our exploratory study provides significant examples of youth assets among our participants that lead us to consider the possibility that curriculum might better focus on the knowledge and experiences students do have as a means of promoting further participation and political engagement.

Introduction

Paulo Freire, the late Brazilian educator and author, was fond of telling a story he heard from a Spanish factory worker living and working in Germany. The worker was hoping to organize his colleagues politically to fight for better wages and working conditions. But every time he tried to elicit the other workers' views and enrol them in an organizing course he had designed, he got blank faces and stony silence. When the workers did talk, they appeared apathetic and uninformed, wanting only to earn their money and return to Spain once they had made enough. Not wanting to give up and knowing that the workers enjoyed playing card games after work, he began to join them in the nightly games. Slowly, through informal discussions about their daily experiences on the job and in the community, politics became one of the more lively and central discussion topics in their social gatherings. Political action soon followed. But, the organizer observed, the workers' political knowledge and curiosity as well as their implicit familiarity with power relations on the job emerged (initially) only through the informal card-game banter and not from formal, direct questions about their ideas or understandings of politics [1].

Although this story derives from efforts by a labour organizer to mobilize German guest workers in Spain, citizenship education and political science researchers everywhere could draw an important lesson from it as well: the common

research findings that indicate political ignorance or apathy (especially among youth) might be partially or wholly the result of unimaginative research approaches rather than a lack of knowledge, interest, or concern among participants. Our research group learned this lesson after conducting a secondary analysis of our data from a study of Ottawa-area high school students in high school civics classes. The two-part study initially conducted for the Government of Canada (Westheimer et al., 2005) and then in conjunction with the Canadian Policy Research Networks (Llewellyn et al., 2007) found that many students were often disengaged, uninformed, and unaware of key issues, debates, and policy deliberations facing Canadians prior to the 2008 general election. These results initially confirmed the findings from numerous other studies that demonstrated declining levels of youth political engagement, voter interest and knowledge, and youth civic participation (for example, Howe, 2003; Pammett and Leduc, 2003; Blais et al., 2005; Gidengil et al., 2004). This, however, was only part of the story.

The secondary analysis of the data resulted in two interrelated findings. First, like the Spanish guest workers, the students we studied demonstrated a keen interest in “ordinary,” every-day issues that affected them and their families and friends and, at times, substantial insight into the larger social and political forces at play even though typical school-based civic education outcome indicators showed an alarming lack of knowledge or interest. Second, the subsequent analysis revealed important youth assets deriving from their daily experiences that mitigate against the various youth deficit models prominent in civic education theory and practice. Both findings showcase the importance of moving beyond civic education based on either of two assumptions: first, that youth lack knowledge (facts), or, second, that youth lack civic experiences (acts). This article draws on these findings to suggest lessons for youth civic engagement practices both in and outside of schools.

The Study

Over a span of two years (from March 2005 to June 2007), we conducted a two-part study of the state of civic education in Canada [2]. In conjunction with the Democratic Reform Secretariat of the Government of Canada and the Canadian Policy Research Networks, we reviewed the current state of civic education in Canada (Westheimer et al., 2005; Llewellyn et al., 2007). Part of that research was an exploratory case study, based on interviews, observations, and questionnaires, with students and teachers at four diverse schools in Ottawa, Ontario during the 2006/2007 school year. The schools included: Crestview Academy, an affluent private day school for girls; Ottawa East High School (HS), one of the most multicultural public schools in the city; Fellowship HS, an independent Christian school for boys and girls; and Ottawa Alternative HS for mature students who left school without completion. These four case-study schools provided excellent settings for exploration of students’ conceptions of citizenship and political engagement. First, they are located in Canada’s political capital where current events loom large; second, they offer explicit citizenship courses (i.e. Grade 10 Civics and elective Grade 12 World Issues); finally, the four schools are located within Ottawa’s urban core and participating students were diverse in ethnic background, social class, and country of origin. This article focuses on in-depth interviews with 16 students, 12 female and four male.

