

# The State and Potential of Civic Learning in Canada

Charting the Course for Youth  
Civic and Political Participation

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1. *A Group Apart: Young Party Members in Canada* – Lisa Young and William Cross
2. *Indifferent or Just Different? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada* – Brenda O'Neill
3. *The Meaning of Political Participation for Indigenous Youth* – Taiaiake Alfred, Jackie Price and Brock Pitawanakwat
4. *Rendre compte et soutenir l'action bénévole des jeunes* – André Thibault, Patrice Albertus and Julie Fortier
5. *The State and Potential of Civic Learning in Canada* – Kristina R. Llewellyn, Sharon Cook, Joel Westheimer, Luz Alison Molina Girón and Karen Suurtamm
6. "What Do You Mean I Can't Have a Say?" *Young Canadians and Their Government* – André Turcotte

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## **Abstract**

This report focuses on the role of education in improving civic learning for youth. We ask two questions: What knowledge and skills serve as a basis for models of civic learning for young Canadians? What changes to learning processes are needed to encourage youth participation in democratic processes? To answer these questions, the report examines the various perspectives represented in the literature on youth and civic literacy. It also offers the various perspectives of Ottawa students and teachers in relation to government curriculum to provide a snapshot of the state and potential of civic learning within secondary schools. We synthesize this research to identify youth trends in civic participation, possible reasons for political disengagement, and the kind of citizenship knowledge and skills provided for students historically and currently. In so doing, we argue that civic learning is primarily characterized by procedural knowledge and compliant codes of behaviour that do not envelope students in collective action for systemic understandings of political issues. We contend that schools need support for renewing efforts that put social justice citizenship at the heart of student learning and the school environment. Educational programs for civic literacy should teach students to make informed, active choices about policies that affect their lives and to engage with their community in efforts for social change.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Canada (1993).

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# The State and Potential of Civic Learning in Canada

## Introduction

In recent years, Canadians have wrestled with a host of policy concerns that call for the kind of rigorous public debates that are the hallmark of democracy. Following the 2006 general election, for example, concern for the health of the planet figured as the highest priority issue for 26% of Canadians surveyed.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, politicians, policy-makers and media pundits have given environmental issues widespread attention. Prime Minister Stephen Harper presented a new *Clean Air Act* to cut 20% of greenhouse emissions by 2050. Opposition parties and government officials from numerous industrialized countries criticized Harper for setting weak targets that undermined Canada's commitment to the Kyoto protocol. The public became witness to and participant in explosive debates relating to climate change. Other issues have figured highly in the public psyche as well. Concern over wars in the Middle East, trust in our government and political leaders, and calls for democratic reform of the political process itself have vied for public attention.

In many ways, these debates mark the health of one of the world's more respected democracies. Politicians express varying positions on issues of public concern. The media carries a variety of views and perspectives. Through election campaigns, a free press and community discourse, politicians and the broader public debate those policies most prominent in the minds of the people these policies will likely affect. Ideally, as Aristotle envisioned, democratic citizens thus move themselves and each other "from individual ignorance to collective wisdom."

However, as Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter point out in their study of US citizens' political knowledge, the "quality of the public debate [on such issues] and thus ultimately the quality of the reforms that emerge, depend on two things: the nature of the information brought to the public marketplace and the ability of citizens to use that information to discern their interests and to articulate them effectively."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, recent studies indicate cause for concern on both counts. 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 literacy that elude a large number of Canadians.<sup>4</sup> If, as Rousseau asserted, the right to vote should be accompanied by an obligation to be knowledgeable in public affairs,<sup>5</sup> strengthening democracy will require attention to the level of civic literacy and the ability to use civic knowledge in the democratic process of governance.

While civic literacy needs to be addressed for Canadians of all ages from the workplace to the home, schools and their students are a central place for reform. Our future public policy depends on the commitments of young Canadians and thus deserves the attention of educators and policy-makers. Although most researchers would agree that the school and the community must give priority to harnessing the vision and energy of youth for civic affairs, there is much less agreement on where or how to seek improvement. Indeed, definitions of civic literacy, how to strengthen it, and its importance in democratic reform are all contested in the research literature. A full picture of civic

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<sup>2</sup> Decima Research, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: ix.

<sup>4</sup> Gidengil et al., 2004: 57-67.

<sup>5</sup> Rousseau, 1968: 57.

learning would have to seriously consider the role of family, media, law, religion, community clubs and many other institutions. The scope of this report allows only for a focus on school. We recognize that the school and its teachers, shaped by a complex web of societal relations, are neither “the problem” with civic learning nor the only solution. The school, however, as one of the primary locations for student learning, has a responsibility to improve civic literacy: the ability of youth to make informed political choices for collective action toward equitable societal improvement.

This report deals with two central questions: What knowledge and skills serve as a basis for models of civic learning for young Canadians? What changes to learning processes are needed to encourage youth participation in democratic processes? The report is based on a dialogical examination of secondary literature on youth and civic literacy, government policy that shapes school civics and a case study in Ottawa schools, specifically about the perspectives of teachers and students on the potential of civic learning in secondary schools. From this research, we argue that civic learning is characterized by procedural knowledge and compliant codes of behaviour that do not envelope students in collective action for systemic understandings of political issues. Civic learning in our schools, stemming from our culture, has contributed to a value-neutral approach to politics. Large-scale possibilities for change-making are thus lost in the eyes of students. We argue for renewed efforts to put social justice citizenship at the heart of student learning and the school environment. Models for social justice can range from curriculum that encourages student dialogue on controversial topics to the role-modelling of effective democratic participation within the school and community.<sup>6</sup> Educational programs for civic literacy would teach students to make informed, active choices about policies that affect their lives and to engage with their community in efforts for social change.<sup>7</sup>

The first two sections of the report demonstrate that apolitical citizenship has historical roots in the purpose of Canadian education. Following that, we turn to current youth trends in civic participation. Specifically, research shows that youth have turned away from formal activities, such as voting and membership in political parties, and have moved toward informal politics, such as volunteerism.<sup>8</sup> The next section explores the possible reasons for youth disengagement from the formal civic arena. Students feel disconnected from democratic institutions, and they are finding new ways to talk about community participation, often through Internet chats, which are under-represented by researchers. The following two sections identify the knowledge and skills, or lack thereof, that our education system provides for students to have robust civic literacy. Young Canadians lack both sufficient knowledge of how government works and the capacity to apply democratic skills beyond their school walls. The next section outlines how curriculum guidelines and codes of conduct have contributed to a depoliticized citizenship for youth.<sup>9</sup> The final section speaks to opportunities for increased civic learning: revitalizing broad-based debate about social justice in schools, supporting teachers with resources that enable ideological diversity in the classroom and calling upon Canadian researchers to conduct empirical studies on the politicization of schools. The primary objective of this report is to survey the state of school-based civics and spark discussion about potential ways to improve civic literacy for youth and thus strengthen Canadian democracy.

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<sup>6</sup> Westheimer and Kahne, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Canada, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Barnard, Campbell and Smith, 2003; Bishop and Low, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Jenson and Papillon, 2001.

## Methodology

This study builds from a previous report, *Strengthening Canadian Democracy: Civic Literacy in Perspective*, produced by Joel Westheimer, Sharon Cook, Alison Molina and Karen Suurtamm with the Democratic Dialogue Research Unit at the University of Ottawa. That report was commissioned by the Democratic Reform Secretariat, Privy Council Office of the Government of Canada, to review literature on civic literacy to demonstrate what we already know and what we still need to discover about the knowledge and skills Canadians possess for political participation. We review those results with a greater focus on the position of youth through empirical research in Ottawa schools. Alan Sears contends from his reviews of the field of citizenship education that scholars have debated approaches to fixing what is wrong with civic learning without the benefit of empirical research that provides a deeper analysis and public conversation.<sup>10</sup> We thus have used a mixed-methods approach to present quantitative data, primarily national statistics of political participation, in relation to qualitative data, specifically case-study interviews that give a richer picture of youth experience with civic affairs.

A team of researchers, with one primary investigator conducting all interviews, engaged in conversations with students and teachers in four Ottawa schools from November 2006 to February 2007. Ottawa, as the political capital of the country, seemed like the optimal setting for observing and discussing civic learning with those people charged with instructing and learning its lessons. We experienced great difficulty, however, in securing participating schools, as well as teachers and students within schools that welcomed the research. Our difficulty reflects the results of research literature; disengagement is often a part of school culture. Informal conversations with administrators and teachers who chose not to participate revealed that discussion of politics was controversial itself and not a common or comfortable part of the school routine. Some teachers even admitted that they were afraid to speak, with perceived consequences to their job security or status in the school. Students argued that a study on civic learning, similar to the democratic process, seemed disconnected from their lives. The learning experience of the most disaffected youth and empirical research on a national scale still require study.

This study targeted youth who were engaged in formal education and interested at some level in discussing civic issues. As the voices of these participants emerge and the absence of other voices are recognized, we are reminded that young Canadians are not a homogeneous group, and thus our approach to civic literacy must be multi-faceted and include political dialogue based on the conflicts of difference. Our case sample of the nation's learning institutions attempts to represent the multiplicity of youth experience. The participating four schools were selected based on a desire to include public, alternative (within the public system), private and independent models of education. These schools also represent diverse ethnic, class, gender, age and religious demographics. Schools were chosen from the secondary system, where citizenship education has an explicit objective in the school curriculum. During the course of the study, each school had to be offering, and teachers had to be willing to open their classroom doors to, mandatory Grade 10 Civics and/or upper-year electives in History, World Issues, Economics and Law. While a teacher interview was a prerequisite to selecting each class, student participation was completely voluntary. Student interviewees were randomly selected from those who consented.

To enable more open discussion with participants in our study, each institution and individual has been provided with a pseudonym. The first school, Crestview Academy, is a private day school for

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<sup>10</sup> Sears, 1996: 126; Sears, 2004: 104.

girls in an affluent area of the city. The second school is Fellowship High School (HS), an independent school for boys and girls whose families want them to have a Christian-based education. The last two schools are part of the public school board. Ottawa-East HS is one of the most multicultural schools in the city and has a large program for English as a Second Language. Ottawa Alternative HS provides curriculum and social services to mature students, mostly between the ages of 18 and 35, who previously left school without completion. We attended Civics classes at all schools except for Fellowship HS, where, due to scheduling, we met only with a World Issues class. At Ottawa-East HS, we attended only the Civics course, whereas we met with upper-year classes in World Issues at Crestview Academy and in Canadian History at Ottawa Alternative HS. We were also invited to a Literacy class at Ottawa Alternative HS. The students in that course shared their recent experience visiting Parliament and witnessing Question Period.

We visited each school for a total of one week. During that time, with the exception of the Literacy course, we observed each class for one or two sessions and attended school assemblies and special events that were taking place. Students who consented were given a two-page questionnaire that asked a range of questions about their knowledge of political leaders, skills to address political issues they deemed important and understandings of the relevancy of civic lessons (see Appendix A). Interviews were then conducted with two to three randomly selected students for approximately one half-hour. The interview questions corresponded with the themes on the questionnaire, but they also enabled us to get a clearer picture of students' impressions of political and social issues and the role of the school for increasing civic engagement (see Appendix B). The teacher for each course participated in an interview lasting approximately one hour that touched upon his/her perspectives on democracy, students' ideas of civic affairs, the content and methods of citizenship lessons, and school policies relating to democratic modelling (see Appendix C). In total, six teachers (four male and two female) and 16 students (12 female and four male) offered their views on civic learning in an interview.

The number of participants obviously represents a small sample and cannot necessarily be statistically generalized for youth across the country. Furthermore, we do not provide conclusive quantitative data from study questionnaires because of completion inconsistencies, language barriers and a lack of identifying information. Specifically, due to ethical concerns from the university council, we were unable to request social identifiers from participants, such as class and ethnicity, on our questionnaires. Questionnaires are evaluated to provide a general picture of these students' political knowledge, skills to address civic issues and awareness of citizenship lessons in school. Social differences as they relate to youth civic engagement need far greater study. We draw upon issues of difference evident from the school populations and student interviewees. For example, we note in the report that Crestview Academy teachers believed that their students were more civically minded due to their privileged families, which did not seem to come to fruition in comparison with other youth in the study. Two Somali girls in our study were among the most politically active regarding the community issues of immigration and government support of single mothers. Across the student participants, however, the message they conveyed was that politics was not a school priority and thus not a youth issue. This study was conducted in such a manner as to begin to bring students into a discussion with teachers, academics and policy-makers about prioritizing social justice-oriented civic literacy in schools.

## What Kind of Citizen?<sup>11</sup>

The notion of “civic literacy” does not signify purely factual knowledge about the workings of government. Civic literacy concerns an individual’s competence and willingness to engage in civic affairs in multiple arenas. A civically literate citizen, then, possesses necessary knowledge but also knows how to employ that knowledge for effective civic participation. As The Centre for Literacy in Montreal observes, new literacies (such as civic literacy) focus on individuals’ “capacity to use and make critical judgments about the information they encounter on a daily basis.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the evolving conception of civic literacy signifies an evolving definition of citizenship itself. Citizenship in a modern democratic society requires more than knowing how a parliament is composed, following laws and paying taxes. Rather, modern democracies require citizens to participate in governance at multiple levels, to make informed choices about different political perspectives and policies, and to engage with other members of the community in efforts at societal improvement.<sup>13</sup> This robust conception of civic literacy drives our examination of the current state of civic learning for youth in Canada.

