Prairie Metropolis Centre

Working Paper Series

WP10-06

Drawing Insights from Former Youth Leaders in Social Justice Activism

Darren E. Lund
University of Calgary

dlund@ucalgary.ca

Biography:

Dr. Darren E Lund is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at the *University of Calgary*, where his research examines social justice activism in school and communities. Darren has published over 200 articles, poems, books, and book chapters; his most recent books are co-edited with Dr. Paul Carr: ***The Great White North? Exploring Whiteness, Privilege and Identity in Education*** (2007, Sense Publishers), and ***Doing Democracy: Striving for Political Literacy and Social Justice*** (2008, Peter Lang Publishers). For 16 years Darren taught high school and founded the award-winning *Student and Teachers Opposing Prejudice* (STOP) program. Darren has been recognizes with numerous honours for his social justice work, including being named a ***Pease Hero*** and a ***Reader's Digest National Leader in Education***.

The PMC Working Paper Series is published by the

Prairie Metropolis Centre

For additional information contact:

PMC Working Paper Series
Attention: Mrs. Lenise Anderson, Editorial Assistant
Suite 2-060 RTF Building, 8308 – 114 Street, University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB T6G 2E1 Canada
Tel: (780) 492-0635 Fax: (780) 492-2594
Email: lenise@ualberta.ca
Web Site: http://pmc.metropolis.net

Funders

We are pleased to acknowledge the following organizations that provide funding in support of the Prairie Metropolis Centre: the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; Citizenship and Immigration Canada; Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Canada Border Ser-vices Agency, Canada Economic Development for the Region of Quebec, Canadian Heritage; Statistics Canada; Human Resources and Social Development Canada; Rural Secretariat of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Department of Justice Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada, Federal Economic Development of Initiative of Northern Ontario, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation; Public Works and Government Services Canada; the Royal Canadian Mounted Police; and Public Safety Canada. The University of Alberta provides PMC with a generous grant and the other participating universities offer supplementary support.

Prairie Metropolis Centre Working Paper Series

General Information

• What are PMC Working Papers?

PMC's working paper series is related to the broad mandate of the Metropolis Project. This initiative is designed to: (1) speed up the dissemination of research results relevant to the interests and concerns of Metropolis researchers, policy- makers, NGOs; (2) fulfill a commitment made in the application to SSHRC/CIC for a renewal grant for the Prairie Metropolis Centre; and (3) populate the Virtual Library on the PMC web site.

• Will these be considered "official" publications?

The inclusion of a manuscript in the working paper series does not preclude, nor is it a substitute for its subsequent publication in a peer reviewed journal. In fact, we would encourage authors to submit such manuscripts for publication in professional journals (or edited books) as well. It is a requirement of researchers who have received funding from the PMC to submit a working paper.

• What subject content is acceptable?

The Working Paper Series welcomes research reports and theoretical discussions relevant to the mandate of the Metropolis Project, providing insight into the policy concerns not only of immigration and integration, but also ethnocultural diversity. Examples of these areas include: socioeconomic, political, cultural, and educational integration of migrants and refugees; impacts on the host society; language; transnationalism; spatial distribution; gender roles and family; ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity; multiculturalism; media and communication; social cohesion- inclusion; racism and discrimination-exclusion; employment equity-anti- discrimination; youth; identity; citizenship; temporary migration; immigration and demographic planning; justice and security; settlement programs and policy; and population health.

• Who may submit papers?

Paper submissions are open to Metropolis researchers, policy-makers and service providers. Submissions from non-affiliates will be examined on a case-by-case basis.

• How do I submit a paper?

All submissions must be sent electronically to lenise@ualberta.ca with a subject heading of Working Papers Submission.

• What happens when I submit a paper?

The PMC will acknowledge receipt of the paper via email within 10 working days.
The series editors will review your submission to ensure that it falls within the mandate of the Metropolis Project and that it is properly referenced and documented. If these standards are met, the paper will then be referred to the appropriate Domain Leader for review and advice. Once the review is completed the author will be contacted.

Style and format requirements

• What style must papers use?

Manuscripts submitted for inclusion in the working paper series should be properly referenced and documented. However, the style followed may be that of the APA Publication Manual, Chicago Manual of Style, the Modern Language Association of America style, or the style of the refereed journal to which the manuscript is eventually submitted.

• What format must my paper use when I submit it?

Papers must be submitted in Microsoft Word.
Manuscripts should not exceed 7,500 words (or 25 typewritten double-spaced pages), including abstract, references, tables, and figures.
The title page must include the following information: (a) title of paper; (b) name(s) of author(s); (c) date (month and year); (d) address(es) for correspondence (postal and email); (e) 75-100 word abstract; and (f) 4 to 6 keywords by which the paper may be indexed. Since manuscripts accepted for inclusion in the Working Paper Series will be uploaded to the Prairie Metropolis Centre's web site all accepted papers will be converted into PDF files. Please note that a limited number of hard copies will be printed by the Prairie Centre. These will be available at a cost of $5.00 per paper.