In our original inquiry, we coded interview transcripts for specific school-based outcomes of civic knowledge and skills (i.e. political parties, citizenship definitions, and methods of activism). Sorting the data provided summarizations of

the procedural and legislative knowledge students failed to recall from their courses. From this analytic process emerged the categorization of students as apolitical and lacking civic abilities. Such a reading confirms typical youth deficit theories. Students told us that they did not know about political and social issues and they were not involved in political or social action. Secondary analysis of the data, however, revealed a more nuanced picture. Although the deficits in knowledge were clear, broadening the research data to include, for example, conversation before and after the formal interview protocols were conducted allowed us to capture a kind of political consciousness that was indiscernible in the previous analysis.

A biographical interpretive method guided our second analysis of the data (e.g. Denzin, 1989; Mann, 1994; Smith, 1994). Biographical method, within hermeneutics philosophy, considers data as human experience with all its messiness and ambiguities laid bare (Jardine, 1998). Researchers using this method seek a participant's thoughts and desires of a situation by "grasping the subjective consciousness or intent of the actor from the inside" (Schwandt, 2000: 192, cited by Popadiuk 2004: 395). At the same time, individual experiences are understood in relation to larger socio-political contexts (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). The analytic focus is thus on in-depth, contextualized, experiential accounts of a phenomenon under investigation (Popadiuk, 2004).

Our interviews were semi-structured sessions. This format allows researchers to listen for unanticipated interpretations of questions and critical points at which participants' issues interrupt the researchers' agenda (Andolina, 2002: 190). Questions about political facts and civic aptitude were accompanied by inquiries regarding family, socio-cultural identity and recreational activities. Our analysis focused on interview moments when the young person's life experiences gave voice to 'ordinary politics' – conveying engagement with their relationship to socio-economic and political structures through the lens of their own experiences. Four biographic profiles – one from each of the four sample schools – serve as illustrations of our findings.

Kids Don't Know Anything

For many social scientists, the single most important component of civic education and political engagement is knowledge. For example, Henry Milner (2005) argues that higher rates of civic knowledge are correlated to rates in political participation such as voting. Indeed, international surveys suggest that countries that have higher voter participation rates also have higher rates of political knowledge among citizens. In Canada, as elsewhere, general knowledge about politics is low. Knowing the names of major political leaders and contenders, how parliament functions, how social policies have been implemented in the past, and basic historical facts about Canada and global affairs are all forms of civic knowledge that elude a large number of Canadians (Gidengil et al., 2004).

Among Canadian youth and young adults, the situation seems even worse. Few studies have been conducted in Canada that explicitly assess political knowledge among Canadian youth (Canada did not participate in phase 2 of the IEA International Civic Education Study [Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Amadeo et al., 2002] which surveyed the political knowledge of youth across thirty countries). But the studies that have been conducted tend to concur with Stolle and Cruz (2005) who observe that "young Canadians are less knowledgeable about politics than any other age group in the country, and perhaps more disturbingly, by a wider margin today than ten years ago. Studies by Howe, Johnston and Blais (2005) have concluded that

young people lack not only general political knowledge but also campaign-specific knowledge. For example, during the final 10 days of the 2004 election campaign, 40% of Canadian young people were still not able to come up with Paul Martin's name when asked to identify the leader of the Liberal Party. Lack of knowledge of the other party leaders was even more widespread: the figures were 53% for the Conservative leader, 66% for the leader of the New Democratic Party, and (in Quebec) 36% for the leader of the Bloc Québécois." Again, young people were less likely to identify various positions of the political parties, even on those issues they identified as priorities, including health care, taxes, and defence (Howe et al., 2005; Howe 2003).

