Citizenship Under Construction:
Student ideologies and social studies education

by

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Abstract

Social studies education has always had an emphasis on citizenship, a role that grows increasingly important as our society falls under the hegemonic control of neoliberal ideology. As elite interests become embedded and misrepresented in the collective consciousness as collective interests, it becomes imperative to explore the nature of ideological development. Accountability schemes that employ standards-based reforms and high-stakes testing further entrench hegemonic social control by narrowing the curriculum, discouraging critical thinking, and eroding teachers’ autonomy. These effects are of particular concern to social studies educators.

This study employed purposive sampling to identify students who were opinionated and well-versed in political and social issues. Students were interviewed from two Alberta high schools to examine their personal ideologies, their construction of a sense of democratic citizenship, and the influences that contributed to these ideological beliefs. Special attention was paid to the role of social studies curriculum and pedagogy in fostering democratic ideals.

The students identified parents and school, particularly social studies, as the greatest influences on their values and opinions. They showed collectivist tendencies and placed great value on equality, but they also showed evidence of having internalized the capitalist and individualistic rhetoric of neoliberalism. These students conceived of democracy in narrow terms and identified with passive modes of citizenship and political participation. These findings also point to the hegemonic effects of neoliberal ideology.

However, the contradictions and timidity of many students’ opinions indicate that their ideologies remain very much under construction. We can begin the work of creating a more democratic and equitable society by teaching social studies in ways that foster the development of critically minded, active citizens who recognize the need for social transformation.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. ii  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................. iii  
List of Figures ................................................................................................................ iv  
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... v  
Dedication ......................................................................................................................... vi  

**Chapter One: Introduction** .......................................................................................... 1  
  Ideology Defined ............................................................................................................ 1  
  Neoliberalism: Ideology at Play .................................................................................... 4  
  Standards-Based Reform and Assessment: Agents of Hegemony ............................... 6  
  Research Rationale and Purpose ................................................................................. 9  
  Research Questions ..................................................................................................... 10  

**Chapter Two: Literature Review** ............................................................................... 12  
  Introduction ................................................................................................................ 12  
  Schools, Curriculum and Ideology: Not-So-Strange Bedfellows ................................. 13  
  Social Studies: Last Gasp or Last Hope? .................................................................... 21  
  Citizenship and Democracy: Pulled Up by the Grassroots? ....................................... 31  
  Accountability: The Neoliberal Answer to Education ............................................... 42  
  Hegemony: The Neoliberal Endgame ........................................................................ 54  
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 64  

**Chapter Three: Methodology** .................................................................................. 67  
  Epistemological and Theoretical Perspective ............................................................ 67  
  Research Site .............................................................................................................. 68  
  Data Collection: Sampling ......................................................................................... 72  
  Data Collection: Interviews ....................................................................................... 73  
  Data Analysis ............................................................................................................ 77  
  Limitations ............................................................................................................... 78  

**Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis** ..................................................................... 80  
  Introduction ................................................................................................................ 80  
  What They Believe: Political Ideologies ................................................................. 82  
  What They Believe: Conceptions of Democratic Citizenship ................................. 91  
  Why They Believe It: Personal Ideological Influences .......................................... 104  
  Why They *Really* Believe It: Unacknowledged Ideological Influences .................. 111  
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................. 120  

**Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications** ......................................................... 122  
  Implications for Democratic Citizenship ................................................................. 123  
  Implications for Schools and Social Studies .......................................................... 127  
  Future Research ...................................................................................................... 133  
  Citizenship Under Construction .............................................................................. 135  

References .................................................................................................................... 139  
Appendix ....................................................................................................................... 150
List of Figures

Figure 1: Summary of Findings ...................................................................................... 121
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To my students,
for teaching me that teachers make a difference
Chapter One: Introduction

Ideology Defined

Our world is an ideological one. Partisan rhetoric and brinksmanship have come to replace reasoned debate and rational dialogue as the modus operandi for government in both Canada and the United States. The controversy over how best to deal with record deficits amid the lingering global recession has similarly been plagued by the invective (and wholly misplaced) usage of the term “socialism.” Pundits are quick to label each other as “ideologues,” as if this somehow absolves them of clinging steadfastly to their own ideals with nary a consideration of compromise and cooperation. In this light, ideology might very well be construed as the enemy of democracy, yet it is inescapable. However, when we move past the headlines and the blogs, and forget about the talking heads with the red ties and those who prefer a shade of blue, we can come to a more constructive understanding of just what ideology is.

Ideology is not in and of itself a bad thing. In fact, our world has benefited tremendously from the contributions of numerous ideologies. To name but two examples, were it not for Marxism we would lack an understanding of social class and were it not for the traditional values of liberalism we might lack the most basic of human rights. Much of its usage today though, especially in political contexts, is in a pejorative sense. This is a tremendous misconception, as much like the values espoused within various ideologies; the term itself is highly contested.