• Copyright

Copyright for papers accepted as PMC Working Papers remain with the author(s) who are free to publish their papers at any time. It is the responsibility of the authors to inform PMC's Working Paper series Editors of any change in publication status.

Please direct any questions you may have about the PMC Working Paper Series to:
Lenise Anderson at lenise@ualberta.ca

Drawing Insights from Former Youth Leaders in Social Justice Activism

Darren E. Lund
University of Calgary

This research extends the findings from two previous Metropolis-funded research projects on school activism, and draws on the wisdom of former student leaders in successful school-based social justice initiatives. The impact of school-based initiatives in creating welcoming learning environments for immigrant and refugee students is well documented. The insights of student leaders into a range of issues surrounding this work have long been overlooked by practitioners, theorists and researchers alike, and are instrumental in formulating effective approaches to welcome and honour immigrant, refugee, and other marginalized students into the educational system, and into communities. The research approach is innovative, utilizing a newly established duoethnographic methodology, and current technology including web-based social networking sites. In-depth interviews with 12 former student leaders explored topics including the recruiting and retaining student activists, effective planning and implementation of projects, mediating school and district administrative issues, collaborating with community and government agencies, engaging positively with the media, using technology, among others. Emergent themes to be explored include the growing awareness of critical issues in race and racialization, including the role of white privilege, and the transformative potential of student activism.

Introduction

The ongoing study[1] builds on the researcher's past two Metropolis-funded research studies, "Examining Social Justice Education in Action" and "Fostering Acceptance and Integration of Immigrant Students." These studies have documented and analyzed a number of current social justice programs operating across three provinces in a number of prairie region schools. Findings now inform this next phase of this research, focused on a critical analysis of the impact of engaging in social justice research from the perspective of actual student leaders. These leaders have long been neglected or overlooked as informants in shaping our understandings in this area.

The researcher has sought to better understand the many complex ways in which taking a leadership role in fostering the acceptance of immigrant and refugee students can impact the individuals in long-lasting ways. Moreover, the study offers valuable insights to current school

activists on a number of relevant topics, including the recruiting and retaining student activists, effective planning and implementation of projects, mediating school and district administrative issues, collaborating with community and government agencies, engaging positively with the media, using technology, and other salient topics that emerge through this study.

The study adds to our understanding of students as agents of integration. The results of this study should be of interest to federal government policymakers, social justice activists, researchers, teacher educators, curriculum policy developers, school administrators, and community agencies. Additional plans are to link this research to other studies of formal school and district policies, courses, projects, and cultural programming, and to official responses to immigrant students, contributing to policy and programming associated with growing school diversity.

Research Problem: Student Leadership in Social Justice

The research reported here is an examination of the experiences of past student leaders in innovative social justice education programs and projects at secondary schools in the prairie region. The researcher and research assistant, Kari Grain, have documented and analyzed the views of students with leadership experience in undertaking specific activism in schools to address issues of racism and discrimination. Through recent studies the researcher has identified and interviewed dozens of student and teacher activists to obtain a complex understanding of their daily work. The initial findings have been presented at three national conferences and one international conference and continue to inform the direction of this study (Lund, 2008; Lund & Nabavi, 2006; Veinotte, 2008).

Many teachers and students have chosen to organize initiatives to foster acceptance in schools across North America, but relatively few sources exist for meaningful guidance in recruiting students, forming, sustaining, and studying school-based coalitions. Through an earlier pilot project the researcher sought to answer this need by developing an interactive, web-based resource for school activists, entitled the Diversity Toolkit, based on interviews with student and teacher

activists (Lund, 2003). The researcher uses this resource to focus this investigation to actual uses and understandings of how students and teachers implement social justice initiatives. Social justice activism in this study includes educational activities, lessons, school or community displays, guest speakers, group activities, awareness events, media campaigns, and other engagement of students and teachers on issues of race, difference, and ethnicity, among other diversity issues.

As in other western democracies, Canadian public schools are microcosms of our pluralistic society and exciting locations for studying how we might best approach living productively with diverse social differences in this country. They can also be sites of conflict based on differences in social identity with their growing diversity mirroring Canada's recent demographic changes (Li, 2003) such as the 13.6 percent increase in the foreign-born population from 2001-2006 (Statistics Canada, 2006). Developing proactive educational approaches to the cultural diversity brought about by immigrant and refugee students needs to honour Li's reminder that integration is not simply about confining people to rigid expectations and norms; rather, "integration is about giving newcomers the right of contestation, the legitimacy of dissent, and the entitlement to be different" (2003, p. 330).