The 2004 Canadian Election Study shows that those under 30-years-old are rarely able to name a political party that would be able to deal with their number one concern (Howe et al., 2005). Instead, "many young people feel that they possess neither sufficient knowledge of the political process, nor sufficient political information to be comfortable about voting" (Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2004:3). These findings stand in particular contrast to civic education goals commonly found in virtually every province's policy and curriculum documents – as adroitly laid out in the findings of Alan Sears and his research team during phase I of the IEA study (Sears et al., 2001)

Lee-Ann, Gabrielle, Jillian, and Sahra

The results of our study show similar knowledge deficits. With few exceptions, the interviews we conducted resulted in similar "kids-don't-know-anything" findings to the studies mentioned above. The students generally do not have a grasp of key political terms like democracy or the basic workings of government. With varying degrees, students believe civic knowledge is a series of adult-oriented, overwhelming facts that are less important than math and science. Similarly, these students are not active in formal politics (more on this below). While most indicate that they will vote in future, few imagine alternative ways of addressing an injustice. Participants state that they cannot take civic action, as some put it 'walk the walk,' because youth life is busy and only adults have enough power to make a difference.

Lee-Ann (all names are pseudonyms), for example, told us that her parents who are Lebanese immigrants and own a small business, have political discussions at home. Aside from trying to "know what's going on" through morning television, however, Lee-Ann is "not that intrigued or interested about politics." Lee-Ann claims to not have "enough information" about social and political issues. Lee-Ann is overwhelmed by political 'facts,' and maintains: "it's just confusing and so it's hard to keep up...the whole A plus B, like the parliamentary system, what happens at different branches, it's good to know that but I probably won't remember that next year." She also observes that her school is an 'academic' school so most students believe Civics is a "joke." The administration and her parents prefer success in "science, math, and English maybe." Her approach to Civics is as a result "more like do-the-work-so-I-get-a-good-mark, instead of understanding and really benefiting from it." She recalls a rare moment sharing civic knowledge with family: "I recently was studying the eleven pillars of democracy and I surprisingly brought that up at the dinner table, they were really impressed."

Another student we interviewed watches the news and reads the newspaper at home. But Gabrielle explains that her family is disengaged from social and political issues. Her family is of Anglo-Saxon heritage and solidly working class.

Gabrielle states: “I don’t know a lot about politics and stuff.” She characterized her Civics class as “hard,” because “you have to know everything.” Gabrielle regularly responds “I’m not sure,” when asked about the purpose of democracy and her take on current news. She believes that Civics teaches her “more about politics and stuff,” which is useful for knowing “what’s going on in the world and who is...the groups and everything.” Gabrielle ultimately asserts, however, that civic knowledge “should be for adults because they have more experience with it and they are actually experiencing taxes...young people aren’t into that yet you know.”

A third student, Jillian, was home-schooled until Grade 10. Now Jillian buses two and a half hours a day to attend her independent Christian school. Grade 12 World Issues, according to Jillian, makes her “aware [so] you can like serve God better because you can argue things better and you can understand and help people.” Political and social concerns are not, however, part of her daily routine at school or at home. Jillian states: “My family we don’t order the newspaper, so I find that I’m lacking on not only politics but like world issues.” Her parents are Anglo-Saxon, own their own business, and belong to “a very Conservative church.” While she recalls moments of controversial discussion in class, Jillian characterizes the school as “sheltered because sometimes you can get a little narrow minded if only your way is presented.” Jillian asserts, however, that “over-exposure would just be a whole confusion of ideas.” A perceived lack of civic knowledge, while influenced by Jillian’s Christian education, ring similar to other students who believe adults control the information market. She states: “For the most part, youth are more viewed as almost troublemakers and not mature...like you have to hit a certain age before an adult will treat you like you know anything.”

Finally, Sahra was born in Somalia, and raised in Kenya. She has lived in Canada for seven years. She talks about her reluctance to enrol in Civics: “I’m not into politics so when he [the teacher] told me it’s about politics I was like this is going to be boring.” She claims to have slightly more civic knowledge than younger students, who she describes as being uninformed. Speaking in the third person, she comments: “I don’t think [young] people are informed, we don’t talk about it that much in school, they don’t know like mostly about the parties and stuff.” Although she often describes herself in similar terms, she speaks with pride about following an election and watching the Cable Public Affairs Channel. Civics, according to Sahra, provides a “general knowledge about basically the workings of anything in the government.” As for social awareness, Sahra argues neither teachers nor classmates start “critical discussions” in case “someone will be offended or will think this person is not a good person.” She vocalizes the desire for a classroom in which “everybody says what’s on their mind, maybe people who don’t know what is happening [will] get to be informed.”