Historians, philosophers and political scientists have long debated which conceptions of citizenship would best advance democracy.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as William Connolly<sup>15</sup> has argued, conceptions of democracy and citizenship have been and will likely always be debated – no single formulation will triumph. The work of John Dewey, for example, which has probably done the most to shape dialogues on education and democracy, has not led to resolution. Rather, scholars and practitioners have interpreted his ideas in multiple ways. In large part, this diversity of perspectives occurs because the stakes are so high. Conceptions of “good citizenship” imply conceptions of the good society. Ideas about civic literacy represent a similar variety of interpretations.

The diverse perspectives on citizenship and civic literacy also have significantly different implications for school curriculum. For example, Walter Parker<sup>16</sup> describes three very different conceptions of citizen education for a democratic society: “traditional,” “progressive,” and “advanced.” He explains that traditionalists emphasize an understanding of how government works (how a bill becomes a law, for example) and traditional subject area content as well as commitments to core democratic values – such as freedom of speech or liberty in general.<sup>17</sup> Progressives share a similar commitment to this knowledge, but they embrace visions like “strong democracy”<sup>18</sup> and place a greater emphasis on civic participation in its numerous forms.<sup>19</sup> Finally, “advanced” citizenship, according to Parker, is one that builds on the progressive perspective but adds careful attention to inherent tensions between pluralism and assimilation or to, what Charles Taylor labels, the “politics of recognition.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This section (“What Kind of Citizen?”) is partly adapted from Westheimer and Kahne, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> The Centre for Literacy, n.d. See also Dubin and Kuhlman, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Canada, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Kaestle, 2000; Smith, 1997; Schudson, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Connolly, 1983.

<sup>16</sup> Parker, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Butts, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> Barber, 1984.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Newmann, 1975; Hanna, 1936.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, 1994, as cited in Parker, 1996.

Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne<sup>21</sup> posit three visions of good citizens that educators and policy-makers can use to consider a variety of goals related to civic literacy and engagement. The *personally responsible citizen* acts responsibly in his/her community by, for example, picking up litter, giving blood, recycling, obeying laws and staying out of debt. The *participatory citizen* actively participates in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, provincial and national levels. The *social justice-oriented citizen* emphasizes social change and seeks to prepare students to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices. Advocates of social justice-oriented programs argue that effective democratic citizens need opportunities to analyze and understand the interplay of social, economic and political forces.

These perspectives can help policy-makers understand the various competing notions of civic literacy at work in school programs. For example, as we will detail later in this report, it seems that all provinces consider citizenship as grounded in the *individual* student's understandings and knowledge, rather than in collective efforts to solve *systemic* causes of political problems. It is due in part to this foundation of curriculum and schooling structures that students and teachers within Ottawa schools expressed frustration that they could not "walk the walk," "put feet to the ideas" or "make a change." Regardless of the particular perspective of citizenship one adopts, most scholars, policy-makers and study participants agree that the knowledge, skills and dispositions that constitute civic literacy are all important for effective citizen involvement.

## A Brief History of Citizenship in Canada

Since the evolving concept of civic literacy in the school curriculum is rooted in changing ideas of the democratic citizen in the culture more broadly, it is worthwhile briefly exploring the history of Canadian citizenship and its impact on Canadian civic education.

It is often observed that Canadian citizenship did not formally exist before the 1947 proclamation of the *National Citizenship Act*.<sup>22</sup> However, invocations of the ideas of citizenship appear much earlier: during and after the 1837 rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada;<sup>23</sup> in the founding of the Canadian nation-state through Confederation in 1867;<sup>24</sup> in the first *Canadian Franchise Act* in 1885;<sup>25</sup> in the extent of Canadian involvement in the First World War, in which Canada was implicated through its colonial status in the British Empire; and in campaigns for women's suffrage at the federal and provincial levels.

At first, Canadian civic virtues were closely identified with British imperialism. Throughout the 20th century, however, conceptions of citizenship were influenced by the notion of "Canadianization," and civic reference points became increasingly North American. With the announcement of the Multiculturalism Policy in 1971 (within a bilingual framework from the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission report), the model for Canadian citizenship became officially grounded in multiculturalism.

Questions of citizenship have also entered Canadian public discourse through a wide variety of fundamental concerns: "the character and destiny of Canadian nationhood, the identity of its

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<sup>21</sup> Westheimer and Kahne, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> For one commentary on this issue, see Troper, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Hébert, 2002: 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Adamoski, Chunn and Menzies, 2002: 12.

<sup>25</sup> Strong-Boag, 2002.

populace, the existing and aspired-to ambits of state power, the scope of civilian duties and entitlements, the experience of belonging, the relations between public and private, the hallmarks of social progress, and the constitution of civil and cultural communities.”<sup>26</sup>

## **The Canadian Citizen, 1867-1918**

Throughout Canada’s history, social citizenship has always been bounded, inclusive in theory but exclusionary in practice. Canadians have not shared equally in the advantages conferred through citizenship. Historians observe broad patterns of inequity based on race, ethnicity, wealth, gender and, in more recent analysis, sexual orientation. As Eric Gorham suggests, citizenship “divides people as it unites them ... States designate citizens by excluding outsiders”<sup>27</sup> and many within their own borders as well. So it has been with the history of Canadian citizenship ideas and practices: inclusion for some, exclusion for many.

Accordingly, from the founding of Canadian society until at least World War I, the ideal Canadian citizen was British (at best, English), male, white, rational and loyal. Early Canadian historical writing all contributed to Canadians’ knowledge and sense of themselves as social citizens in a system characterized by British parliamentary government, fair play, order and duty to self and Empire.<sup>28</sup> Procedures and rituals enshrined in virtually every institution of the young country reinforced early Canadian citizenship qualities based on this imperial model: reports of royal commissions such as the BC Commission on Mental Hygiene;<sup>29</sup> legal codes related to conduct including those proscribing sexual offences;<sup>30</sup> even sanity was determined in relation to the ideal of the “good” citizen.<sup>31</sup> The major exception to respect for British hegemony is Quebec, where the models for citizenship, as defined in this period by L’Abbé Groulx, were homegrown and rooted in Quebec rural culture.<sup>32</sup> Hence, none of the categories typically used to discuss citizenship or civic literacy in English Canada fit at all easily into Quebec’s history.<sup>33</sup>

Not surprisingly, the definitions of “good” and “bad” citizens found their way into Canadian school textbooks. Indeed, much of the task of reinforcing positive civic qualities fell to the formal educational system. With the introduction of compulsory schooling in late 19th century Canada, more children were exposed to these prescriptive codes than ever before. Even prior to compulsory attendance laws, local forms of schooling in Central Canada and British Columbia were central in constructing the habits and understandings of the “citizen.”<sup>34</sup> This period’s goals of civic literacy included deference to authority, limitations to the freedom of individual and family norms, devolution of their authority to the demands of the state, and the development of an orderly and compliant public culture in the public space of the school.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Adamoski, Chunn and Menzies, 2002: 14.

<sup>27</sup> Gorham, 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Berger, 1970; Creighton, 1970; McKillop, 1980.

<sup>29</sup> Adamoski, Chunn and Menzies, 2002: 385-413.

<sup>30</sup> Backhouse, 1991; Chunn, 2002; Dubinsky, 1992; Strange, 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Moran, Wright and Savelli, 2004; Kelm, M. E., 1992.

<sup>32</sup> Groulx, 1919.

<sup>33</sup> Some would argue that the same difficulty arises in applying notions of Canadian citizenship to First Nations peoples, women and Canadians marginalized through poverty. See, for example, Strong-Boag, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> Curtis, 1988.

<sup>35</sup> Barman, Sutherland and Wilson, 1995; Curtis, 1989.

In all settings, subjects like Geography, Literature and History provided ideal vehicles for the inculcation of this knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Aside from formal curriculum, civic literacy has always been taught through a broad range of “habits of mind” through classroom process and pedagogy, including the discipline of choral speaking and individual elocution, the practice of standard penmanship, punctuality in school attendance and work assignments, orderly queuing and the acceptance of educational authority trumping familial or even community standards of behaviour.<sup>37</sup> (Contemporary reflections of these educational goals can be seen in the behavioural “codes of conduct” detailed later in this report.)

The inculcation of standards for good behaviour became a priority in educational programming around the turn of the century. From the 1890s, Canada experienced dramatic growth through immigration and industrialization, and many felt the need to socialize this large group of young, male, semi-skilled workers, many of whom lacked a working knowledge of English or British societal norms.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Canadian Citizen, 1919-1990**

Post-war Canadians experienced the gradual, if uneven, extension of civic entitlement. White women, for example, were especially successful in obtaining the federal franchise.<sup>39</sup> The declaration of women as “persons” under the British North America Act in 1929<sup>40</sup> and the establishment of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1967 (reporting in 1970)<sup>41</sup> provided important legal entitlements for women’s civic integration.<sup>42</sup>

One major objective of the inter-war period was to “Canadianize” a population that had either been coarsened by the brutality of war or, as new Canadians, had never been exposed to British norms of democracy and justice. Despite the increasing importance of American cultural and economic standards for Canadians, school curricula continued to provide British reference points for most invocations of citizenship, including such celebrations as Empire Day.<sup>43</sup> The Second World War provided another rallying point for civic patriotic fervour; young people engaged in home-front support,<sup>44</sup> learning the ways of patriotism through labour in defence of a just cause.

Interestingly, the 1947 *National Citizenship Act* draws little attention from historians interested in the development of civic identity in Canada. Similarly, the passage of Trudeau’s Bill of Rights in 1968, while widely cited in school textbooks for its foundation of citizen rights, came to be overshadowed by the profoundly significant “B and B Commission” in 1963 that first recognized French Canada “as a cultural instead of a geographic concept.”<sup>45</sup> The 1971 policy of Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework, supported by generous federal funding, most directly influenced and shaped Canadian

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<sup>36</sup> Bruno-Jofre, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Gaffield, 1987; Cook, 1994.

<sup>38</sup> McLean, 2002; Stanley, 1996.

<sup>39</sup> Cleverdon, 1970.

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Lester, 1985.

<sup>41</sup> Begin, 1992.

<sup>42</sup> Much historical debate continues around the broader significance of such legislation for women in concert with, and often as opposed to, social movements like the right to abortion (Dubinsky, 1985), equal pay for equal work (Marsden, 1980) and protection from violence for urban and rural women.

<sup>43</sup> Stamp, 1982.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, 1988.

<sup>45</sup> Newman, 1968.

civic values, especially as these were taught in the schools, in the last third of the 20th century. It was reaffirmed and given the force of law under the Conservative Government of Brian Mulroney with the passage of the *Canadian Multicultural Act* in 1988.

The new Multicultural Framework caused some to worry about the undermining of Quebec's special status through the elevation of other ethnic and linguistic groups' status.<sup>46</sup> Despite positive assessments by such historians as Cornelius Jaenen, who judged the policy to be a "sensible cultural ideal, an enlightened policy and an evident social reality,"<sup>47</sup> and Howard Palmer, who viewed it as a means to foster national unity by giving ethnic groups a sense of belonging to Canada,<sup>48</sup> there continued to be uneasiness. The Canadian sociologist, John Porter, for example, expressed concern that, with the policy, "we may well be turning back on the [democratic] principles which have been evolving in our histories and which the revival of ethnicity contradicts."<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, by the 1980s, multiculturalism as an essential component of citizenship education had entered mainstream discourse, becoming enshrined in formal curriculum guidelines, as with Ontario's Grade 9 optional history course *Many Cultures, Many Heritages*, along with a variety of supportive textbooks. Throughout the 20th century, educational literature remained deeply imprinted by the multicultural context, from the work of influential educational scholars such as Ken Osborne<sup>50</sup> – who has called for Canadian citizenship education that is inclusive of varied ethnicities and regions, but also activist – to those practitioners who deplored the loss of traditional History teaching to the multicultural melange.<sup>51</sup> Whatever their perspective on multiculturalism, most educators and policy-makers agreed that, if a wide mix of citizens were to effectively participate in the civic and political life of the community, they would require the knowledge, skills and dispositions of participation that democracy demands. The work of preparing citizens for participation in democratic society would, of course, include more than the schools, but schools were most often recognized as the public institution best positioned to reach the majority of young Canadian citizens. Moreover, although the best means for accomplishing this complex goal remains highly contested and somewhat elusive, the conviction continues today among many policy-makers and educators that the goal is a desirable one.

## Trends in Youth Civic Participation

Trends in civic participation reveal that youth are increasingly disengaged from formal political activities. Whether they are simply turning to other forms of informal political action is under debate by researchers. The concern is that the benefit of these activities, like Internet chats or volunteering, may be accompanied by depoliticizing citizenship and ostracizing youth from the power of political voice. This section explores nationwide patterns of engagement in relation to the Ottawa youth in our study.

André Turcotte began his recent *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

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<sup>46</sup> Mazurek and Kach, 1990.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Kach and DeFaveri, 1987.

<sup>48</sup> Palmer, 1975.