Let us turn then to the question of what exactly we mean when we employ the term ideology. For the purposes of this study it is necessary to construct at least a rudimentary theory of ideology to facilitate its consistent usage; this despite the fact that
there are in reality many different theories of ideology to draw upon (Geuss, 1981).

Apple (2004) sheds light on the dilemma:

What ideology means is problematic usually. Most people seem to agree that one can talk about ideology as referring to some sort of “system” of ideas, beliefs, fundamental commitments, or values about social reality, but here the agreement ends. The interpretations differ according to both the scope or range of the phenomena which are presumably ideological and the function—what ideologies actually do for the people who “have” them. (p. 18, emphasis in original)

As Eagleton (1991) is quick to point out, “Nobody has yet to come up with a single adequate definition of ideology” (p. 1), but what does exist are a number of different conceptions of ideology that are adequate within their specific context. For example, Ross (2000) defines ideology as “the frame in which people fit their understanding of how the world works” (p. 50). While such a definition may not solely facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the relative positions of the New Democrats, Liberals, and Conservatives in contemporary Canadian politics, it is quite useful in a discussion of how social studies instructional methods foster certain conceptions of citizenship over others. By considering Geuss’ (1981) three categorizations of the term within the frame provided by Apple’s remarks above, a definition of ideology appropriate for the purposes of this study can be constructed.

Geuss (1981) distinguishes between three definitions of ideology; the descriptive, the pejorative, and the positive. Ideology can be used in a purely descriptive sense to refer to divisions between groups of people based on any number of criteria including their beliefs, values, desires, rituals, and any of the other aspects of what we would
normally call culture. Geuss (1981) emphasizes that “this sense of ‘ideology’ is non-evaluative and ‘non-judgmental’ – one isn’t praising or blaming a group by asserting that its members ‘have an ideology’ in this sense” (p. 5). Referring back to Apple (2004) then, the scope of this definition would seem to include all aspects of social and cultural life while the function of this definition is to differentiate between groups of people.

In the pejorative sense of the word, ideology refers similarly to a set of values or beliefs, but in this case they are to be viewed negatively. This view may be equated with notions of “false consciousness” and “delusion,” and thus ideology is used in a critical rather than descriptive manner (Geuss, 1981, p. 12). The scope of this definition is similarly broad as in the descriptive sense; however the function of this definition is to facilitate reproach. As mentioned prior, this would seem to be the way ideology is most commonly employed by the mainstream media and contemporary political contexts.

Finally, the positive sense of the term involves using ideology to describe the construction or creation of a set of beliefs and attitudes that is meant to bring people together and meet their needs and wants (Geuss, 1981). For example, Lenin and Castro invoked socialist ideology for the presumed betterment of the working class (Eagleton, 1991, p. 44). Here the scope of this definition would be limited to those ideas which hold some degree of desirability and mass appeal, while the function would be to unite and empower the group.

This study is intended to be exploratory in nature, investigating the political beliefs and ideas of students and the relationship between their construction and the delivering of social studies curriculum and instruction. While the individual values held by students may certainly prove to be of great interest, it is not the place of this study to
judge them by any sort of criteria (moral, political or otherwise). For this reason, both the pejorative and positive senses of the term are ill-fitted to the purpose of the study.

Ideology is meant to be used in this study as a morally neutral and descriptive term. The scope will be limited to political values, beliefs, and ideas with a particular emphasis on conceptions of democratic citizenship and political participation. The function is similar to that described in Geuss’ (1981) first sense of the term, though the intention will be to distinguish between individuals rather than groups, or conversely to describe the homogeneity of the participants. Eagleton (1991) offers six definitions of ideology with the broadest referring to “the general material process of production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life” (p. 28). By combining this definition with that of Ross (2000), and keeping in mind Apple’s (2004) emphasis on scope and function, “ideology” is used in this study to refer to the ideas, beliefs, and values that underlie an individual’s understanding of the world around them. Having established what ideology will mean within the parameters of this study, it is now pertinent to consider in more detail the aforementioned ideological world we inhabit.

**Neoliberalism: Ideology at Play**

Contemporary political discourse is laden with –ism’s. Terrorism, patriotism, fundamentalism; none of these terms is a stranger to the lips of our elected representatives or the reader of a major daily newspaper. Much of the backlash against President Obama’s attempts at healthcare reform can be explained by referencing the basic principles of conservatism, while attempts at cooperation between Canada’s political parties are handcuffed by the continual tarring of the New Democratic Party as
socialists. Despite the fact that ideology may not always be specifically referenced by
name in these contexts (Orlowski, 2008a, p. 30), it is nonetheless very much at play.