The Solution? Facts to Acts

Although Lee-Ann, Gabrielle, Jillian, and Sahra share the kinds of knowledge deficits so commonly reported in the literature, a secondary analysis of our interviews and observations revealed some surprising findings which we will discuss below. For now, however, it is worth noting that the knowledge deficit model of civic engagement assumes that since young people do not know enough about civic affairs, school-based civic learning opportunities should focus on teaching facts. We do not argue that these deficits in knowledge are worrisome. Pedagogically, however, what to do about it seems more complex.

If students learn facts about the political system, will they then be more motivated to act – vote, participate in political campaigns, join political parties? Pammet and Leduc report that “most Canadians feel that young people are not voting because they feel distanced from the operations of the political system or because they lack information about it” (Pammet and Leduc, 2003:54). Only 5 percent of 18-24 year-olds reported feeling “very knowledgeable” about the election party platforms, compared to 18 percent for those over 55 (Kingsley, 2004). One poll indicates that 40% of 18-34 year-olds strongly agreed with the statement, “I would like to learn more about Canada’s history and heritage” (Smith et al., 2001:20). Other surveys of young Canadians demonstrate that they are not satisfied with their own levels of political knowledge. Instead, “many young people feel that they possess neither sufficient knowledge of the political process, nor sufficient political information to be comfortable about voting” (Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2004:3). In addition, Milner argues that “the knowledge to be effective citizens” (2001:3) has a positive relationship to levels of political engagement. Similarly, Howe concludes that “political knowledge is a critical factor – perhaps the critical factor – underlying cohort differences in voter turnout” (Howe, 2003:21).

The direction of causality, however, remains uncertain. In other words, we do not know that having students memorize facts about the workings of government or particular campaign platforms will increase rates of political participation. While we identify a positive correlation between political knowledge and political participation, there is little evidence that increased political knowledge is the cause of increased political engagement. What seems to connect both political knowledge and participation is political interest. Those who are more interested in politics tend to be more politically informed, seek out political knowledge, and participate in political activity. Again, however, it is unclear whether political knowledge can be the source of interest, or whether they are all simply symptoms of political engagement (for example, a study by Schugurensky and Myers [2003] suggests that the most powerful influence for political interest is family socialization.

Kids Don’t do Anything

Another conclusion many studies agree on is that young people (and Canadian citizens in general) are not as active as they should be in political affairs. André Turcotte began his Elections Canada report on youth voter participation by musing that if the “Do Not Vote Party” had fielded candidates in the 2004 Canadian general election, our new government would be overwhelmingly comprised by its members (Turcotte, 2005). Blais (2002) echoes the conclusions of many researchers that low voter participation is especially pronounced in the young: “If we want to understand why turnout is declining in Canada, we need to focus on the generation that was born after 1970” (1). The political disengagement of young Canadians is also evident in political parties, whose average membership age is 59. Only 2% of young Canadians reported being a party member in 2000, a decline from 10% in 1990. Furthermore, although Canadians under 30 years old constitute 40% of the general population, only 6% of total party members are under 30 (Young and Cross, 2004; O’Neill, 2001).

Once again, our data offers some support for these claims. All 16 of the students interviewed described themselves as inactive within formal politics, uninspired to serve as political leaders and unaffiliated (with no expectation of affiliation) with political parties. Lee-Ann echoes the sentiments of other students

we interviewed when she explains: “we’ve got so much going on in our lives...we’re more affected by it [government] when we get older, because right now we’re more under our parents’ responsibility in a way they run us kids.” For Lee-Ann, being political is an adult activity: “I always think of voting...instead of little acts like involved with the community.” Lee-Ann cites the example of her school’s semi-annual fundraisers for Child Haven (a charity for African children), as ‘a little act’ for which she is unsure of its political impact. Furthermore, she does not think protesting or letter writing “really makes a big impact.” Lee-Ann notes that Civics includes writing letters to the prime minister, but when it comes to getting involved in efforts at positive change she notes that “that’s one topic we didn’t discuss... we don’t really focus on [what’s going on] outside of the school.”