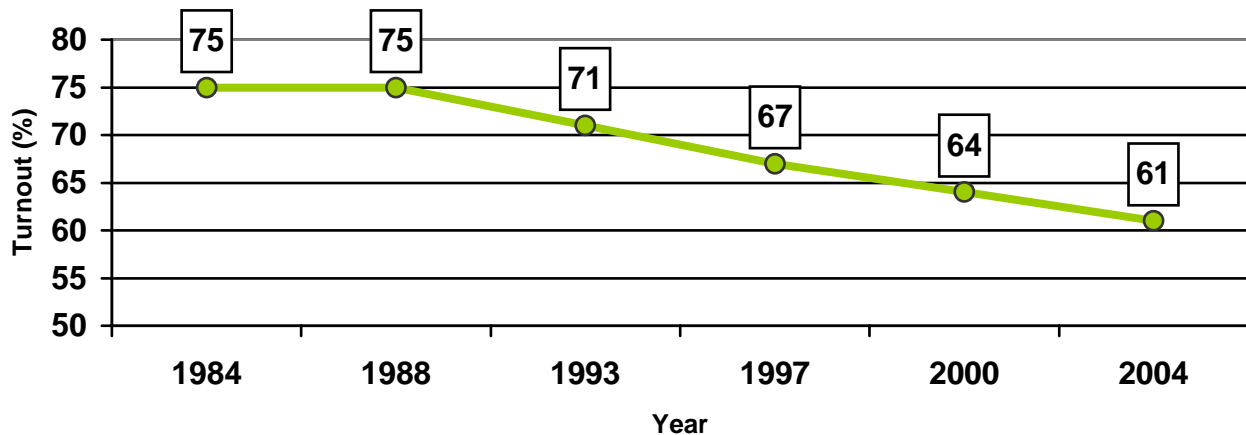
<sup>49</sup> Porter, 1975: 304. See also McAndrew, 1987.

<sup>50</sup> Osborne, 1999.

<sup>51</sup> Davis, 1995.

government would be overwhelmingly composed of its members.<sup>52</sup> Only 60.9% of Canadian voters participated in that election, leaving almost 40% of the nation not voting.<sup>53</sup> More alarmingly, this rate of participation reflects a longstanding downward trend. As shown in Figure 1, between 1988 and 2000 alone, federal electoral turnout dropped substantially from 75% to 64%.<sup>54</sup>

**Figure 1: Turnout in Federal Elections, 1984-2004**



Source: Elections Canada, 2004.

Many analysts observe that the decline in voter participation rates is largely attributable to those under 30 years of age. André Blais echoes the conclusions of many researchers: “If we want to understand why turnout is declining in Canada, we need to focus on the generation that was born after 1970.”<sup>55</sup> Figure 2 illustrates that only 22.4% of first-time electors voted in 2000.<sup>56</sup> This number rose to 38.7% in the 2004 elections,<sup>57</sup> but the turnout was still 15 points lower among those aged 19 to 29 than it was for those over 30.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Turcotte, 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Gidengil et al., 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Pammett and LeDuc, 2003: 4; Elections Canada, 2003.

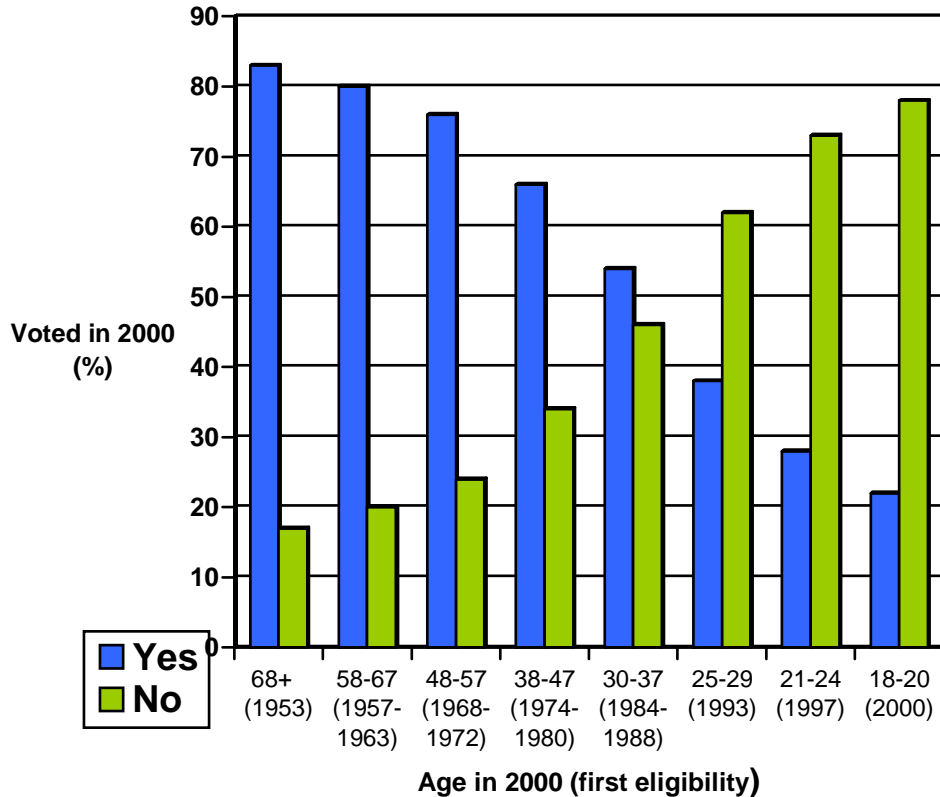
<sup>55</sup> Blais et al., 2002: 1.

<sup>56</sup> Pammett and LeDuc, 2003: 20.

<sup>57</sup> Milner, 2005: 3.

<sup>58</sup> Gidengil et al., 2005.

**Figure 2: Voting and Not Voting in 2000, by Age Cohorts**



Source: O'Neill, 2003.

Studies that examine other forms of youth political participation seem to reinforce the belief that voting rates may serve as a proxy for declines in other forms of participation. After studying data collected by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP), Brenda O'Neill concludes that younger Canadians are "less likely to follow politics closely; are less politically knowledgeable; are significantly less likely to have voted in the 1997 federal election; are less likely to see voting as an 'essential' democratic act; are less likely to be or have been a member of a political party or interest group; and are more likely to believe interest groups are more effective than political parties for bringing about change."<sup>59</sup> The political disengagement of young Canadians from political parties is glaring considering that the average membership age is 59.<sup>60</sup> Only 2% of young Canadians reported being a party member in 2000,<sup>61</sup> a decline from 10% in 1990.<sup>62</sup> Few disagree with the low-level assessment of Canadian youth's knowledge, interest and participation in politics.

<sup>59</sup> O'Neill, 2001: 15.

<sup>60</sup> Young and Cross, 2004: 9.

<sup>61</sup> O'Neill, 2001.

<sup>62</sup> Young and Cross, 2004: 9.

Little disagreement came from those people who participated in our Ottawa study. While the issue of political knowledge will be discussed later in the report, we note here that students generally claimed to have minimal understanding of government procedures and national issues under current debate. 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, a Grade 12 student at Crestview Academy, voiced the position of most youth participants: “I’m not that intrigued or interested about politics ... If I looked at our grade as a whole [other students are] not really.” Only two students, Jamie from Ottawa Alternative HS and Samantha from Crestview Academy, expressed enjoyment from political discussion. As a result of finding politics “fun,” they both identified themselves as “nerds” or atypical in their peer groups. Student reflections stood in contradiction to those of most teachers, who, despite asserting students did not know enough about government, believed and hoped that they were interested. In particular, teachers from Ottawa Alternative HS, Fellowship HS and Crestview Academy asserted that their students were more engrossed in politics because of their respective adult experiences, faith community and privileged families. Little difference among the youth, however, was evident regarding formal political participation. Teachers’ comments from these specific schools may speak to the relevant expectations we place upon youth based on age or socio-economic status or presumed disengagement level of the most disaffected groups in society. We do not know without longitudinal study whether such a pattern will emerge among these youth participants when they reach voting age.

Interestingly, each student who was not yet eligible to vote argued that he/she would vote when of age or upon becoming a Canadian citizen. Given the data in the research literature, we can assume that over half of these students will not follow their intentions. Claims of future voting may have resulted from the context of a personal interview in which characteristics of “good” citizenship were being explored and within a school setting where the expectation for youth to be dutiful citizens was clear. In fact, citizens who would choose not to vote were always referred to by students in the third person. Sahra from the Civics course at the Ottawa Alternative HS said: “I’ll get my citizenship. I’m going to go vote, of course. I find a lot of teenagers complain a lot and they don’t do anything. They can go vote ... but they’re not interested in it.” For those student participants who were eligible to vote, a mirror of the data on youth voting patterns emerges. Of the four eligible voters in our sample, only two had voted or would vote.

Reliable information on Canadian youth membership in interest groups is considerably harder to find than similar information about membership in political parties.<sup>63</sup> Most data come from the 2000 Canadian Election Study, which asked respondents whether they had ever been a “member of an interest group that worked for change on a particular social or political issue.”<sup>64</sup> Generally, Canadian youth are more likely to be a member of a public interest group than a political party. For every Canadian aged 18 to 27 who has been a member of a political party, 4.5 such Canadians have been a member of an interest group.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, the numbers are nearly reversed for those over 57 years of age.<sup>66</sup> Few researchers have asked these kinds of questions of students under the age of 18; thus, analyses of national trends are not possible. Patterns from our Ottawa sample, however, are evident. Samantha, a Grade 12 World Issues student from Crestview Academy, stands as atypical for her involvement outside of school with Greenpeace and organizations to end violence against women, as well as her desire to work with Doctors without Borders.

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<sup>63</sup> See Young and Everitt, 2004.

<sup>64</sup> Gidengil et al., 2004: 131.

<sup>65</sup> O’Neill, 2003.

<sup>66</sup> O’Neill, 2003.

Nationwide data on youth participation in informal political and community projects are more encouraging. Canadian youth membership and participation in groups and organizations increased slightly from 44% in 1997 to 47% in 2000.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, volunteer rates among all Canadians have declined slightly, but Canadians aged 15 to 24 “volunteered at a rate second only to those aged 35 to 54 (30% of this age group volunteered in 2000). Within the 15 to 24 age group, teenagers (those aged 15 to 19) volunteered at a much higher rate than those aged 20 to 24 (37% vs. 22%) and gave more time on average (136 hours vs. 121 hours). Youth aged 15 to 19 were much more likely than older Canadians to volunteer (37% vs. 26% for those aged 25 and older).”<sup>68</sup> Stolle and Cruz, in their study of youth participation, conclude that “volunteering generally is on the rise for young citizens, as more young Canadians are engaged in such activities mostly because of required programs ... but it seems [to happen] in a more and more sporadic and episodic manner.”<sup>69</sup>

When Ottawa teachers in our study spoke of high levels of student engagement, they may have been referring to such programs. In 1999, the Ontario government established 40 hours of mandatory “community involvement” to obtain a high school diploma. The stated purpose was to “encourage students to develop awareness and understanding of civic responsibility and of the role they play in supporting and strengthening their communities.”<sup>70</sup> When study participants were asked if they volunteered, most of them referred to the regulation as their impetus for action. Bethany was representative of the group when she stated this: “I usually try to volunteer wherever because I want all those hours.” Students at the Ottawa Alternative HS who began their secondary program before the 1999 regulation were not required to complete such hours. None of these students in our study volunteered. In large part, this speaks to their adult commitments to paid work and family. Approximately 75% of our student participants described involvement in some form of volunteer work on their questionnaires, including community clean-ups, assisting at old-age homes, providing child care and working at a community centre.

Most student interviewees did not characterize their volunteer hours as a long-term commitment to organizations or social issues that were of particular interest to them. Most students commented on the episodic character of mandatory volunteerism. Gabrielle, a Grade 10 student from Ottawa-East HS, initially commented that she had not volunteered. After recalling the mandatory program, she stated: “I babysat some kids at an after-school program, but I don’t know, I never got them counted and it was a long time ago. I was thinking of volunteering at retirement homes helping people. I heard that they are accepting volunteer students.” Gabrielle’s experience was echoed by her teacher Helena, who called the program “an artificial way of making [students] do 40 hours” with guidance and not students’ taking the initiative to find placements. Helena believed that the “majority [of students] really resent” the program.

Here we find a significant difference between public and private schools. The students at Fellowship HS spoke of volunteerism as having a higher purpose than a school diploma. Jillian said, “We would call it a Christian duty whereas you, some people would call it a good citizen.” The school has established its own diploma, in addition to the Ontario High School diploma, which is based on extra courses and 60 hours of community service. Larry, a teacher at the school, explained that “some students have two to three hundred hours” because “that was asked of Jesus...We have a

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<sup>67</sup> Stolle and Cruz, forthcoming.

<sup>68</sup> Barnard, 2003: 26.

<sup>69</sup> Stolle and Cruz, forthcoming. See, also, Tossutti, 2004.

<sup>70</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education, 1999: 9.

responsibility over and above the government to be caring, merciful and compassionate to people.” The result is school-wide service days that have students sometimes working with secular organizations like Habitat for Humanity, but primarily participating in Christian mission trips within the city and to other countries like Peru. As Trevor put it, “The church doesn’t run without the volunteer work.”

Crestview Academy, although a secular private school, similarly instructs students to be pilgrims, as illustrated by the opening hymn of their assembly. Christine, a Grade 12 World Issues student, explained the school’s merit and reward program for service. Students earn points and a bronze, silver or gold pin, depending on their academic average and membership in school clubs. Christine proudly wore many pins on her uniform for participation with the student newspaper, Amnesty International, a debate club and various other groups. When asked more specifics about Amnesty International, she explained that she was involved in so many organizations that she often just signed the attendance sheet and left the meeting. One of the teachers expressed concern over the common scenario Christine described. The teacher informally stated that the school had a “culture of ‘try everything’” because the school marketed itself as creating future leaders for the country. The teacher expressed “concern for the quality” of the various “civically minded” programs and questioned whether they provided “genuine opportunities to be leaders.”

Research studies often conflate involvement in charitable direct-service volunteering, community organizations and even sports with involvement in political interest groups. As such, clear data on young Canadians’ involvement in civic affairs beyond voting are not easy to find. Our study shows that involvement in charitable and co-curricular activities is high. There is little evidence that these activities, which are episodic of character and/or focused on the internal community of church or school, translate into increased participation in civic affairs. We do not yet know the affects of mandatory volunteerism for long-term commitment among youth and, equally important, the affects of these programs for the wider public arena. Youth attending a 2007 forum organized by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) were themselves skeptical of the long-term value of mandatory volunteerism. These young men and women suggested that involving youth in community action around issues of concern to *younger Canadians* had a much greater chance of re-engaging youth in civic culture than would artificial, mandated volunteer programs.