A growing body of academic literature in both Canada and the U.S. shows promising efforts to reflect cultural sensitivity in teaching materials, training and practices (Dei & Calliste, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003). Recent educational research that examines administrative and policy changes necessary to address the growing ethnocultural diversity in schools (Corson, 2000; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004) has offered numerous insights into educational reform, including the need to address non-discriminatory hiring practices, adequate representation of marginalized groups in curricular materials, culturally sensitive educational programming, respectful parent and community engagement, and other specific approaches to attaining equity and social justice for all students. Turning to the lived experience in schools, the researcher designed this project to examine the views of past student leaders who have

already engaged in collaborative, school-based approaches to foster integration as one possible response to the complexities that accompany ethno-cultural and other diversity.

Research consistently reveals that many young people continue to experience racism in our multicultural nation (Creese & Kambere, 2003; Pruegger & Kiely, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2002). Engaging student activists as active participants in educational research resists a growing backlash toward youth culture in general. Giroux (2003) notes that "youth" as a social category is too often used as a catalyst for panic and fear. More recently, Giroux has observed, "if not represented as a symbol of fashion or hailed as a hot niche, youth are often portrayed as a problem, a danger to adult society or, even worse, irrelevant to the future" (p. xiv). Besides the limited data generated by standardized surveys of "youth attitudes" on a broad range of issues (e.g., Bibby, 2001; Griffith & Labercane, 1995) students have rarely been engaged in meaningful ways in educational research on anti-racism activism, and their understandings of the nuances of work in this area remain largely unexamined. This project directly engages student leaders as informants and participants in the struggle to make schools more equitable.

Objectives/Purpose

This project continues to build on the researcher's two decades of antiracism research and activism in this field. The researcher formed an award-winning student activist program in an Alberta high school, *Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice* (STOP) that has served as a model of collaborative antiracism activism for 20 years (Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2000). For the past several years he has charted the field of antiracism pedagogy in North America, seeking a clearer understanding of the practical realities of this work amongst activist Canadian teachers and students (e.g., 2006, 2008). In addition, the research assistant has significant national and regional experience with coordinating social justice projects, and her own graduate research entails studying the experiences of educators in international teaching contexts.

The researcher recognizes and answers the strong need for educational research that includes the views and experiences of actual students and practitioners. Previous research (Nieto, 2008; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003) indicates that developing proactive educational approaches to promote equity and fairness is part of schools' responsibility to support all students in reaching their full potential. This research analyzes the views of former student leaders of social justice initiatives. Specific topics for this project have been identified from earlier studies and include examining best practices for recruiting students, dealing effectively with teachers and school administrators, making best use of innovative technologies, and interacting positively with the media and the community. A goal has been to undertake an analysis of an integrated antiracism approach using an innovative duoethnographic research. This research model offers a mutually beneficial and respectful process that can inform ongoing policy development, theoretical understandings of social justice, and the practicalities of doing this work in schools.

Rationale/Theoretical Framework

Directing specific attention to anti-racism education includes a critical and dynamic understanding of racism, refined and revised in light of emerging insights from our collaboration with research participants. Clearly, racism is just part of a larger and intertwined set of social and institutional practices and policies that create and preserve an inequitable playing field. Groups who are most typically affected cannot easily be categorized or described in simplistic terms, and have personal agency of their own, as clearly outlined by a growing number of cultural theorists and researchers (e.g., Giroux, 2003; McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2005; Yon, 2001). This approach emerges from a critical theoretical stance of "integrative anti-racism," conducting educational research that seeks solidarity with political struggles across issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation and other contested elements of social identity (e.g., Dei & Calliste, 2000; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003). The research follows Hall's (1992) theorizing on

culture and identity, a perspective that recognizes race as a social construction while acknowledging the racialized context of schooling and the pervasiveness of racism.

Better understanding the ways schools can help combat discrimination to allow students to achieve their full potential requires the development of a supportive network to share ideas and expertise, dialogue about important issues, provide mentorship and role models, "and collaboratively challenge each other to grow as educators and people. This can be a challenging task, especially for people who have been unable to find a supportive cohort within their own schools' walls" (Gorski, 2005, p. 23). This research offers just such a supportive collective as a reciprocal benefit of participation.

Many students choose to organize initiatives to foster acceptance in schools across Canada, but the researcher has been unable to locate studies that engage youth leaders directly and collaboratively on their actual experiences. An earlier pilot project for this research, noted above, produced an award-winning web-based resource for school activists. This study makes use of this online resource, as well as pioneering the research use of social networking sites, both as data-gathering and community-building tools. This research has directed its focus to how young people see their roles in school leadership on social justice, and the vital insights they need to share with current activists, educators, theorists and policymakers.