Similarly, Gabrielle notes that her parents do not vote and that none of her teachers are examples of involved citizens. Gabrielle describes Civics as “jotting notes, listening and asking questions” without debates or experiences beyond the school walls. She struggles to think of an issue that she would act upon. If she were to get involved, Gabrielle thinks that she might “write a letter, make a petition I guess...I don’t know!” She contemplates future volunteering because “it’s nice to help.” Gabrielle states emphatically that she will vote at 18 “because if you want something done, if you want a change in your, in something, you have to say something.” She concludes the interview, however, by stating that only “way bigger people than them [young people]” can make a difference.

Jillian participates in a 30 hour famine, child sponsorship, and Habitat for Humanity through her school. A diploma from Fellowship High School requires 60 hours of community service, compared to the 40 hour provincial requirement. As a result, she argues that her school teaches civic engagement. Jillian states: “Christianity is love and giving to society, so we’re taught to support our views in the world through our actions.” Jillian admits, however, that other than letters sent to the newspaper, World Issues is mostly “talk about writing letters to your MP, your MPP, becoming a party member...and we’re taught debating skills.” When asked if she applies these lessons, Jillian responds: “We’re so busy with school, like we just have so much going on. I would be interested later on in life, probably closer to when I turn eighteen and I actually have more of a say.”

Sahra says she does not volunteer inside or outside of the school because she is “not a citizen yet.” She states: “I wouldn’t mind doing it, but it’s kind of hectic you know.” “Right now,” she explains, “I just want to try and finish my credits so I can get out of school.” When asked if she or her peers learn skills for getting involved, Sahra wonders aloud: “I don’t think there would be anything [to do except] wait for an election.”

The Solution? Acts to Facts

If those researchers who claim that more facts will lead to more acts have pedagogical opposition, it can be found in the writings of those who profess a different assumption: more acts will lead to more facts. In other words, students have too few opportunities to participate in civic affairs and if they participated more, they would have greater interest, vote more, participate more, and seek out the knowledge they need to effectively engage in the political and civic life of the community. Indeed, one of the authors of this article, has argued exactly this (eg. Westheimer, 2005).

Proponents of service learning, in particular, argue that participating in community-based activities tied to the school curriculum can elevate students' willingness and desire to assimilate facts and skills related to those activities.

Beyond Deficit Models

We have described a Facts-to-Acts theory for youth political engagement which assumes that teaching students more information will lead to greater political participation. We also described an Acts-to-Facts model for political engagement that assumes that if students are asked to participate more in politically-engaged experiences, they will eventually come to learn the required information for effective political participation. Both of these models focus on youth deficits, the former a knowledge deficit, and the latter an experience deficit. We would like to propose a third approach. Our re-analysis of the data from our exploratory study indicated significant examples of youth assets among our participants that lead us to consider the possibility that curriculum might better focus on the knowledge and experiences students do have as a means of promoting further participation and political engagement. This consideration is not new. John Dewey and other turn-of-the-century progressives and many contemporary educators have asserted the potential for educational activities that build on the knowledge and experience students already have. Our study simply helps to highlight those possibilities for civic education that might lead to greater youth political engagement. At the same time that students showed gaps in civic knowledge and in civic experiences and intentions, they also revealed important life experiences and insights that could be plumbed in productive ways in schools.