## **Explaining Levels of Engagement and Redefining Civic Literacy**

There is little consensus around the causes of diminished electoral activity among Canadian youth. This section posits various explanations from researchers and our study participants. These explanations range from disillusionment with politics to the need for a redefinition of what counts as civic engagement.

A primary cause, according to researchers, is a serious disconnect between youth and politicians concerning values and interests.<sup>71</sup> While student participants in our study claimed that they would vote in future, studies show that youth generally have a much weaker sense of duty than older cohorts when it comes to voting and other forms of political participation.<sup>72</sup> Jon H. Pammet and Lawrence LeDuc are doubtful that these trends will reverse, due to the “widespread perception that politicians are untrustworthy, selfish, unaccountable, lack credibility, and are not true to their word, etc.” Too many citizens, they argue, assume that the government “betrays the people’s trust, and

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<sup>71</sup> Wyman, Shulman and Ham, 2000: v.

<sup>72</sup> Blais et al., 2002: 7.

accomplishes little.”<sup>73</sup> In a study conducted by D-Code, a Toronto youth-focused social research firm, interviewees (aged 18 to 35) suggest that their own disengagement with formal politics is due to the irrelevance of political issues in their daily lives, a lack of strong leadership, the poor level of decorum in the House of Commons, and the perception that politicians and politics are dishonest.<sup>74</sup>

Lying, brainwashing and being unreliable were common characterizations of politicians made by the Ottawa students in this study. John from Fellowship HS described the political process as “kind of like a soap opera” with boyfriend/girlfriend dramas and different people switching parties. Omar from Ottawa Alternative HS was more critical when he portrayed the government as a crime family distracting citizens with insignificant issues “while other people on the other side of the world [were] dying ... like the Iraq war.” “Politician” was used as a “bad” word by most students. By virtue of that fact, politics and political discussions were deemed potentially offensive. When Sahra was asked if she had political discussions in class, she replied: “Some people might get offended ... I’m not a person who speaks my mind.” Most students conveyed negative impressions without admittedly having met politicians, been part of election campaigns or visited Parliament Hill.

A particular exception to the lack of exposure to Parliament was in the Literacy class at Ottawa Alternative HS. Luke, who taught Literacy and Civics at the school, believed that, because Canada was a new home and English was a second language for most students there, they should be exposed not only to literacy as reading and writing but as governmental knowledge. The class toured the Parliament Buildings and attended Question Period. The following week, we had a lively discussion with the class members about their visit. Their initial descriptions centred on the high security that resulted in one Afghan student’s being closely searched, the grandiose decor with large pictures of past prime ministers and the lack of racial diversity among the primarily older, male parliamentarians. The students reported hearing discussions on taxation, passports, immigration, Aboriginal education and child care. With agreement from the class, one student commented: “So much discussing and arguing and not much got done.” Another student added that the yelling was both “disrespectful and exciting.” Although most were disapproving of politicians’ behaviour, they asserted that seeing the critical issues being discussed made them want to be sure and vote for the correct person next time. Some commented that because of the visit they watched CPAC, discussed politics more and could envision themselves in Parliament one day.

While many studies, including our own, demonstrate high levels of political cynicism among youth, other research notes that youth are no more cynical about politics than older generations.<sup>75</sup> Canadian youth do not appear to be more jaded than adults in the ways that many suspect. Howe, Johnston and Blais note that people aged 18 to 29 are the least likely to think that all federal political parties are basically the same and that there isn’t really a choice (33%). They are also the least likely to believe that the government does not care much what people like them think (53%), and they are actually the most likely to say that they are at least fairly satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada (63%).<sup>76</sup>

The students in our study seemed to sustain their faith in Canada’s political process by separating good leadership from good people. Samantha described her view of politicians as pessimistic while pointing out the following: “If you look through history, a lot of people who were good leaders were

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<sup>73</sup> Pammett and LeDuc, 2003: 7.

<sup>74</sup> Smith et al., 2001: 20-21. See also O’Neill, 2003; Gauthier, 2002.

<sup>75</sup> Blais et al, 2002: 7.

<sup>76</sup> Howe, Johnston and Blais, 2005.

not necessarily good people ... As long as you can lead the country well, we shouldn't care about whether or not you're cheating or something." Similarly, after Leyla, a Civics student from Ottawa-East HS, argued that lying was "just what politicians do," she explained that Canadian democracy is "a good thing ... Everyone gets their chance to vote, they can vote for whomever they want and the majority can rule." She concluded her point by saying that "everyone is involved in politics," not just politicians. From these interactions and statistics, it seems that cynicism perhaps is not the most significant reason for the decline in youth participation.

A more considerable factor may be the perception that politics are irrelevant to the lives of young Canadians. Despite young Canadians' overwhelming attitude that Canadian democracy works,<sup>77</sup> many findings indicate that youth do not believe that the government belongs to them. Rachael, a student in World Issues at Crestview Academy, explained that politics in school is "mainly presented as more of an adult issue ... It's taught, know the political parties of Canada, but it sounds like just that stuffy old political stuff, right." Civic engagement as something that happens with age was a common theme in the interviews. The top two elements of being a good citizen were, according to most students, paying taxes and voting – actions that did not apply to them until the age of 18. Those students over age 18 similarly described politics as a concern for when they got older, had a family and had a full-time career. When asked why youth were not more attracted to politics, Rachael explained: "There are probably many different reasons ... There's not really any point pushing them into getting attracted when it doesn't really seem to affect them."

There were some political issues that Ottawa youth did deem personally important and worthy of their immediate attention. Students from Fellowship HS were passionate against same-sex marriage and abortion. In particular, they mentioned participating in the March for Life on Parliament Hill. Leyla from Ottawa-East HS and Yasmin from Ottawa Alternative HS, both Somali, were adamant in protecting the interests of the Somali community in the city. Leyla protested the Children's Aid Society's removing children from Somali mothers, and Sahra informally recruited community members to vote against the Conservatives in the last election because of their stance on immigration. From the student questionnaires, the issues of greatest concern generally were the environment, war and poverty. During interviews, however, few students could envision how a greater youth voice or representation of youth issues in government could make a difference.

Students' inability to see a place for youth in politics is explained by researcher André Turcotte. He argues that youth disengagement from electoral politics results from their assessment that leaders and candidates do not take interest in their priorities. Specifically, in the 2004 federal election, young voters were more concerned with economic issues and education than the common concerns of the older cohorts – health care and the sponsorship scandal.<sup>78</sup> Mauricio Martine, in his examination of the New Democratic Party's (NDP's) struggle to attract more youth members, argues that young people are drawn to the direct action of political movements, rather than the electoral system.<sup>79</sup> This attitude seems to be a result of both a lack of political knowledge and a general disillusionment about their political efficacy.

Disillusionment was expressed by many of the youth in our study because of their social and economic circumstances. The students interviewed from Ottawa Alternative HS shared particularly important and personal insights in this regard. Jamie, who came from a lower socio-economic

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<sup>77</sup> Pammett, 2001.

<sup>78</sup> Turcotte, 2005.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Barnard, Campbell and Smith, 2003: 57.

family, spoke about being bullied and ostracized in his previous school and finding home depressing. While Jamie voted in the previous election, he cited poverty as a systemic cause for the decrease in voting patterns. He questioned: “Isn’t it poverty? Isn’t it like the poor people are so downtrodden and they’re depressed, they feel like they don’t have the time and they work more hours?” Unlike Jamie, Teika explained that it was too hard to vote even if she wanted because “life is a little unstable I guess for our generation.” Life has certainly been unstable for Teika. Over the course of the interview, she described leaving her parents’ home at a young age due to family problems, spending two months in a shelter, dealing with anorexia and attending five different schools in the last few years. Teika commented that government was far removed from her needs. She said: “My little world it’s completely different logic, so even if I had the chance to talk I don’t think that’s what government is really talking about, like social services and all that other stuff. I don’t know where it fits in.” Jamie and Teika represent students who spoke about the disaffection of young people from Canadian politics as a result of inequalities. Other students, in particular Fatima from Ottawa-East HS, a recent immigrant from Iraq whose family is struggling to learn English and find employment, felt silenced by the civics questions in our study. Her teacher, Helena, explained, “There’s no continuity in a lot of the kids’ lives, I take my hat off to them because if I had to exist in the situation they’re found in, I don’t know if I would have made it.”

While many students in our study considered political voice an impossibility, Gina Bishop and Rebecca Low remind us from their research interviews of youth “that many expressed passion in things that could be considered political, like the environment, community based action, and community support for neighbours, family and friends.” They do not necessarily identify their actions as political because “most view ‘politics’ as separate from them, something that is boring and to be avoided when possible; ‘politics’ happens some place far away, an activity of ‘older men and women’ and had little to do with their lives, interests, and the things that they value.” Some in their research saw politics as an exclusive group for those with more money and power. As one of their interviewees stated, “Politics is a club, and I’m not a member.”<sup>80</sup>

The “club” for youth in our study was student life, a culture that does not easily enable political participation. A busy schedule was the dominant cultural characterization provided by both Ottawa teachers and students. Trevor explained: “Teenagers are busy people, and they’re trying different things ... Politics, and being politically active, it kind of takes a back seat to some of the other activities they are involved in.” John made a similar comment when describing the busy in-school schedule of the students he teaches. Outside of schools, he said, “They are either doing homework or [having] down time [because] in the end they’re still Grade 12 girls.” John concluded that “the timeline or their scheduling inhibits their passion or inhibits their action.” Many other participants described the stresses of adolescent relationships, getting high marks or needing to work part-time as adding to a hectic agenda.

Perhaps more definitive of student life than a full timetable, however, were cultural stereotypes of youth made by authority figures. Samantha argued that adults were as jaded about adolescents as adolescents were jaded about politics. She reflected on what adults think about youth: “They [youth] really don’t care. I’m not going to lie, a lot of the adolescent experience is stuff that’s meaningless ... but at the same time, adolescence is a lot more because it is when you form most of your ideas.” When Jillian was asked why her peer group did not discuss politics, she responded in a similar manner to Samantha. She said, “This is what I’ve heard, that teenagers generally don’t talk about anything that isn’t going to happen in the next 45 minutes.” Jillian, like most youths in our

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<sup>80</sup> Bishop and Low, 2004: 7.

study, gave examples of living up to their reputations. She said that outside of school she talked about politics more, “but when I’m inside of school ... you just talk about oh I have a test, oh this teacher said this, oh I have sport, you know, its just you talk about your environment, and whatever they are doing in politics won’t affect you here now.”

It is possible that the ways we have come to describe youth have further isolated them from perceived “adult” politics. It is also possible that many of the ways traditionally used to describe political engagement have become either calcified or obsolete in describing contemporary youth’s attitudes, skills and knowledge for democratic engagement. There is, indeed, some limited research in this area. There are some students, to be sure, who feel comfortable developing their own civic identities and their own political outlooks with reference to the kinds of questions we asked and using a kind of discourse familiar and comfortable to many traditional researchers on youth civic engagement and political participation. But there are others, perhaps a large number of other youth and young adults, who use a different kind of discourse to describe their forms (and those of their peers) of political learning, identity, engagement and action.

Our understanding of the ways youth describe political action is complicated by the fact that researchers and educators continue to debate what counts and does not count. A student from the Ottawa Alternative HS Literacy class was the only student to seek a definition of being a political person. His teacher and the researchers struggled to provide a satisfactory answer. Is it a personally responsible young adult who does not litter? Is it a social justice-oriented adolescent who protests against security certificates? While most students in our study identified themselves as apolitical, their list of political activities on the questionnaire was extremely broad. The activities ranged from voting and donating to working election events and sitting on municipal government committees. Students at Fellowship HS noted that attending school was a political act for a Christian student. Students at Crestview Academy reported student council, in-school clubs and sports. Sandra summarized the position of most youth interviewed when she argued that “you can make a political statement with where you choose to spend your time.”

There is some indication of under-reporting of certain kinds of civic involvement among youth due to discursive variation. Other researchers have shown that youth may not identify their community work as civic engagement, perhaps because their participation is not inspired by a sense of civic duty. Instead, they volunteered for “the chance to help in a cause they believed in, to connect with friends, or to gain job skills.”<sup>81</sup> While our study did not find such results to be typical, some scholars found that youth would deny any involvement in volunteerism and then would continue to discuss their involvement in Big Brothers, day camps and coaching sports.<sup>82</sup> Youth in other studies did not identify their activities with the term “volunteerism” because they found it to be an “intimidating concept, something that required a major commitment that most could not, or were not, willing to make.”<sup>83</sup> The semantic and discursive barriers between generations can often make us fail to notice the ways in which youth are, in fact, actively engaged in political and community work.<sup>84</sup> In short,

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<sup>81</sup> Barnard, Campbell and Smith, 2003: 31.

<sup>82</sup> Canadian Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, 2001.

<sup>83</sup> Bishop and Low, 2004.

<sup>84</sup> Similarly, researchers assume that when young Canadians identify the major election issues, they are also naming their most important concerns. It is possible, however, that youth have other serious political concerns, but would never identify them as “election issues” because they simply do not believe the Canadian government can (or will) address these problems sufficiently. Such issues include corporate globalization and irresponsibility, the growing global divide between the “haves” and the “have nots,” and the production of genetically modified organisms. These are all areas around which young people are mobilizing outside of Parliament.

many youth and young adults may see themselves as politically thoughtful and politically active, but not in ways that hit the radar of much research on civic engagement.