Procedures: Data Gathering and Analysis

The researcher formulated flexible guiding research questions generated from extensive experiences and ongoing research in this field. Seeking a respectful engagement with the everyday social justice work of the participants, the researcher and research assistant have employed a dialogic approach following *duoethnography* (Norris, 2008; Norris & Sawyer, 2008). Using an innovative model of participatory research that draws from Weis and Fine's (2004) deliberate attention to social justice issues, this method acknowledges power relations and the researchers' own values and assumptions. Building on insights from recent duoethnographic studies that the

researcher has undertaken using this method (Lund & Evans, 2006; Lund & Nabavi, 2008), this study seeks to understand participants' perspectives in their own terms through a collaborative interview process.

Refining this innovative methodology for larger, collaborative national studies of social justice activists has been a goal of this next stage of the research. Some guiding research questions included:

1. How do former student leaders conceptualize and articulate their social justice education and activism?
2. What are some of the intersections of existing social justice research, policy, and practice, in relation to the understandings of former youth leaders?
3. How can innovative modes of research such as duo-ethnography and data gathering through online social networking sites best be used to generate insights from student activists?
4. How might these understandings, based on the actual experiences of former student leaders in social justice, best inform research, policies, and programming for immigrant and refugee students?

The researcher and research assistant are both educators with experience in coordinating social justice projects, and the research assistant has been enrolled in graduate studies full-time during the project. From the outset, the researcher positioned this and previous studies as a means of community building among social justice advocates. Rather than deny or downplay past experiences in the field, the researcher has successfully benefited from his role as an "insider" to obtain more relevant and sound data, and to disseminate research results more successfully to a wider audience. The insights gained from this research hold promise in informing future planning and policy in social justice education.

The 12 participants for this ongoing research have been gathered using a range of convenience sampling methods (Cresswell, 2007) that drew on the researcher's and research

assistant's extensive network across the prairie region of community activists, social justice educators, youth groups, school personnel, government contacts, and other people involved in this work. The researcher and research assistant used word-of-mouth, telephone, Internet searches, historical document analysis, diversity contest results, social networking web sites, media archives and informal community surveys to identify past social justice projects and their student leaders. During data gathering, the researcher and research assistant arranged and conducted telephone and online interviews a wide range of potential participants for this research. Efforts have been made to sample a diverse mix of past student leaders representing a range of cultural and ethnic demographics and both genders. Each met the criteria of having held leadership roles, taken an active part in planning and implementing social justice activities or projects, and have been involved in the work directly for at least one full year.

All of the appropriate permissions to conduct this research were sought and obtained from all of the necessary sources in accordance with the ethical standards of Metropolis (the funder) and this university's research ethics board. Individuals were interviewed during face-to-face visits will in a number of locations with one or both the researcher and research assistant, following the protocols of duoethnography (Norris, 2008; Norris & Sawyer, 2008). Duoethnography is a dialectic form of inquiry that builds upon and extends narrative and autoethnography genres, and regards all participants as co-researchers. It considers all life histories as a curriculum, and asks participants to examine their understandings through a collaborative process of meaning making. Data were gathered from field notes and transcribed interviews, and both researchers have undertaken initial data coding and analysis. Follow-up communication with selected research participants has been conducted to analyze their experiences and understandings of engaging in social justice education.

Results: Emergent Themes of Collaborative Activism

As this research project is ongoing, so far six individuals have been included, half of the anticipated total of participants in duoethnographic conversations. All have been female, one identified as Indo-Canadian, one as mixed-race Chinese, and four are of European white ancestry. The researcher and research assistant have begun identifying a number of common themes in these accounts, and expect that these thematic threads will continue to expand and develop additional depth and complexity as the study continues. For the purposes of this paper, we have selected three of these overlapping themes as illustrative of the insights and understandings we are developing in collaboration with our participants. They each centre around the notion of the increased forms of awareness that can develop as a result of their engaging in school-based activism as students.

Gaining critical awareness: The participants ranged in age from early twenties to late thirties and all had taken an active role in a social justice project while high school students. Each one talked about their current engagements with social justice issues, and mentioned the lasting impact that their involvement had on their actions and understandings as adults. One of the most apparent and perhaps unsurprising consequences of being exposed to more critical considerations as young people engaged in activism is that these former youth leaders become far more likely to take an active part in related matters as adults. The "groundwork" laid by their work as young adults seems to provide them with a conceptual and ethical foundation that can more readily fuel future activism. One former activist, Ashley[2], explained how she uses this insight in her current work with young people:

> This is something I tell myself when I'm working with youth now: Even if you talk about these issues and you get them engaged but then they stop being engaged, when they become engaged again or when those opportunities come up again, I think it's more likely to stick.