Civic Assets: Students know things and they are involved

In contrast to the formal answers participants gave to direct questions about political engagement, a conversational tone emerged when they were questioned about their own life experiences and related youth issues. Leyla, from Ottawa East HS, spoke in-depth about injustices against her Muslim community and Muslim nations around the world after 9/11; John at Fellowship HS described his participation in protest marches against abortion in concert with his church; Teika, a student at Ottawa Alternative HS, expressed sophisticated concerns about funding for social programs that she needed as a homeless teen. Each story, while unique, reveals experiential knowledge and experiences that have implications for furthering political engagement among youth

Lee-Ann's experiences at an all-girls school stand out as influential to her sense of civic identity. She, similar to other participants at that school, discusses excelling in science and wanting to be a lawyer to break down female stereotypes. Her favourite Civics lesson is about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Lee-Ann is particularly worried about women's freedom of speech in other countries. She explains: "women's rights to speak out against something...let's take Africa for instance...if they don't agree with something they don't have a way of saying." While her knowledge of women's equality internationally is general, Lee-Ann seeks specificity in regards to gender and political voice. For an essay assignment in Civics dealing with any leader or organization, Lee-Ann was researching the life of Burmese pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi, a political detainee. Lee-Ann stresses that the school expects the girls to become leaders in their respective communities. That goal is currently reserved for lunch

hour clubs, of which Lee-Ann is an active participant. In addition to Amnesty International and Ontario Students Against Drunk Driving, she explains her favourite club, Taking Action and Caring for Others (TACO): "it's like a group of girls like Crestview students where we make up presentations we go into the middle school and talk about issues such as media and body image and how it affects you." Lee-Ann expressed desire to learn more "about how everything affects our lives and what we could do to change it."

Gabrielle, who was raised in a working-class family, discussed workers' rights with us. After first denying in laughter that her peers discuss political issues, Gabrielle told us that "we talk about what you're doing, where you work...things like that." She goes on to speak in unusual depth for the interview about the inequities at her job in a hair salon. Gabrielle states: "I wanted to do hair dressing, but I don't like it anymore...at work they [managers] just tell me to do everything, like everything, and they sit there and just watch." In terms descriptive of age discrimination and the need for a living wage, she explains: "I'm really young compared to them all [senior employees] ...I clean, I bring the garbage out, and everything and I only get eight dollars." Gabrielle also is involved in a school club that raises awareness of the dangers of second-hand smoke. She recalled her initial involvement this way: "A woman came in [to school] who was dying... she was from Hull and she worked in a restaurant and because they were allowed to smoke there so she got second hand smoke and she never smoked a day in her life and she got cancer and died." So while Gabrielle confessed to us that "I don't know a lot about politics and stuff," she demonstrated sufficient experience and insight on which to build political understandings and engagement.

Jillian also had a determined sense of civic engagement, primarily defined by her participation in the Christian community. "You can make a political statement with where you choose to spend your time," she notes. For Jillian, devotion to religious education is a form of political action: bussing over two hours to attend an independent school, participating in student council, assisting teachers at the sister elementary school, and volunteering in school-based outreach missions. She reflects: "We call it a Christian duty, whereas you would call it a good citizen." Duty means "sometimes going against what current politician say," for example, fighting against abortion and "protesting the idea of marriage being changed." Although she initially claimed to have little political knowledge, Jillian revealed a strong grasp of particular political and social issues that conform to conservative Christian dogma. She worries that the "Christian viewpoint" is under-represented in Canada, citing same sex marriage even though "there are very few homosexuals." Jillian thought that "in some ways we're too democratic. The minority has more of a say than the majority, if only a certain amount of people say it loud enough it's going to happen whereas sometimes the majority is ignored for the sake of compromising." Jillian also concluded one interview seeking a larger political voice for youth: "teenagers have a lot of energy and because we have lots of new ideas, I think if we actually chose to express ourselves that way that there would be a big change."