This may be particularly true of students' use of the Internet as a source of political engagement. Ottawa students used their home page (typically MSN) and YouTube as their primary source of news. Facebook was a means of peer interaction about current events; Google searches provided research for school essays on activities and political processes; and e-mail provided connections to the activities of interest groups. Most teachers in our study underestimated the use of computer programs, asserting that newspapers were the most appropriate means for accessing political information. Other teachers did not know about YouTube or Facebook until students brought it to their attention during our visits.

Young Canadians have been and are being raised in the midst of the information revolution. This revolution appears to both disable and enable their political involvement. On the one hand, youth complain of information overload; they feel that there are so many problems in the world, and so many different ways of acting, that they grow overwhelmed and cannot identify the most appropriate method of action.<sup>85</sup> The pervasive media ensures that youth experience major political issues (like conflicts and war) through the filter of passive media like television, and they are “‘disconnected’ from any meaningful channels of action.”<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, the introduction of interactive technologies has inculcated more “‘participatory instincts’” among youth,<sup>87</sup> who now expect a high level of participation and control in their interactions with the world. For example, given the ease with which youth can discuss and organize around political issues on the Internet, they may find the slow, bureaucratic nature of parliamentary politics alienating. These skills, however, are rarely applicable to formal modes of politics, and instead facilitate grassroots organizing that satisfies their desire for accessibility, participation, agency and immediate results.

Although there are indications from other studies that Canadian youth are finding alternative means of political participation, there is also evidence that those youth engaged in different ways also tend to be the ones who vote, join political parties and engage in other traditional forms of political involvement. Elisabeth Gidengil and colleagues question the “‘optimistic assumption’” that many youth are turning away from formal politics to participate in informal, community politics.<sup>88</sup> Instead, they argue that youth are “‘tuned-out’” from all political life, lacking even the most basic political knowledge, including the names of party leaders. When examining youth voter turnout, Henry Milner distinguishes between two kinds of non-voters. The first are “‘politically informed individuals who reject voting in favour of some other form of activity they see as politically oriented and which they consider more meaningful.’”<sup>89</sup> The second group, the much larger group, consists of those who “‘lack the information to adequately distinguish among the candidates and/or parties.’”<sup>90</sup> Milner believes that Canadian youth simply lack sufficient political information to participate.

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<sup>85</sup> Barnard, Campbell and Smith, 2003.

<sup>86</sup> Smith et al., 2001: 14.

<sup>87</sup> Smith et al., 2001: 14.

<sup>88</sup> Gidengil et al., 2004.

<sup>89</sup> Milner, 2002: 2.

<sup>90</sup> Milner, 2002:3.

## Political Knowledge and Young Canadians

For many social scientists, the central component of civic literacy is knowledge. We ask two questions in this section: What do Canadian youth and specifically Ottawa students from our study know about general political concepts, government processes and campaign-specific knowledge? Does this knowledge determine youth participation levels? When it comes to expressly political knowledge, as Ken Osborne observes, “the evidence suggests that we are not all that successful.”<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, as Henry Milner argues, higher rates of civic knowledge are highly correlated to rates in political participation such as voting.<sup>92</sup> In Canada, few studies have assessed expressly political knowledge. Those that have been conducted conclude 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.”<sup>93</sup> However, researchers continue to debate the cause and effect relationships among knowledge, interest and participation.

The teachers and students from our study seemed to embrace the acquisition of political knowledge as a primary objective of schooling for the increased civic engagement of youth. When asked what they would like their students to take away from the course, most teachers responded that “information for action” was the goal. Nicole from Crestview Academy elaborated: “I usually describe it as citizenship and teaching students to be active citizens, and therefore they are given knowledge about the basic history of Canada’s political system, basic sort of organization of the political system, and then how they can be involved.” Others described the knowledge base as “a suitcase ... to know their rights,” “truths ... to understand what they believe” and “political vocabulary that becomes meaningful.” Students seemed to hear these messages as they reflected on the necessity of building a suitcase of political knowledge. Leyla at Ottawa-East HS explained: “I didn’t really understand it before ... but now I’m actually understanding all the levels and everything, so Civics really does help you.” Many students talked about first acquiring a political vocabulary from their parents. Civic learning at school was particularly important for those students who did not have political discussions at home. Such was the case for Bethany from Crestview Academy. She said, “I know for me I didn’t like know anything about politics until I was in this course.”

Although students saw the value of learning politics, the bad news is that few expressed an understanding of such material. On the over 80 questionnaires completed by students, less than 30% named a citizenship lesson in school that dealt with specific political content. Some listed history lessons on becoming citizens in Canada, while others listed the political parties and levels of government. The majority, however, listed qualities of “good” citizens, such as being well mannered and open-minded. During interviews, most students struggled to recall the basic political facts of their courses.

Many other studies indicate that students do not have a firm grasp of key political terms. Howe points out, from his study in New Brunswick, that few youth could define a central concept like “democracy.” He argues that student answers such as “I define democracy as a free and just society” do not indicate in-depth understanding of the workings of democratic government.<sup>94</sup> Other focus groups that he held in New Brunswick recorded a team of young women who gave the following

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<sup>91</sup> Osborne, 2005.

<sup>92</sup> Milner, 2005.

<sup>93</sup> Stolle and Cruz, forthcoming.

<sup>94</sup> Howe, 2004: 37.

definition of democracy: “We aren’t sure, but we thought it wasn’t a good thing. We don’t think we have it here in Canada. We think it is when you don’t have the right to give your ideas, like in Russia or in Germany with Hitler.”<sup>95</sup> Apparently, such confusion was commonplace, as most respondents sympathized with each other’s confusion. Based on our study and other international research, this last response would seem like a worst-case scenario, albeit surely not unique.

We asked students from the Ottawa schools this question: Is Canada a democracy, and if so, what does that mean? Gabrielle responded: “Umm, we did learn that but I forgot, because it was fast ... I’m not sure.” Lee-Ann commented that she was memorizing the 11 pillars of democracy for a big test and impressed her family by remembering them at the dinner table. Lee-Ann said that there was little discussion in class or at home about the substance of these pillars. Her classmate Sonya elaborated, though still vaguely, on the definition of democracy: “We don’t have a dictatorship, so we have the choice to vote for different parties ... the sovereignty of the people.” Sahra, from a different school, asserted that democracy means “just a right to be yourselves.”

Some researchers hypothesize that, while young people may lack general political knowledge, they may be more aware of issues that are more important to them. Bethany, like many others, wished that her classes were “more about the issues,” thus moving beyond the “how a bill gets passed ... technical stuff.” Teachers in this study argued that government-mandated curriculum was based on procedural or “technical” information. They saw the value and attempted to integrate issue-driven materials into their classes. David, the History teacher at Ottawa Alternative HS, asserted: “I’m always fighting as a teacher against the idea that school is school and that life is out there.” He described students coming into his class during the height of the Quebec separation debate. David encouraged them to understand the issue: “I put the lesson on hold and we talked about this ... I mentioned a few things that happened in history.” Teachers in Civics took a similar approach, allowing a *Globe and Mail* poll of the day or student-picked newspaper articles to start off political discussion for each class. Issue-centred material seemed to pique the interest of students in these classes. The scope, however, of their understanding of political issues remained somewhat limited.

This result seems similar to national patterns. A survey conducted in March 2001 by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada revealed that only 57% of Canadians born after 1970 had heard anything about globalization, only 53% had heard anything about the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization the previous year in Seattle and only 40% had heard anything about the upcoming Summit of the Americas in the city of Québec. On all three questions, awareness was lowest among the young.<sup>96</sup>

In our study, students had a breadth of knowledge on issues that have saturated the news, like the war in Iraq, or issues that were recently covered in their class, like the environment in Grade 12 World Issues. Cultural identity played a dominant role for several students’ information on issues. Leyla, for example, taught the researchers details of the civil war in her home country of Somalia and of the slower aid that came from Canada for tsunami relief in Muslim countries compared with the aid from smaller countries like Nepal. Most students, particularly those born in Canada, had less understanding of issues the further away they were from municipal politics. Students were typically asked what their opinions were on three issues, moving from local to international: Ottawa’s proposal for a light rail transportation system downtown, recent federal cuts to the Status of Women Canada and the war in Afghanistan. In response, two-thirds explained that they knew about the

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<sup>95</sup> Howe, 2004: 37.

<sup>96</sup> Cited in Gidengil et al., 2004.

potential cuts to the light rail project, and some even knew the position of certain mayoralty candidates on this subject; none knew about the cuts to women's programs; and the majority chose not to discuss Afghanistan, instead referring to their knowledge of the war in Iraq from the news.

Students may know or be interested in knowing about political issues, but do they know the processes by which those issues are decided? Other than sporadic and sometimes idiosyncratic studies of context-specific knowledge, we found few studies about what young Canadians know in general terms of the civic functions and workings of various governmental and legislative institutions. For example, Canada did not formally participate in the IEA International Civic Education Study (1999), which compared the political knowledge of youth across 30 countries.<sup>97</sup> Studies in the United States, however, demonstrate that young people have little idea how their government works. Nearly one-third of high school seniors lack the most basic understanding of how the American government works, and 75% of students scored as "basic" or "below basic" on the 1998 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) Civics Assessment.<sup>98</sup>

When assessing political knowledge, an understanding of campaign-specific knowledge may be more important than general knowledge about the functioning of democratic government. Studies by Howe, Johnston and Blais and colleagues have concluded that young people lack not just general political knowledge but also campaign-specific knowledge. Indeed, these data are far clearer. Data on levels of knowledge during the 2004 election indicated the following: "During the final 10 days of the campaign, 40% of 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."<sup>99</sup> 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.<sup>100</sup> The 2004 Canadian Election Study showed that those under 30 years old were rarely able to name a political party that would be able to deal with their Number One concern.<sup>101</sup>

The Ottawa students that we surveyed fared a bit better, perhaps because they were currently taking politically oriented courses. The overwhelming majority recognized Paul Martin or even the newly elected Stéphane Dion as leader of the Liberal party and Stephen Harper as the Conservative leader and Prime Minister. The odd person mistakenly wrote that Steven Martin, the US comedian, was the Prime Minister. After knowledge of those two parties, however, the results were not strong. The NDP, Bloc Québécois and Green Party barely made the list. In our interviews, however, at least half of the students knew which party reflected their position on issues. For example, Jamie claimed to be a "lefty" and supported the NDP, and Sahra believed Liberals had a more lenient policy on immigration. Our results were somewhat shaped by the students from Fellowship HS, who all claimed to be Conservatives in accordance with their faith. They based their support on the concern for abortion choice and the definition of marriage. Few knew the Conservative platform on the environment, despite considering climate change an important issue.

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<sup>97</sup> See Sears, 1997.

<sup>98</sup> Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, 2003.

<sup>99</sup> Howe, Johnston and Blais, 2005.

<sup>100</sup> Howe, Johnston and Blais, 2005. See, also, Howe, 2003.

<sup>101</sup> Howe, Johnston and Blais, 2005.

## Does It Matter?

Research indicates that there is a direct relationship between such political knowledge and civic engagement. Furthermore, surveys of young Canadians by various researchers demonstrate that youth are not satisfied with their levels of political knowledge. Instead, “many young people feel that they neither possess sufficient knowledge of the political process, nor sufficient political information to be comfortable about voting.”<sup>102</sup> Wanting to know more was a common theme among our student interviewees. Jillian admitted this: “I don’t know enough about politics. See, for my family, we don’t order the newspaper, so I find that I’m lacking on not only politics but world issues.” Fatima explained that she needed more political knowledge. She knew the names of federal politicians now, but she needed to know more about the premiers because “to get the Canadian citizenship, I have to do it, to vote.”

It is important that we hear both the desire and the necessity for more information because, as Milner argues, “democracy is ... stronger in a community blessed with a substantial stock of civic literacy. Stronger in the sense that levels of political participation are higher; stronger, too, in the sense that policy decisions are more likely to take into account the full gamut of interests and perspectives present in society.”<sup>103</sup> High levels of civic literacy, what Milner defines as “the knowledge to be effective citizens,”<sup>104</sup> have a positive relation to levels of political engagement. Studies demonstrate that politically informed citizens are also the ones more likely to participate in formal politics. For example, an American study found that “those in the highest third of the survey in terms of political knowledge were twice as likely to have voted in the 1994 presidential election as those in the lowest third.”<sup>105</sup>

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. Luke, one of the teachers at Ottawa Alternative HS, reasoned as follows: “It’s probably no accident that the people who are most involved on an issue are the most aware of the processes, but I would guess that activism comes before knowledge. I don’t think people get involved in the homelessness issue because they understand how city council works. It’s the other way around.” 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, to seek out political knowledge and to participate in political activity. A study by Brenda O’Neill demonstrates a relationship between voting turnout and political interest: “While 81 percent of young respondents with some political interest reported voting in 1997, the rate drops to 55 percent among those reporting little or no interest.”<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, Paul Howe has shown that impoverished knowledge is more likely to affect voting turnout for youth than for older cohorts.<sup>107</sup> Again, however, it is

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<sup>102</sup> Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2004a: 3.

<sup>103</sup> Milner, 2001: 7.

<sup>104</sup> Milner, 2001: 3.

<sup>105</sup> Cited in Milner, 2001: 6.

<sup>106</sup> O’Neill, 2003.

<sup>107</sup> Howe, 2003b.

unclear whether political knowledge is the source of interest, or whether both knowledge and interest result from political engagement.