They each talked about seeing a lifelong change in their perspectives on a range of issues. After the interviewer in this instance noted that he had seen a number of former student activists enter particular professions, Linda talked about the changes in her own values and perspectives:

> *Darren*: A lot have and have gone onto some really interesting, other helping professions, or interesting other community engagement like you.
>
> *Linda*: Yeah or it can just be your perspective. My view definitely has changed. I think I've become more open to the possibilities of how things can be different and just the wider range of views. The longer and the more that you've had that range growing up, the more activism you'll do. Some things may not be doable like running for the presidency of the United States, or becoming Premier but they're still doing things day-to-day and they're having this compassion now and standing up to things, and working for a cause where it's appropriate and so I think those things happen because of the values.
>
> *Darren*: I hope so, and the value of building a democracy, too; they're just being more active citizens, they're actually having a voice, trying to change things that they see are wrong.
>
> *Linda*: Yeah, writing their MP or MLA. I continue to do that; every time there's an election, I ask my key questions on the environment and human rights and so forth. I usually will present that to whomever I'm voting for to make sure we're on the same page. So it might be something behind the scenes that people don't ever talk about. So [former activists] are making more informed decisions, more informed decisions about even what they buy and how it impacts them.

This building of a more critical awareness of their own voice and impact in society is part of fostering an engaged notion of their citizenship and participation.

Other former activists echoed the sentiment that their early activism in school organizing had given them a more informed and critical eye on social issues being taken up in later years. Katie recounted her experiences while at university:

> I had already been exposed to things, so now I looked at all this stuff with a critical eye. And often I find myself feeling that I want something more radical, like, "We need to challenge this. Look at all the problems with this"… We were talking about this yesterday. [A friend and I] both have a lot of friends who have done trips to Africa and whatnot. And I think part of it is just that there's a lack of education and awareness about different issues. People come into university and want to do something to help, and they sign up for an agency and don't ask a lot of questions, whereas I was doing background research on questions like: What do countries think of these non-profits that go in and build schools, and what are the politics behind that, and where is the money going?

Their increased sensitivity to underlying issues raises critical questions that allow them to explore the politics and structures that drive popular international development projects. She related this to her own experiences with developing a more sophisticated analysis of social justice issues as a young person:

> Because I had some sort of background and some sort of race, class, or gender analysis that I'd already sort of developed I was able to have more confidence in my abilities to tackle those issues when I became more engaged again. And just because I did have that background it gave me the confidence to be able to debate with [a local politician] and to feel that I can contribute because I do have this critical thinking thing going on that I can utilize. So there are definitely strong links I think.

Likewise, Linda connected her desire as an adult to consider the ethical implications of her development work to her high school experiences, and talked about how it guided her choice of an international agency:

> I have a girl I support in China. I do it through SOS. The only reason I do it through them is they're non-religious, non-partisan, and they don't come in with another values system. But that's something I've always wanted to be involved in. Now for me personally, it took a

while to find something that wasn't religion-based. So once I found SOS Children's Villages, I continued doing that. I always wanted to do that since [my high school activist program]. But I didn't want to do it through religion.

Each former student activist recounted a variety of specific circumstances in which their high school leadership experiences significantly enhanced their critical understandings of social justice activism, and of the underlying issues that guide particular existing programs.

Exposing white privilege: The former activists with whom we collaborated all talked about their past learnings around race and racism, as these were the primary focuses of the school projects and programs in which they gained experiences as youths. Some poignant insights on whiteness came from the two participants who were not white. They recounted their own growing critical analysis of how whiteness and race are lived and experienced in western Canada. Seema is of an Indo-Canadian background, and has lived her life with many experiences of white people asking where she is "really" from:

Seema: People say, "Where are you from?" I'm Canadian, and if I say, "I'm Canadian," nobody listens. They're like, "Really?!"

Darren: They're like, "Come on, you know what I meant by that. Don't play this game with me; don't make me be polite."

Seema: Haha [laughing]. Yeah.

Chantal has a white father and a Chinese mother, and talked about living with what she called her "racial ambiguity." She described her mother as "detached" from her Chinese culture, in that she and her siblings "never got to go to Chinese school and connect with another cultural group. We were still outside of the mainstream of white people." Chantal even recalled being told, "You're the first coloured person I've ever met," and responding, "Please don't call me coloured." She mentioned living somewhere *between* clearly defined cultural and racialized identities:

> There was a sense of not knowing what it's like to be full-blown of an ethnic and cultural community that's outside of the mainstream white European Canadian born, but I know that it's odd to be a part of a group where you can't really connect with anyone beyond your siblings and cousins, right? But I don't talk about those things with my twelve-year-old cousins, and my parents don't really understand either because my dad is white. So he doesn't really – like he kind of knows, because he's had to deal with the crap of marrying a Chinese woman – but he doesn't really know. And my mom doesn't know either because she is always marked as different, always, all the time, whereas the ambiguity of race for me has been weird.

She recounted being in an anti-racism project with "mostly white kids from privileged backgrounds" and having to help educate them as well. As someone who has always been considered "non-white," she recounted her own experiences with racism after the events of 9/11:

> I remember right after 9/11 I got quite a few comments on the street because [white people] saw someone who wasn't quite white and they were like, "You could be a Muslim and I don't like it! So I'm gonna freak out!"