Sahra spoke to us about her experiences as an African immigrant. She believes people in the 'West' are "only aware of North America... never question themselves and what's causing all this conflict." She recounts a moment in class when a student brought up religious abuses of women. Sahra did not respond to the comment at the time, but reveals in the interview: "I think people are really ignorant, just because they see people dressing up as a certain way they assume that the person doesn't have any privileges, or freedom." "I'm a Muslim [woman]," Sahra

continues, and “one of our prophets, his wife was a merchant, she used to work...A lot of people think that [Muslim] women don’t have the freedom to work, but they do.” Sahra also declares her opposition to Muslim women’s rights being curtailed. “I was working in the Ottawa Somali community,” Sahra recalls, “the thing was the women didn’t even know like which place to go and vote, so they call one another up and say you’ve got to go vote.” This work is important for Sahra, as she fears the conservative party may follow an American approach to immigration with “strict laws.” Her worries are substantiated by what she sees as “the role of Canada itself changing, it’s no longer a peaceful nation...going all the way to Afghanistan.” She questions the economic priorities of the richest nations who spend “trillions of dollars, money for war,” when children “most of them Muslim, Latino, and Blacks” are homeless. Recall, Sahra’s earlier claim, however, that she is “not into politics” and that when her teacher indicated a lesson was going to be about politics, she assumed “this is going to be boring.”

The youth we studied have clear gaps in political knowledge, identity, and efficacy. But they also have significant civic assets or ways of “experiencing a sense of connection, interrelatedness, and, commitment towards the greater community” (Adler and Goggin 2005: 240; cited by Harris et. al. 2007: 26).

Ordinary Politics and Youth Political Engagement

In their 2006 book, *Ordinary People’s Politics*, Judith Brett and Anthony Moran present compelling portraits of Australians from all walks of life talking about politics and the future of their country and the world. Their research project, they emphasize, sought to uncover the subtle ways people think about politics that are obscured from political scientists’ traditional measures. The aim of their book is to “reveal aspects of people’s political outlooks...by showing people thinking about the society they live in with the resources they have available” (Brett and Moran, 2006:4). Studying millennial generation youth’s understandings of politics, civic engagement, and social issues of concern requires broadening our approaches for inquiry.

The study we described here demonstrates the need for multiple forms of inquiry when seeking to understand how “ordinary” people – and especially youth – think about politics. This work resulted from secondary analysis of data already collected. Rather than focusing on formal coding of participant responses to our initial protocols, we looked instead to the interstices of the interview and observational data – the casual remarks, conversational banter, and unintended analyses. Like the Spanish guest worker described by Freire and like the Australian researchers Brett and Moran, we became interested in what “ordinary [people] have to say when you engage them in a conversation about politics and give them plenty of time and a willing ear?” (3). Applied to youth political engagement research, this is a question well worth further pursuit.

Correspondence: KRISTINA LLEWELLYN AND JOEL WESTHEIMER,
University of Ottawa, 550 Cumberland Street, Ottawa, ON, Canada

NOTES

- [1] For a description of these events (that is somewhat less detailed than Freire has given in public lectures and conversations), see Freire, P. *Pedagogy of Hope* and Shor, I. and Friere, P. *A pedagogy for liberation: dialogues on transforming education*.
- [2] A third part of this study began in September 2006 and is ongoing; it explores qualitative case studies of youth conceptions of citizenship and civic education in schools in Ontario, New York, and Chicago.