Studies show that Canadian youth are less interested in politics than the older cohorts. Only 41% of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 27 reported following politics at any level, compared with 68% of those over 57.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, only 11% of Canadians aged 18 to 24 reported following the 2004 federal election, compared with 30% of those over 55.<sup>109</sup> In a study conducted by André Blais and colleagues, the authors posit that, given their low level of interest, it is “not surprising to find that members of the youngest generation are more poorly informed than those of older generations. This is the case whether we look at general knowledge about politics or campaign-specific knowledge.”<sup>110</sup>

The parameters of our study did not allow for us to measure the correlation between each student’s level of political knowledge, participation and interest. Nevertheless, we did hear from participants that they believed a lack of interest directly related to a low level of knowledge. John commented: “I guess information is more readily available but maybe not the most interesting. They don’t make it the most interesting subject.” “Boring” was a term used regularly by students and even teachers to describe Civics, Canadian History and World Issues. According to almost all 22 interviewees, however, boredom was not the cause of disinterest in politics. Instead, most argued that the social sciences and humanities were not a priority in the education system. Luke argued that Civics was a default subject, seen as lacking substance among the teaching staff. For students, electives like World Issues and History were not prerequisites for post-secondary institutions, places that demanded more success in mathematics and sciences. These subjects were the priority of Crestview Academy because, students asserted, they were the ticket to success on a global scale and the school wanted to break the stereotype that girls could not do math. Unfortunately, as their teachers pointed out, social sciences teach students to “crucially think and question and look at the world,” and “leadership opportunities aren’t math or science.”

Those who see civic knowledge as a prerequisite for political participation point to international trends in data that show the benefits of civic literacy for more egalitarian distribution of rights, resources and representation. Milner, for example, argues as follows:

The effects of low civic literacy are not neutral. In low civic literacy societies like the United States, the interests of the economically disadvantaged carry less weight since they are often excluded from informed political participation through lack of civic competence. In contrast, high civic-literacy societies such as the Scandinavian countries tend to adopt policies that take into account the full range of interests in society because they encourage political participation across all sectors of society. The end result is more egalitarian economic and social policies.<sup>111</sup>

Milner warns that, given the low levels of civic literacy in Canada, “there is reason to be concerned that we are more likely to follow the American than the Scandinavian path in the coming years.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> O’Neill, 2003.

<sup>109</sup> Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2004b.

<sup>110</sup> Blais et al., 2002: 5.

<sup>111</sup> Milner, 2001: 3.

<sup>112</sup> Milner, 2001: 3.

If the stakes of political knowledge and interest are high for Canadian society, then the risks are even higher for the most disaffected young people in our country. Teachers from Ottawa-East HS and Ottawa Alternative HS, where a high proportion of students are economically and socially disadvantaged, expressed a greater sense of urgency than other teachers about the state of civic learning for young Canadians. Helena, the teacher from Ottawa-East HS, believed that Civics was critical “so it gives them [youth] the option to think of real alternatives.”

## Capacities and Skills for Youth Civic Participation

Those people seeking to teach and encourage active, sustained and thoughtful civic engagement understand that students’ knowledge of democratic processes is of little use without the skills to put this knowledge into practice. Patricia Kubow argues as follows: “Those preparing to be teachers (as well as political leaders, national commissioners, community members, parents, and students at various levels of their educational development) need to think about what skills, values, and attributes are required for democratic existence now and in the future and how citizenship education can best be fostered in the formal educational setting.”<sup>113</sup> Similarly, Caroline Beauvais, Lindsey McKay and Adam Seddon, in their *Literature Review on Youth and Citizenship*, observe a tendency to “teach about formal political institutions and people’s rights within the polity as opposed to teaching about the practice of citizenship.” They go on to note that citizenship education rarely actually teaches about political participation.<sup>114</sup>

Given the evolving conception of civic literacy discussed earlier in this report, it is curious that little attention is given to the skill required to make political knowledge useful. For those teaching reading and writing, it is important to know that students not only *can* read or write specific words but also that they understand the usefulness of these words and know how to use them in sentences, in short, that they *do* read. It would seem no different for civic literacy. One US study of programs that taught these skills found that, as students developed the abilities to participate, they saw their own participation in civic affairs as more plausible. The authors observed: “In this sense, each student’s identity as an engaged, democratic citizen followed his or her capacity to be one.”<sup>115</sup>

Do Canadian youth possess the skills necessary for participation? Do they know how to affect change? Do they know how to support a candidate for office, for example, organize a protest, get names for a petition, hold public meetings, facilitate meetings and so on? These answers are necessary for understanding the state of students’ civic skills and to make recommendations for the teaching and encouragement of such skills in the classroom. While we have statistics regarding the knowledge and behaviours of Canadian citizens, few have investigated the extent to which young Canadians have the *skills* necessary to be engaged, active citizens.

From our study, if we were to take only a general look at the questionnaires completed by Ottawa secondary students, we would have to conclude that youth do not possess the skills for political action. Approximately 75% of the students left the section on such skills blank or listed a personal quality, like honesty or loyalty, as a way to address an injustice. John admitted that, when it comes to “walk[ing] the walk, maybe sometimes I’m not the best.” Similarly, Jamie portrayed himself as “all talk, so I wouldn’t do anything.” Most interviewees believed that they could not address an injustice because they did not have actionable skills beyond voting. Some students directly attributed

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<sup>113</sup> Kubow, 1997: 4.

<sup>114</sup> Beauvais, McKay and Seddon, 2001: 20.

<sup>115</sup> Kahne and Westheimer, 2003: 28.

a lack of political action to the type of lessons they received in school. Lee-Ann's illustration of a typical lesson was shared by many students, as well as teachers. She said: "I think an experience would do us all good ... School, it's more of a work and write and learn, and you don't really know how it all comes together and what it's really like being a part of all these things that go on."

There were participants who cited specific political skills that were practised within their school. Letter writing was perhaps the most often cited. At Ottawa-East HS, a student wrote a letter to the mayor concerning the safety of local parks and received an answer. A student at Fellowship HS wrote a letter to the editor about the lack of public funding for Christian schools, and it was published in the local paper. All the interviewees at Fellowship HS repeated this story because they were proud of the results. None of these incidences, however, involved the participants in our study. Some participating students did mention certain school-wide actions: they created a petition to protest an administrative decision to cancel certain classes, made anti-smoking presentations to younger students and ran in student election campaigns. Within their classes, teachers set up mock elections that were popular among the students, action plans if students were going to address a world issue and research essays on non-governmental organizations or individual activists.

We can see that the majority of these skills are situated as hypothetical or without application beyond the school walls. This was a frustrating reality for most teachers, who expressed a lack of resources and time for the application of these skills in the civic arena. Not surprisingly, when asked how they would fight for an issue important to them, students mostly replied with what they *could* do and not what they *would* do. Nicole, a teacher at Crestview Academy, sadly reflected, "It seems like the student is no longer the means of change."

## **What Skills Should Schools Teach?**

The kind of skills taught in the classroom will vary depending on the underlying assumptions about the proper roles of democratic citizens. Of course, "knowing how to read, write, and do arithmetic are essential for any citizenry. And democracy requires citizens who know how government works and have both the ability and commitment to locate and analyze information."<sup>116</sup> In this sense, students need knowledge of Canadian politics but also need the skills to access the information they need beyond the contents of the textbook.

The goal is to move away from what our student participant Christine characterized as "answers that are drilled into us." She specifically referred to Civics as democratic "propaganda ... to instill national pride." Christine wanted to know how Canada's democracy works and what democracy means in relation to other forms of governance around the world. During our class observations, it was obvious that teachers strove to educate their students on how to seek answers to inquiries. They used online scavenger hunts regarding government processes, gave presentation assignments on policies from Aboriginal affairs to terrorism, and read the Charter of Rights and Freedom in an effort to design an in-school charter. Other activities toward that goal might include information gathering by conducting polls, interviewing officials and analyzing proposed legislation. Despite the use of some of these activities, most students believed that, to effect change, they would need to find someone "smarter" or "with more power" to speak for them. For many students, this figure was their teacher, but the teachers expressed the desire to empower their students. Four of the six teachers repeated "confidence-building" as one of their primary objectives in educating their students.

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<sup>116</sup> Westheimer and Kahne, 2003: 31.

For people who consider participation in the electoral process sufficient for civic engagement, few skills need to be inculcated in Canadian youth. However, a survey conducted by Kubow revealed that policy-makers and students alike considered the following attributes and skills necessary for strong citizenship: “the ability to understand, accept, and tolerate cultural differences; the ability to work with others in a cooperative way and to take responsibility for one’s roles and duties within society; a willingness to change one’s lifestyle and consumption habits to protect the environment; a willingness to resolve conflict in a non-violent manner; the ability to be sensitive towards and to defend human rights; and the capacity to think in a critical and systemic way.”<sup>117</sup>

The completed questionnaires from our study reveal widespread acceptance that “good” citizenship requires such attributes. Respect for other citizens and the country were listed on over two-thirds of the questionnaires. Participants took the greatest pride in sharing the ways their school supported what they deemed to be Canadian values, namely, multiculturalism, peacekeeping and freedom of speech. Students at Ottawa Alternative HS were particularly vocal about the positive environment of their school because it embraced diversity of cultures and opinions. Jamie gave but one example when he recalled a class in which Iraqi and Iranian students debated the United Nations’ dealing with Saddam Hussein and “never getting angry.” For most students, sharing opinions and listening to others were important personal and relational skills. They did not see, however, how these seemingly individualized attributes could translate into systemic analysis and action.

Gabrielle aptly stated that “you could make a difference, but one person, I don’t think could do it by themselves.” Unlike Gabrielle, Leyla considered herself to be extremely politically active. When discussing racism, however, she argued, “There’s nothing you can do about it ... just you.” To be able to pursue change in matters of social justice, it is clear that civic engagement demands not only leadership attributes but also skills in the collective process. To encourage students to practise democracy, such skills may include the ability to run a meeting effectively and fairly, conflict management, critical reflection, decision-making and civil protest.<sup>118</sup> Lee-Ann said that she experienced occasional group work and debates, but that “a lot of our work is individual in Civics.” Teachers agreed, arguing that, due to long lists of content and assessment needs from the curriculum, they usually gave individual exercises, such as essays and tests. Beyond school-wide donation collections, few collective projects took place. Classes and schools seemed to lack the resources to establish learning activities that involved systemic analysis of social inequality with resultant group political action.

The intricacies of how to teach citizenship skills are well beyond the scope of this report. Countless educators agree, however, that skills cannot simply be absorbed from a textbook: “The skills and dispositions necessary for effective democracy can really only be learned by practicing them. This is the most important challenge facing schools in this area. It is also the most difficult.”<sup>119</sup> Some scholars argue that classrooms must “encourage critical pedagogy and active investigation by students to grapple with and solve the complex, intricate issues facing the world.”<sup>120</sup> Others have found that students who practise skills in the classroom or the school as a whole have an increased vision of how to help others. They are also more likely to feel like they possess sufficient knowledge and social capital to support community development.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Kubow, 1997: 38.

<sup>118</sup> Westheimer and Kahne, 2004: 4. See, especially, the work of Kathy Bickmore (1999a; 1999b; 2003).

<sup>119</sup> Levin, 2000: 3.

<sup>120</sup> Kubow, 1997: 3-4.

<sup>121</sup> Westheimer and Kahne, 2004.

Various pedagogical approaches exist, and many have been studied extensively.<sup>122</sup> These include (but are not limited to) project-based learning, community service learning, simulations and workshops, exposure to activist role models, developing communities of support and of civic practice, and examining contemporary social problems and conflicts. This last example has been shown to be particularly effective and yet is often the least pursued in schools.<sup>123</sup> Two of several reasons why teachers avoid a pedagogy that credits political conflict and problem-solving is its potential to create division and discord in the classroom, and the complexity of such teaching strategies.<sup>124</sup> Another reason is that teachers report deficits in their own knowledge base of political process and pedagogy.<sup>125</sup> Clearly, both pre- and in-service teacher education is an important site for the improvement of instructional practices, deserving further attention by government, the academic community and, very importantly, teachers' associations. The next section provides a brief examination of the curriculum guidelines and behavioural policies across Canadian schools to seek further explanation for the absence of conflict analysis from civic learning.

## Civic Literacy and Schools

In a modern democratic society, citizenship requires of us that we not only be law-abiding but that we also participate in our own governance. To do so effectively requires that we have the requisite skills and this, of course, raises questions of how we can best impart these to our children and to the citizen body at large.

—Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology<sup>126</sup>

One of the few opportunities for the state to formally improve civic literacy is through school curriculum and policies developed by the provincial and territorial ministries of education. Guidelines for promoting civic literacy can be found in two aspects of ministry literature:

- School curriculum directs teachers' pedagogical methods and establishes required knowledge, skills and effective goals for classroom work. It is available to educators and the community in hard copy and on government websites.
- Behavioural “codes of conduct,” part of most citizenship and civic education programs, aim to provide a safe and respectful learning environment. Each code of conduct is generally outlined in support documents and often reinforced through legal means as an “Act.”

Both curriculum guidelines and behavioural codes of conduct have a central role in educators' definitions of “civic literacy,” and yet these documents often present conflicting models of the ideal citizen and student.

In what follows, we identify common assumptions underlying compulsory guidelines for civic literacy and outline the various (and sometimes competing) definitions of civic literacy arising from official curriculum guidelines and educational behavioural codes. We emphasize courses that are compulsory requirements for high school graduation and are also offered before the legal leaving age

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<sup>122</sup> See, for example, CIRCLE (<http://www.civicyouth.org>) and Ayers, Hunt and Quinn, 1998.

<sup>123</sup> Hess, 2004; Bickmore, 1999a; 1999b; 2003.