In her descriptions of the overt racism she has experienced as a "mixed-race" Canadian, Chantal addressed the particular virulence of racism against First Nations people:

> My sisters are ten years younger than I am, so they're quite little, and when I was 15 or 16 and they were 5 or 6 we would go out and people would sometimes freak out and start thinking they were my kids and I was a "drunk Indian." They would kind of see what they wanted to see. I think they had resentment towards aboriginal people. They see a girl who looks like she might have been really young when she had kids, and who has vaguely Eurasian/aboriginal traits, and they would just assign that meaning. So I think it's interesting to be able to infiltrate, if you will, white people.

Her experiences with youth activism gave her an opportunity to work against racism, but she recalled how her theoretical analysis would come later during her university studies:

> We weren't experts. Well I don't know if anyone really is an expert on this sort of thing. There's so much to know, but as sixteen-year-olds in high school, in a group of predominantly white kids, trying to do this antiracism work and not having a very solid theoretical background, it was more just like "This is awful. We need to do something," versus "This is awful because Critical Race Theory says it's awful."

For both of these former activists, their evolving understanding of race and racism, and the nuanced ways that whiteness played out in their own lives were inevitably enabled by their ability to work through some of these issues through collective activism toward challenging racism and other oppression.

Personal transformation: These former youth activists all talked about their past experiences with collaborative social justice projects as having played a role in transforming their sense of self, and shaping the adult persons they have become. Chantal recounted the significant shift in perspective that came about when she learned more deeply about various forms of oppression:

> As soon as you start thinking about how crappy racism is, or how awful homophobia is, it's kind of hard not to realize they affect you. It's hard to not become involved with that, or to be okay with going back to those friends who are like, "Well, gay people are gross anyway," or "You're the first coloured person I've met," or any of those stupid comments. It's hard to go back to that. Even if you don't want to do anything about it, I think it's hard to be around that once you realize how awful those things are.

For Chantal it was impossible to return to an ignorant or apathetic state once she began analyzing oppression, and it reinforced how important having a vehicle to channel this new awareness. She also talked about the relatively simplistic and idealistic notion that she had toward injustice, saying

"it doesn't seem so simple to me any more, but at the time I think that sense of simplicity was really important to keep us going."

One student described her own transformations that began with youthful anger that fuelled her and her friends' activism as high school students:

> *Katie*: I find myself just learning to challenge things in a less angry way, too, but I think that was a good phase to go through in high school.
>
> *Darren*: Kind of angry at the establishment?
>
> *Katie*: Yeah, like angry and angst-y and I am happy that lots of kids can benefit from going through that. I think that I've come to my own way now of learning how to approach things so people on the other side don't feel so antagonized. So I make it seem more feasible. I swing them around so they end up doing it my way in the end. I don't hold that kind of anger, I guess, that I did, but I think that's another thing that teenagers feel: anger towards the world. So [activism] is a good way to direct that.

She expressed that providing a healthy outlet for youthful anger about injustices can be of tremendous benefit to young people, and how her current tactics have grown from this early approach.

Linda, a former activist who is now a social worker, highlighted how her high school experiences helped her make specific personal transformations that encouraged her to continue with her social justice work:

> I think [youth activism] is a big confidence-building experience. You're getting more involved, you're affecting change, and you get to be a product of the effort. I think that was just a part of making people globally aware and locally active. And I became social. You know part of the whole mandate in [social work] is to be socially active and to address social injustices, so I definitely think that was part of it. I've always been interested in articles that were written up about [our activist group]. In the Canadian Social Work Journal

> I wrote up an article a few years ago. I kept things like that. So I definitely think I've had a part of that trajectory to continue social action, and it stimulated me to be involved in several causes.

She saw the lessons and successes that she experienced as a young person as pivotal to help shape and transform the adult she has become. Chantal also recounted that, "just because these kids were engaged with the antiracism thing, I think there was still… the primary focus was on learning for us." For Ashley, the student-driven nature of her youth activist project was the key to how much she learned about the issues:

> [The teacher] was the resource and when people had ideas he would support them but he definitely wasn't telling us what to do, which I think is cool. It definitely wasn't as efficient, but in the long run it is, because being able to pursue our own ideas and to work through the problems and trying to see it come into fruition, that is more efficient in the long run, because you're learning way more.

Chloe, a relatively recent high school graduate in her early twenties, recounted how her experiences with organizing an ambitious school-wide social justice event helped to fuel her enthusiasm for future activism. She explained that, "if you are involved, if you are doing what you love to do, you feel better and you are more motivated to do something else." Her activism in high school led her to increased involvement in the community, and at the university from which she had recently taken a break, around social justice issues. Chloe explained: "So now that I'm more involved, I'm more motivated to go back to school. I find it's really motivating when you see something you started [continuing] even if you thought it was something small." For her, it was seeing the impact of her social justice organizing in the community that encouraged future activism.