REFERENCES

- ADLER, R.P. AND GOGGIN, J. (2005) What do we mean by 'civic engagement?' *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3, 3, 236-253.
- ALVESSON, M. AND SKOLDBERG, K. (2000) *Reflexive methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- AMADEO, J.A., TORNEY-PURTA, J., LEHMANN, R., HUSFELDT, V., AND NIKOLOVA, R. (2002). *Civic Knowledge and Engagement: an IEA study of upper secondary students in sixteen countries*. Amsterdam: IEA.
- ANDOLINA, M. et. al. (2002) Searching for the Meaning of Youth Civic Engagement: Notes From the Field. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6, 4, 189-195.
- BLAIS, A. (2002) Generational Change and the Decline of Political Participation: the case of voter turnout in Canada. Prepared for the workshop "Citizenship on Trial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Political Socialization of Adolescents." McGill University, Montreal.
- BRETT, J. AND MORAN, A. (2006) *Ordinary people's politics*. Melbourne: Pluto Press.
- CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND INFORMATION ON CANADA (CRIC). (2004) *Canadian Democracy: bringing youth back into the political process*. Ottawa, ON: CRIC.
- DENZIN, N. (1989) *Interpretive biography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- FREIRE, P. (2004) *Pedagogy of Hope*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- GIDENGIL, E. et al. (2004). *Democratic Citizenship in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- HARRIS, A. et. al. (2007) *Young People and Citizenship: an everyday perspective*. *Youth Studies Australia*, 26, 3, 19-27.
- HOWE, P. (2003). Electoral Participation and the Knowledge Deficit. *Electoral Insight*, 5, 2, 20-25.
- JARDINE, D.W. (1998) *To Dwell with a Boundless Heart: essays in curriculum theory, hermeneutics, and the ecological imagination*. New York: Peter Lang.
- KINGSLEY, J.P. (2004) Keynote Speech. Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC), Research seminar on the political engagement of Canadian youth. Ottawa, ON: CRIC.
- LLEWELLYN, K., COOK, S.A., WESTHEIMER, J., MOLINA-GIRÓN, L.A., AND SUURTAMM, K.E. (2007) *The State and Potential of Civic Learning in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks.
- MANN, C. (1994) How did I get to here? Educational life histories of adolescent girls doing A levels. *Auto/Biography*, 3, 59-70.
- MILNER, H. (2001) Civic Literacy in Comparative Context: why Canadians should be concerned. *IRPP Policy Matters*, 2, 2.
- MILNER, H. (2005) The Phenomenon of Political Drop-outs: Canada in comparative perspective. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Political Science Association. Leeds, UK.
- O'NEILL, B. (2001) Generational Patterns in the Political Opinions and Behaviour of Canadians: separating the wheat from the chaff. *IRPP Policy Matters*, 2, 5.
- PAMMETT, J.H. AND LEDUC, L. (2003). Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: a new survey of non-voters. Ottawa, ON: Elections Canada.
- POPADIUK, N. (2004) The Feminist Biographical Method in Psychological Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 9, 3, 392-412.
- SCHUGURENSKY, D. AND MYERS, J.P. (2003) A Framework to Explore Lifelong Learning: the case of the civic education of civics teachers. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 22, 4, 325-352.
- SCHWANDT, T.A. (2000) Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry. In N. K. Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- SEARS, A., CLARKE, G.M. AND HUGHES, A.S. (2001) in Torney-Purta et. al (Eds.).
- SHOR, I. AND FRIERE, P. (1987) *A pedagogy for Liberation: dialogues on transforming education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- SMITH, S. et al. (2001) *Social Vision: young adult perspectives on social and civic responsibility*. Toronto, ON: D-Code and the Canadian Centre for Social Entrepreneurship.
- SMITH, L.M. (1994) Biographical Method. In N. K. Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- STOLLE, D. AND CRUZ, C. (2005) Youth Civic Engagement in Canada: implications for public policy. In *Social Capital in Action: thematic policy studies*. Ottawa, ON: Policy Research Initiative.
- TORNEY-PURTA, J., LEHMANN, R., OSWALD, H., AND SCHULZ, W. (Eds.) (2001). *Citizenship and Education in Twenty-eight Countries: civic knowledge and engagement at age fourteen*. Amsterdam: IEA.
- TURCOTTE, A. (2005) Different Strokes: why young Canadians don't vote. *Electoral Insight*, 7, 1, 12-16.
- YOUNG, L. AND CROSS, W. (2004). Youth Involvement in Political Parties. In Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC). *Canadian Democracy: Bringing Youth Back into the Political Process*. CRIC. pp. 9-11.
- WESTHEIMER, J. (2005) Democratic Dogma: there is no one-size-fits-all approach to schooling for democracy. *Our Schools Our Selves*.
- WESTHEIMER, J., COOK, S.A., SUURTAMM, K.E., AND MOLINA-GIRÓN, L.A. (2005). *Strengthening Canadian Democracy: civic literacy in perspective*. Prepared for the Democratic Reform Secretariat Privy Council Office of the Government of Canada. Ottawa, ON: Democratic Dialogue.