<sup>124</sup> See, for example, Osborne, 1997: 39-67.

<sup>125</sup> Osborne, 1991.

<sup>126</sup> Canada, 2003.

of 16 (generally Grade 10).<sup>127</sup> While we have limited our analysis here to those courses, other instances of civic instruction are available in non-compulsory courses and programs, particularly the senior courses in Politics, Economics, World Issues and Canadian History.

## Provincial/Territorial Curriculum Guidelines

Each Canadian province and territory identifies Civics as an important component of the curriculum, and in many cases civic instruction is provided from the earliest grades to the last year of high school. Curriculum guidelines demonstrate fairly consistent understandings of the knowledge needed for students to develop into responsible and knowledgeable Canadian citizens. Every provincial/territorial curriculum guideline associates civic literacy with particular kinds of historical knowledge. In many cases, as in Manitoba, civic instruction is located in the Social Studies curriculum and is always seen as an outgrowth and adjunct to History, rather than to other disciplines forming the Social Studies, such as Geography.<sup>128</sup> In a few other cases, Civics constitutes a separate course, as in Ontario, but even here, the guideline is a part of the compulsory History guidelines.<sup>129</sup> Curriculum guidelines suggest that a historical approach to civics is necessary to demonstrate how past wrongs have since been righted. This version of history tells of Canada's imperfect past, which leads inexorably to our democratic (and tolerant, diverse, respectful and pluralistic, in the words of the Quebec guidelines) present.

Regardless of the organizational structure of civics curriculum, there are three notable characteristics of curricular aims and procedures. First, almost all curricular guidelines characterize civic knowledge as primarily procedural and legislative in content. The Alberta guidelines serve as one example among many: "Responsible citizenship requires an understanding of the structure and function of government ... the rights and duties of citizenship in a changing Canadian society," including an understanding of parliamentary democracy, the levels and functions of government, and the constitution.<sup>130</sup> Another common assumption in provincial models of civic education is that civic literacy progresses linearly, from civic knowledge to civic engagement. That is, only once students have mastered this detailed procedural information are they ready to take on more active forms of civic life.

Second, every provincial and territorial curriculum guideline suggests that civics courses should teach knowledge of fundamental Canadian civic virtues. They suggest that educators provide current and relevant examples of ideal civic qualities and then allow students to discuss other ways of manifesting these values. Commonly accepted Canadian values listed in provincial guideline documents include the following: tolerance of diverse political communities, pluralistic backgrounds and profiles according to culture, religion, gender, socio-economic status and former nationality;<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> With few exceptions, civics education is provided through Social Studies or History courses. Only Ontario mandates a compulsory Civics half-course, in addition to the mandated Grade 10 Canadian and World Studies course. The following provinces require graduating students to have successfully completed at least one Social Studies or History course in which there was some attention given to government and civics: Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Ontario and Saskatchewan. The same requirements might apply to Quebec, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, but no information on this was available.

<sup>128</sup> Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2002.

<sup>129</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999.

<sup>130</sup> Alberta Learning, 1989: 17.

<sup>131</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999: 48.

pride in Canada's tradition of inclusion and justice,<sup>132</sup> environmental sustainability, gender equity, multiculturalism and anti-racism; respect for Aboriginal culture;<sup>133</sup> understanding of the "value of equal opportunities for people regardless of race, culture and creed";<sup>134</sup> acceptance of global interdependence;<sup>135</sup> and "moral attitudes of openness to the world, tolerance, respect for cultural differences, and intellectual values" such as a belief in the importance of a "systematic approach to work, a critical spirit concerning social phenomena and a search for truth."<sup>136</sup> The foundation of civics courses is built upon those values that Canadians identify as representing the best qualities of the national culture.

Third, ministry documents suggest comparable pedagogical approaches to further develop and deepen student knowledge and commitment to the democratic process. Most of these fall under the rubric of developing skills in communication, collaborative problem-solving and decision-making. Strategies include debate, brainstorming, role-play and other small-group interactions and simulations. For example, the curriculum guideline for the Northwest Territories and Nunavut suggests that students hold an in-class election or choose a class mascot: "Begin with a campaign, and take the students right through the voting procedures to the posting and celebration of results."<sup>137</sup> The Ontario guideline for the compulsory Civics course suggests that students "describe the changing nature of Canadian citizenship rights and responsibilities based on an examination of provincial legislation, the Bill of Rights (1960), and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982)." This would give students the opportunity to examine "democratic notions of fundamental freedoms, democratic rights, mobility rights, legal rights, equality rights, language rights, and Aboriginal rights."<sup>138</sup>

Only occasionally do guideline documents suggest that students should follow a controversial civic issue that is fundamental to the democratic process. For example, the New Brunswick curriculum guideline suggests that students react orally or in writing to the following statements:

- a) Interest groups are dangerous to democracy since well organized minorities are able to influence governments.
- b) Interest groups represent democracy in action since the essence of democracy is people participating in the political process.
- c) The interest group with the greatest financial resources will always emerge victorious.<sup>139</sup>

This exercise can help students understand the political structure of Canadian democracy, while also interrogating its complex relationships of power.

Regardless of region or political orientation, all provincial/territorial curriculum guidelines assume that civic education is fundamentally knowledge-based: "Knowledge contributes to responsible

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<sup>132</sup> Government of the Northwest Territories, 2002: 45.

<sup>133</sup> British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 2006: C-3.

<sup>134</sup> Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2003: 9.

<sup>135</sup> New Brunswick Department of Education, 1998: 2.

<sup>136</sup> Gouvernement du Québec, 1991: 5.

<sup>137</sup> Government of the Northwest Territories, 2002: 26.

<sup>138</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999: 48.

<sup>139</sup> New Brunswick Department of Education, 1998: 53.

citizenship when it is used by students to inform their judgments, shape their options, solve problems and guide their actions.”<sup>140</sup> With very few exceptions, it is assumed that this knowledge – primarily historical in nature – is essential for active citizenship engagement. Other pedagogical interventions follow a fairly standard (and narrow) range of strategies that tend to emphasize critical-thinking and communication skills. All provincial/territorial guidelines assume that civic literacy has a place from the earliest grades to the last year of high school, with curriculum advancing from local concerns to provincial, national and even international issues. There is, in fact, broad public support for such content: 83% of Canadians agreed that “schools should do more to educate children in the benefits of voting and political participation.”<sup>141</sup>

## Provincial “Behavioural” Codes of Conduct

Guides for such lessons are often shaped by school codes of behaviour. Within the past decade, many ministries of education have produced behavioural guidelines for students under their provincial jurisdiction. One of the motivations behind strengthened behavioural codes seems to be the perception that students lack the ability or the willingness to solve their problems peacefully or respectfully. Many people see this as an indication of the failure of civic knowledge or value development. For example, British Columbia’s *Social Responsibility: A Framework* (2001), despite being “voluntary,” defines civic values echoed in other mandated provincial documents, including the ability and predilection to contribute to the classroom and school community as a shared enterprise, solve problems peacefully, value diversity and defend human rights, and exercise democratic rights and responsibilities.<sup>142</sup>

Similarly, *Ontario Schools Code of Conduct* notes that appropriate behaviours are based on respect, civility and responsible citizenship. A student demonstrates those values when he or she “comes to school prepared ... shows respect ... refrains from bringing anything to school that compromises the safety of others; and follows the established rules.”<sup>143</sup> *The Alberta School Act* requires that every student “attend school regularly and punctually; co-operate fully with everyone authorized by the board to provide education programs and other services; comply with the rules of the school; account to the student's teachers for the student's conduct [and] respect the rights of others,” among other demands.<sup>144</sup>

## Opportunities for Civic Learning

After examining provincial guidelines in civic education and proper community behaviour, it is useful to revisit the competing ideas about citizenship discussed earlier in this report. The spectrum of citizenship qualities described by some authors, such as Walter Parker or Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, has significant implications for educational curricula and programs.<sup>145</sup> These qualities can assist policy-makers in identifying the aims and outcomes of different kinds of school guidelines and activities.

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<sup>140</sup> British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 2006b: 2.

<sup>141</sup> Pammett and LeDuc, 2003: 53.

<sup>142</sup> British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001.

<sup>143</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2001: 6.

<sup>144</sup> Alberta Education, 2002: 13.

<sup>145</sup> See, for example, Parker, 1996; Kahne and Westheimer, 2003; Westheimer and Kahne 2003 and 2004.

As we noted earlier, for example, it seems that all provinces consider citizenship as grounded in the *individual* child's understandings and knowledge, and rarely in *collective* efforts to examine the root causes of social or political problems. One exception is the document by the Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training (CAMET) entitled *Foundation for the Atlantic Canada Social Studies Curriculum*, which argues that "the empowered Canadian citizen understands personal rights and responsibilities and the interplay among authority systems, citizens and public policy," in order to examine "how power is gained, used, and justified."<sup>146</sup> This document's recommendations, however, are not compulsory, and mandated curriculum guidelines rarely mention the importance of discussing issues of power to foster civic literacy.

Similarly, the behavioural codes of conduct tend to envision ideal civic behaviour as being compliant and obedient. The critical-thinking skills enumerated in all of the curriculum guidelines do not appear to apply to the regulations governing students' behaviour in schools. The behavioural guidelines, then, tend to be consistent with the vision of *personally responsible* citizenship described earlier, while civic education guidelines tend, occasionally, toward more *participatory* visions of citizenship. With a few significant exceptions, formal school programs shy away from efforts to promote social justice and reform.

The Ottawa-based participants in our study confirmed the type of citizenship that is mandated for schools. Civic literacy, when presented as purely procedural and technical, rather than focused on issues, failed to sustain the interests or the rigorous analysis of students and teachers alike. While most agreed on a necessity for general and campaign-specific knowledge, they sought information that was connected to their lives and opened up space for application within their communities. The process of government for many students needs to address not only the number of seats in the House of Commons, but also the decision-making of parliamentarians regarding such issues as immigration, post-secondary education, the environment and health care.

To sustain the connections among information, interest and participation, students need to know their role in the decision-making behind Canada's policies. Educators sought strategies to encourage students to practise critical-thinking skills and democratic communication. Students in our study wanted to "walk the walk" of political action, outside the bounds of the narrowly defined good citizen in the codes of conduct. Interviewees expressed the need for resources and time to experience politics, rather than to read about it or imagine hypothetical activities. They valued those instances when civic life and schools seemed inextricably linked. Those were the moments when collective, meaningful social analysis and political change were possible. Such moments are often lost, according to a teacher from Fellowship HS. Larry stated that schools are "so expectation-minded that you lose the teaching opportunities," and went on to ask, "How we can make the connection between them as participating student [and] as a citizen?"

General findings from the research literature, government curricula and policies, and civic literacy programs show that schools typically avoid political controversy despite considerable evidence that teaching political conflict increases engagement. The kind of value-neutrality obsessively nurtured by institutions (especially schools, but also many youth organizations, clubs, etc.) may have wrought damage to the institutional capacity to influence youth in meaningful ways. In much of common parlance, for youth and adults alike, "being political" is a bad thing. Being political is tantamount to devaluing the public good for personal or party gain. The kinds of controversies, power plays, social upheavals, movements and networks that some youth avidly engage in outside of formal institutions

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<sup>146</sup> CAMET, n.d.: 16.

are the same issues, ideas and debates that are systematically stripped from the school curriculum and environment.

The apolitical characteristic of schools became a glaring reality in the Ottawa case study when, during our interview with Teika, she paused, scanned the classroom, started to criticize the Conservative party and then asked, “Am I allowed to say that?” Samantha similarly described her school as a place where certain political actions were deemed inappropriate. She stated, “If it’s kind of controversial, they won’t let you hear it.” Samantha also asserted, “They [the administration] don’t really want to see Crestview girls at Parliament Hill, ya know, holding up signs and stuff so they kind of want the more polite version of activism.” In all the other schools, students regularly expressed that teachers and their peers were afraid to reveal their politics. Jamie believed that the reason his teacher feared letting students know his views on politics was “so simplistic ... people are afraid of other people finding out what their opinions are and then using that against them.” He went on to ask, “How tolerant are we if we’re afraid of certain people’s opinions?”

In many ways, Jamie’s teacher, like so many of the other teacher participants, concurred with this assessment. He said that he “stays away from conflict” and believed that “encouraging students to act on a particular political stance, I think that I’m overstepping.” The teachers saw it as imperative for them to take a journalistic approach, namely, objectively covering both sides of an issue without revealing their biases. Interestingly, while most teachers believed that showing their passion for a subject created passion in their students, few made the same connection with politics. Being political in the classroom and getting one’s students politically active did not seem to follow given the climate of our education system.

We thus need to re-politicize our schools, our teaching and our learning. Harry Boyte describes politics as the way people with different values and from different backgrounds can “work together to solve problems and create common things of value.” It is the process by which citizens with varied interests and opinions can negotiate differences and clarify places where values conflict. Schools, he argues, have a role to play in moving youth from a notion of politics as mud-slinging to politics as, what Bernard Crick called in his work *In Defense of Politics*, “a great and civilizing activity.”<sup>147</sup>

For our schools to play a greater role in creating and sustaining a social justice-oriented model of citizenship, they need support from families, communities and government. The way to embrace this citizenship model in schools has been and will continue to be a source of contestation. We highlight below some recommendations, inclusive of proposals from our study participants, for ongoing debate:

- Considering that a social justice, rather than legislative, model of citizenship education necessarily involves ideological diversity, we need to make room for competing and tension-filled interpretations of responsibility and justice regarding civic learning.<sup>148</sup> Most importantly, discussion needs to be opened to a broad cross-section of stakeholders, including government, citizens, parents and, especially, teachers and students. As this report has shown, teachers and students often perceive themselves as unable to make change, despite being critical agents for advancing 21st century citizenship.