Linda also talked about the transformative potential of young people finding a like-minded group with which they can feel a sense of belonging and connection. She suggested that, "I think that's where [our activist program] really becomes a force of good in a way – not to be airy fairy –

but kids need a place to belong." She explained how it can counteract the racist messages they might be hearing from friends and family, and can offer ethical guidance and a collective voice toward social justice:

> If someone comes along and says you know the reason why you're not getting a girlfriend or your dad can't get a job is because of the immigrants… it's a pretty tangible group to be pulled into. So you have things like Aryan Nations and other hatred groups; they have their own bands, they have their own recruitment, they're doing all of this stuff. So kids need to identify somewhere. So it's [either] gangs like the Aryan Guard, or it's [an antiracist program], it's a sports team. So is [their finding a place to belong] good or is it bad?

For Linda, undertaking activism with young people was all about providing opportunities for those pivotal transformative personal experiences, and "it is about being informed and not missing opportunities to have a teachable moment with somebody… It's a compassionate, non-violent way you can sometimes change people's perspectives because you've been exposed to an alternative viewpoint."

The participants all talked about some tangible skills they had developed as activists, and how their involvement as teenagers led them to take part in socially responsible engagement as young adults. As an example, Katie described her choice to continue her community work in university:

> Activism is foreign to [my parents]; they don't understand it. So when I did volunteering for fundraising for the sexual assault centre on campus and I can remember when I first told them, my Mom was like, "You're not doing that; that's a bad thing to do"… It ended up being a really big turning point for my university career and that period of my life; it was huge, positively. I learned so much in my first year of that.

Linda recounted how her involvement in a youth activism project motivated her choice, as a high school student, to share her views in the large community forum of a local daily newspaper. Over 15

years ago, she was tackling the contentious issue of the discrimination faced by gay and lesbian students in a small prairie city:

> The things I've been involved in – things I did individually like writing a letter to the editor – came out of [youth activism], because I felt confident doing that in a small town, which isn't really the most comfortable thing. I did have somebody phone me. He was a friend of a friend's mom; I don't know how he got my number. But he called me up crying, saying that [my letter] was really important for her.

Indeed, for each of the participants in this study so far, there were innumerable teachable and pivotal moments in their own experiences with being youth activists that led them to their own personal transformations. Some of these experiences would lead them to more complex understandings of race and racism, some to a lifelong commitment to social justice, some to using their anger and other emotions to fuel their evolving activism, and many to find additional productive ways to establish a sense of belonging with, and responsibility for, others.

Discussion and Implications:

These emerging results may offer some crucial insights for understanding how actual student leaders have experienced social justice education and activism, including the influence these experiences have had on their current civic engagement, building a grounded understanding that will guide further social justice work in policy making, educational theory, research and curriculum development. These students spoke eloquently about the role that engaging in social justice activism in schools has played in their evolving sense of social justice, and in their continued involvement in related issues through their schooling, and in their communities. Key insights emerged regarding their lived experiences and analyses of racism and white privilege, and of their own efforts with undertaking and sustaining social action.

Research participants recounted how their own values and understandings of social justice issues were enhanced and shaped by their experiences as young people, and how these evolved as

they became adults who continued their community engagement. Issues such as engaged citizenship, finding a public voice, and the fostering of values and critical understandings of complex issues emerged in the conversations. These former activists recounted how their awareness of the impact of their activism, and the student-led nature of the projects fostered important opportunity for learning and personal transformation. Their early leadership involvement in successful projects as young people also allowed them to consider and question underlying assumptions about other agencies and projects.

The emerging findings from this research can inform researchers, policymakers, and practitioners across several levels. The project has fostered the productive interaction of individuals and agencies from a number of regions, including expert scholars, a graduate student research assistant, and former student diversity activists. This study has the unique attribute of using an innovative research methodology that is currently undergoing much study in a range of disciplines, and has the potential to influence the direction of future research. The researcher hopes the project may contribute significantly to policy development related to countering discrimination and fostering collaborative antiracism projects. Of particular benefit to educational policymakers will be a better understanding of the complex nature of how students already play a role in forming and sustaining coalitions, through a more fully developed analysis of the experiences of actual activists who have gained their experience through leadership in projects in school settings.

Conclusion

The researcher expects to collaborate and expand the current research with studies of social justice efforts in schools across Canada, thereby having a significant potential to inform public policy on diversity issues on a national level. The researcher looks forward to sharing further results at relevant local and international bodies with an interest in public, government, and educational policies. Previous studies have focused mainly on the needs of immigrant students; this project is generating new knowledge about how former student activists understand their

important leadership role in social justice initiatives in schools. Their insights into student engagement and best practices in enhancing civic engagement of young people can provide valuable findings for practitioners wishing to shape effective social justice strategies and initiatives, and to encourage young people's role as agents working toward social justice in schools and communities.