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<sup>147</sup> Boyte, 2002: 13.

<sup>148</sup> See, for example, Hess, 2004; Silverman, 2003; Westheimer, 2007.

- We cannot re-politicize our schools within a one-size-fits-all model of citizenship: a model similar to zero tolerance policies that are currently in favour for regulating student behaviour. Civic literacy must oppose standardization, which neglects the diverse social, cultural realities of young Canadians. A uniform model will prove particularly ineffectual for capturing the civic minds of disaffected youth who, as Milner’s work emphasizes, will not be reached unless their particular needs become a priority for society.<sup>149</sup> Our study participants, particularly the less privileged students, pointed to the government–young citizen disconnect as a major reason for their disengagement from civic action.
- To encourage all students to be agents of change, other stakeholders need to embrace young people’s media sophistication. Advertisers, for example, have become keenly aware and respectful of young adults’ intelligence, critical-thinking abilities and savvy. The new breed of advertising that effectively “targets” youth is what Douglas Rushkoff calls “wink advertising,” which recognizes that young people pride themselves on being able to deconstruct the coercive tactics of television commercials.<sup>150</sup> By winking at the audience, the advertising acknowledges that the audience knows how to think and not just to be blindly influenced. Curricular activities could help to teach youth our “wink” democracy: recognizing ambiguity, seeing human conditions as complex and challenging power relations that surround us. Almost all participants in our study wanted from their classes more “analysis” and “controversial debates.”
- We must provide youth with genuine opportunities for leadership in the civic arena. Students in our study wanted immediate and efficient avenues for talking politics, such as youth workshops with government officials. Philip stated: “Our school is sheltered ... They [youth] have convictions, but they have to have some sort of outlet.” Educators require greater resources to bring civic learning from the classroom into the public sphere. While one teacher recommended case studies to work classes through a reform initiative over the long term, one student suggested that co-op placements be extended to activist organizations. For any of this to occur, education systems need to disrupt the current societal preoccupations with testing individual students for math and science success.<sup>151</sup> Why, for example, do university entrance requirements not prioritize student participation in collective action for social improvement if their goal is to produce “leaders for the nation?”
- Priority also needs to be given to the preparation of teachers for teaching Civics. Teacher education holds some responsibility for avoiding the complexities of political pedagogy. Furthermore, post-secondary education programs need to address teachers’ reported lack of civic knowledge and skills that may be used within the classroom. Civic literacy is not and cannot be considered a “teacher problem.” Rather, government resources, policy, societal norms and legal change influence the civic culture of schools and the citizenship role of its educators. For example, teachers from this study pointed out that they needed more time for Civics class. With respect to current course offerings, they suggested that more Politics courses be offered in the senior division or, alternatively, that Civics in Grade 10 be changed from a half-course to a full-year course.

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<sup>149</sup> Milner, 2002.

<sup>150</sup> Rushkoff, 1999.

<sup>151</sup> Kahne and Westheimer, 2003.

## Future Research

Given the obviously multi-faceted actors and institutions that shape civic learning, the onus on researchers cannot be overlooked. As noted throughout the report, we need to conduct far greater research.

- More longitudinal and nationwide studies are required to understand patterns of youth engagement across region, culture and social status. These studies need to pay particular attention to youth who are at risk of being “civic” dropouts. Studies should address such areas as the relationship of Aboriginal youth to Canadian governance, the role of community programs for civic engagement of rural youth and young peoples’ use of creative arts as an expression of political voice.<sup>152</sup>
- This last area speaks to the need for research that seeks out under-reported forms of youth participation. Are there new discourses for civic knowledge that does not conform to the informal/formal political divide? Should blogging be considered a learned skill in curriculum guidelines for Civics?
- Researchers should also examine the impact of mandatory volunteerism programs. At a CPRN roundtable discussion with community stakeholders in May 2007, Henry Milner pointed out that studies have shown that there might be an inverse relationship between volunteering and political participation. From the same workshop, Nishad Khana (Centre for Excellence for Youth Engagement) argued that it was the nature of the volunteering experience itself, rather than its mandatory status, that mattered for youth’s long-term commitment to civic reform. These issues deserve further study.
- As with the issue of volunteerism, researchers seek to understand the cause and effect relationship that shapes civic responsibility, and this research should continue. Various studies indicate that young Canadians’ low levels of political knowledge are connected to low levels of participation. We do not know, however, whether knowledge causes increased participation. Perhaps exposure to a political event or interest in a particular political issue introduces an individual to critical civic knowledge.
- Perhaps a dearth of skills necessary for active citizenship lies at the root of youth disengagement. This area needs to be explored further. How do youth learn to enact change within and outside of their schools? Few researchers have investigated the extent to which young people have the capacity to apply political knowledge in the civic arena or the type of skills that schools may legitimate for political action. Does political protest have a place in school curriculum alongside learning the Charter of Rights and Freedoms?
- Empirical research is lacking within Canada regarding pedagogical approaches that have worked for creating politically and socially just classrooms. That is not to imply that such teaching is not taking place across the country. Most research, however, comes out of the US context. This body of work provides methods that teachers can and have implemented in their classrooms. Examples include providing activist role models, bringing politicians into the classroom, having the school participate in real-world projects and building communities of support, from administrators to parents, for discussing controversial issues.<sup>153</sup> It is this last example on which

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<sup>152</sup> See, for example, Kennelly, 2006.

<sup>153</sup> See, for example, Westheimer and Kahne, 2003; Westheimer, 2007 (particularly Diana Hess’s contribution); and a recent notable exception in the Canadian field, Cook and Westheimer, 2006.

Canadian researchers should focus future empirical study. How can schools and their communities work together to address what Diana Hess calls the “controversies of controversial issues?”<sup>154</sup>

After all, democracy is not self-winding. As political theorist Sheldon Wolin observed, citizens in a democracy – both young and old – need to be taught to “know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life.”<sup>155</sup> Improving civic literacy may be one way of getting there.

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<sup>154</sup> Hess, 2004.

<sup>155</sup> Wolin, 1989: 139.

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## Appendix A: Student Questionnaire

Course/School: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Can you name the political parties in Canada and their leaders? If so, please list two.

- 1.
- 2.

List the three most important qualities for a good citizen.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Indicate two issues you think are politically important.

- 1.
- 2.

Indicate one activity in which you participate that might be considered political.

Please list the courses in which you learn lessons about being a good citizen.

Provide one example of a citizenship lesson from your school courses.

How is this lesson relevant for your everyday life?

List two qualities expected of students as good citizens in the school?

- 1.
- 2.

Do you have the skills to dispute an injustice you see? If yes, list three of those skills?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

## **Appendix B: Student Interview Guide**

Questions will alter slightly for adult learners compared with younger students. All of these questions will not be posed to the interviewees. The selection of questions will depend upon the answers provided and the time remaining in the interview. The participant will be reminded of the rights of their participation (e.g. refusal to answer questions, request to turn off the recording device, and/or withdrawal from the study).

### **Impressions of Civic Literacy and the Role of Youth/Young Adults**

- What are your impressions of politics and activists? Would you want a career as a politician/activist?
- How do you think young people contribute to democracy?
- How do you think youth/young adults should participate in society as good citizens? (e.g. vote, political parties, interest groups, volunteering, clubs, recreational activities)
- How do adults perceive youth and is this image accurate?
- Can individuals make a difference when they see injustice? Can groups of people make a difference? Do you have examples?
- Do people become more politically engaged as they get older? If so, how and why?
- Does the government effectively represent Canadian youth/young adults? What issues should the government take more seriously?
- What would society look like if youth/young adults had more social responsibilities or voice in society? How would society benefit from youth/young adults' leadership? What benefits might we lose if they are not engaged in social issues?

### **Discourses and Activities for Civic Engagement**

- How do you shape decisions that affect your life (i.e. locally and globally)?
- What are your political interests/activities? How could you express interest in social issues?
- Do you have positive and negative examples of people who have acted on a political/social interest?
- Describe groups of people you know who participate in political issues?
- Where or from whom do you learn about controversial issues and/or public policies?
- With whom do you talk about important issues? Are news topics discussed at home and do you participate in the discussions? Do you use the internet to discuss news issues? In what ways?
- Are your recreation clubs and friends engaged in civics issues? If so, how? Do you participate with them, and if so, how?

### **Civics at School: Priorities and Pedagogies**

- Does this school make civics a priority for extra-curricular activities? Are there debating clubs, volunteer organizations, student councils? Do you participate in any of these groups?

- Does the school encourage you to work within the community? In what ways? Have students you know organized around a particular issue? Has the school helped with that organizing?
- What have you learned in school about citizenship? Are these lessons relevant to you?
- What have you learned about being Canadian (e.g. values, history and government)? Is Canada a democracy? If so, what does that mean?
- What kind of information don't you know about government, politics, social issues but would like to see covered in school courses? Any news stories that you want to know more about?
- Would you tell me what you think about one of the following issues: environmental policies, the Canadian military in Afghanistan, or government funding of education? Would you like to tell me about other political knowledge that you have?
- Do you think courses about citizenship, like civics, history and politics, are difficult or easy? Why?
- Are controversial issues discussed in class? Is there a disagreement of opinion, and if so, how does that work in class?
- Do you think you have the skills (as well as knowledge) to address an issue of injustice that affects your life (e.g. public speaking, debating, group work, protesting)? What could your course of action be if you heard the government was banning cable television because of its negative influence on people? What if you heard that funding to women's shelters in Ottawa was being cut and they would have to close their doors? What would you do if the school board decided that there was no more money for extra-curricular clubs?
- Do you think that students have power to make decisions in the school? Do you think teachers have decision-making authority? Have you ever disagreed with a school policy and what was the result?
- Are you a good citizen of your school? In what ways?
- For which issues would you like to see the school as a community become involved?

### **Other Reflections/Questions**

- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about you as a citizen, what you think is an ideal citizen, what you've learned about citizenship inside and outside of the school?

## **Appendix C: Teacher Interview Guide**

### **Impressions of Youth/Young Adults Civic Literacy**

- In ideal terms, how would you describe a civically responsible student? Do you think this vision is possible to produce through the schools? Why or why not?
- How do you think students interpret citizenship and democracy?
- How do you see students engaging with issues that affect their lives?
- Do you think students are civic leaders or apathetic to political and social issues? If yes, why do you think? If no, do you think they express their political interests in new ways that are misinterpreted as being apathetic?
- How do you think students could become more civically engaged?
- How do parents and clubs shape students' civic engagement?
- Is youth civic engagement the responsibility of the school?

### **The Politics of Civic Instruction**

- What does it mean to be teach students to be good citizens, democratic citizens and civically engaged?
- Do you have positive or negative impressions of contemporary politics, Canadian government and our democratic institutions?
- Are you politically active? If yes, in what ways? In no, why not?
- Are teachers generally politically active? Why? Are teachers fearful of the repercussions of taking a stance on controversial issues? In what ways do teachers' political interests come into the classroom?
- Is your teacher training in the area of social studies?
- How has you education, family, volunteering, social groups, recreational activities shaped your perceptions of citizenship?
- Do you critique social issues with students, colleagues, and/or administrators?

### **The Content and Skills of Civic Instruction**

- What are the objectives for civics curriculum?
- What do students learn about being Canadian (e.g. values, history and government)?
- Does curriculum emphasize patriotism or democracy? In what ways?
- Do students have the necessary knowledge about governance to be effective citizens? If not, what do they need to acquire? If yes, what is that knowledge?
- Do students have the skills necessary to be participants in democratic processes? If not, what do they need? If yes, what are those skills?
- Is the curriculum approach to citizenship infused or devoid of politics? Do students discuss war, public policy, foreign relations, and equity issues?
- Do you think students are critical thinkers? Do students see the relationship between history and their present, global issues and their local realities, their individual lives and social equity issues?
- How do you handle diversity and equity issues within civics lessons?

- Does your class deal with controversial topics? If yes, how do you deal with these issues? What issues and modes of action peak student interest the most?

### **The Teaching Methods for Civic Engagement**

- Describe your pedagogy, evaluation and other procedures for teaching civics (i.e. example of a lesson)? Do students receive direct instruction, apprenticeship and role modeling for civics?
- Is public service a critical part of school life (student government, political campaigns, volunteerism)?
- Where else, beyond school, do students learn civic engagement? Are family, community and social organizations incorporated into civics education within schools?
- How do you make citizenship relevant? How can we bring experience and expertise to youth's passions?
- Do the codes of conduct for students in schools inhibit conflict, debate and disagreement within the classroom? What teaching methods do you think can enable respectful disagreement while still abiding by institutional rules behaviour?
- Are there teaching methods you cannot incorporate practically into the classroom but would ideally like to see for civics learning?

### **School Policies and Practices for Democratic Citizenship**

- Do you think the school, the board and the government prioritize civics education? What are the accountability measures that make sure civics is an important goal?
- What kinds of activities and events are organized to increase students' political interest? Has the school community taken collective action around a common issue of importance? Have you heard of such projects in schools?
- Are there deliberate efforts to engage students who might otherwise be disengaged from civic participation both inside and outside of the school?
- Are there professional development opportunities or rewards for teachers in civics?
- Does the faculty at the school have democratic forums? How do teachers engage in the decision-making of the school?
- Do adults in the school community model democratic dialogue regarding controversial issues (i.e. school meetings)? Can you give a recent example of dialogue among school community members? Do you think the regulations and decisions of the school are open and transparent to students, teachers, and the community?
- What does a democratic school look like? What reforms would you like to see regarding civics in the curriculum, extra-curricular areas, and the governance of the school?

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