Notes:

1. This research was supported by the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council* through a research grant from the *Prairie Metropolis Centre*. This paper is based on material presented at Congress 2010 at the *Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education*, Concordia University, Montréal, Québec, 2 June 2010.

2. The names of the student activists are pseudonyms.

References

Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission. (2000, May). *Tools for transformation: Human rights education and diversity initiatives in Alberta.* Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Government of Alberta.

Bibby, R. W. (2001). *Canada's teens: Today, yesterday, and tomorrow.* Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Stoddart.

Corson, D. (2000). A pan-Canadian research program for more inclusive schools in Canada: The diversity and equity research background. In Y. Lenoir, W. Hunter, D. Hodgkinson, P. de Broucker, & A. Dolbec (Eds.), *A pan-Canadian education research agenda* (pp. 167-191). Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Society for Studies in Education.

Creese, G., & Kambere, E. N. (2003). What colour is your English? *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, 40,* 565-573.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dei, G. S., & Calliste, A. (Eds.). (2000). *Power, knowledge and anti-racism education: A critical reader.* Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Fernwood.

Ghosh, R., & Abdi, A. A. (2004). *Education and the politics of difference: Canadian perspectives.* Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Giroux, H. A. (2003). *The abandoned generation: Democracy beyond the culture of fear.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Gorski, P. C. (2005). *Multicultural education and the Internet: Intersections and integrations* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Griffith, B., & Labercane, G. (1995). High school students' attitudes towards racism in Canada: A report on a 1993 cross-cultural study. In K. A. McLeod (Ed.), *Multicultural education: The*

state of the art, Report #2 (pp. 144-151). Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada: Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers.

Hall, S. (1992). New ethnicities. In J. Donald & A. Rattansi (Eds.), *"Race," culture, and difference* (pp. 252-259). London, UK: Sage.

Li, P. (2003). Deconstructing Canada's discourse of immigrant integration. *Journal of International Migration and Integration, 4*, 315-333.

Lund, D. E. (2003). Building capacity among school diversity activists: Developing an antiracism toolkit. *International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities and Nations, 3,* 475-480.

Lund, D. E. (2006). Rocking the racism boat: School-based activists speak out on denial and avoidance. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 9*(2), 203-221.

Lund, D. E. (2008, April). *Examining benefits and challenges of social justice research projects with youth*. Workshop organizer and presenter at the "10th Annual National Metropolis Conference," Halifax, NS.

Lund, D. E., & Evans, R. E. (2006). Opening a can of worms: A duo-ethnographic dialogue on gender, orientation and activism. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education, 10*(2), 55-67.

Lund, D. E., & Nabavi, M. (2008). A duo-ethnographic conversation on social justice activism: Exploring issues of identity, racism, and activism with young people. *Multicultural Education*, *15*(4), 27-32.

Lund, D. E., & Nabavi, M. (2006, January). *Social justice projects in Canadian prairie schools: Teachers and students challenging racism.* Paper presented at the Fourth International Conference on Education, Honolulu, HI.

McCarthy, C., & Dimitriadis, G. (2005). Governmentality and the sociology of education: Media, educational policy, and the politics of resentment. In C. McCarthy, W. Crichlow, G.

Dimitriadis, & N. Dolby (Eds.), *Race, identity, and representation in education* (2nd ed., pp. 321-335). New York: Routledge.

Nieto, S., & Bode, P. (2008). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (5th ed.). New York: Allyn & Bacon.

Norris, J. (2008). Duoethnography. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 233-236). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Norris, J., & Sawyer, J. (2008, April). *An articulation of the emergent tenets of a dialogic and pedagogic curriculum research methodology.* Paper presented at the 89th Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association, New York.

Pruegger, V., & Kiely, J. (2002). *Perception of racism and hate activities among youth in Calgary: Effects on the lived experience.* Calgary, Alberta, Canada: Community Strategies.

Sleeter, C. E., & Bernal, D. D. (2004). Critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and antiracist education: Implications for multicultural education. In J. A. Banks & C. A. McGee Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (2nd ed., pp. 240-258). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Solomon, R. P., & Levine-Rasky, C. (2003). *Teaching for equity and diversity: Research to practice.* Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Statistics Canada. (2002). *Ethnic diversity survey*. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Government of Canada. Retrieved April 6, 2010, from http://www.statcan.ca/english/sdds/4508.htm

Statistics Canada. (2006). *Census trends*. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Government of Canada. Retrieved April 6, 2010, from http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/trends/Table_1.cfm?T=PR&PRCODE=01&GEOCODE=01&GEOLVL=PR

Veinotte, C. (2008, April). *Social justice education in public and charter schools*. Paper presented at the "10th Annual National Metropolis Conference," Halifax, NS.

Weis, L., & Fine, M. (2004). *Working method: Research and social justice*. New York: Routledge.

Yon, D. A. (2000). *Elusive culture: Schooling, race and identity in global times.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.