Dating back to the French and American revolutions, ideologies of conservatism,
liberalism, socialism, and nationalism have largely dominated and defined the political
world; but as postmodernist perspectives gain prominence these ideologies are
increasingly challenged and problematized (Schwarzmantel, 1998). In fact, the dominant
political economic paradigm (especially in Canada and the U.S.) is one of neoliberalism
(Chomsky, 1999; Hursh, 2008; Mathison & Ross, 2008; Ross & Gibson, 2007). Key
tenets of neoliberalism include the primacy of the free market, government deregulation,
and generally speaking, those policies that serve the interests of large corporations and
the upper class (Mathison & Ross, 2008). The prominence of this ideology extends across
party lines, and when combined with the shift of mainstream media to the right
(Orlowski, 2008b) has come to function as a hegemonic discourse in contemporary
society.

The Gramscian notion of hegemony “refers to the ideal representation of the
interests of privileged groups as universal interests, which are then accepted by the
masses as the natural economic, political, and social order” (Orlowski, 2009a, p. 55).
While hegemonic institutions are often, and justly, equated with social control, it is
essential to note that hegemony functions as a two-way street of sorts. In order for
hegemony to be achieved, there must be more than a simple authoritarian dictate. Those
on the receiving end must not only obey and “buy-in” to the message of the dominant
class, but internalize and accept the message as well. As Chomsky (2003) argues, the
Corporate mass media plays a fundamental role in this process by promoting discourses
that create submissive and passive individuals who pose no threat to the dominant social order. Orlowski (2009a) continues that “this conception of hegemony explains how social hierarchies and order are maintained within capitalist societies. Force is not required to maintain these hierarchies if the public willingly gives its consent to accept it” (p. 55).

Not only does the public accept this structuring of society, but it becomes regarded as a matter of common sense (Apple, 2004; Aronowitz, 2002). Orlowski (2007) explains that “many people consider conservative values and beliefs as common sense precisely because they figure so prominently in the discourses that mainstream media use” (p. 40). It is not surprising then, that ideology would be scarcely mentioned by name in the mainstream media, since it would be deleterious to draw attention to their own hegemonic agenda of promoting neoliberal values that best serve their corporate interests. Despite these attempts to present and recontextualize the ideals of neoliberalism as “just the way things are,” it is nothing more than a pervasive and hegemonic ideology being put into practice.

**Standards-Based Reform and Assessment: Agents of Hegemony**

The hegemonic agenda of neoliberalism is not only promoted and manifested in the corporate media, but in another prime site of cultural transmission as well, the public education system. It bears mention that “education, in Gramsci’s conception, amounts to nothing less than the fundamental operations of hegemony” (Borg, Buttigieg & Mayo, 2002, p. 8). While the traditional practice of many teachers has been to strive for neutrality in their curriculum and instruction (especially in social studies) the fact remains that teaching is never neutral, it is always a political act (Apple, 2004; Ross, 2000; Stanley, 2005). Teachers are increasingly bound to the standards contained in
government-issued official curricular documents and despite the fact that teachers often have a hand in developing government curriculum, “even well-intentioned curriculum developers may be influenced by the dominant values of capitalist society” (Orlowski, 2008a, p. 34). Furthermore, when teachers try to surround themselves with an aura of “neutrality,” taking care to devote equal emphasis and merit to opposing political viewpoints while serving as a passive conduit for the curriculum they promote the status quo by default (Ross, 2000).

Setting aside curricular content itself, the more dramatic influence of neoliberal ideology on education is seen through the discourse of accountability that has come to dominate public education in Canada and especially the United States. These accountability initiatives often take the shape of standards-based educational reforms with a heavy reliance on the use of high-stakes tests. In the American context, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has made it a matter of law that standards, accountability, and school funding are all linked (Mathison & Ross, 2008). There is no equivalent legislation in Canada as education is a matter of provincial jurisdiction, but while lacking some of the punitive sanctions of NCLB, every province and territory still employs some form of large-scale mandated testing program (Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007, p. 31).

The rationale behind standards-based reform assumes that educational goals and outcomes should be externally formulated by bureaucratic elites, transmitted through curricular content standards and enforced through an accountability system of high-stakes testing (Mathison & Ross, 2008; Mathison, Ross & Vinson, 2006). Given these practices, it is presumed that instruction, learning, and the overall efficiency of the system will
improve. This logic has been embraced by individuals and groups from across the
political spectrum (Mathison, Ross & Vinson, 2006). Vinson and Ross (2001) explain
how the accountability discourse is situated within the values of neoliberalism:

Though dominant and indicative of a powerfully elitist consensus, the recent
move toward [standards based educational reform] – particularly within social
education – must and can only be understood contextually and against certain
overlapping and contiguous sociocultural, economic, and political currents,
including … the advent of state-sponsored global-corporate capitalism. (p. 55)

The nature of these top-down reforms is also such that their language and philosophy
quickly becomes institutionalized, thus limiting the potential for dissent and resistance
among teachers and other stakeholders (McNeil, 2000). In this way, standards based
reform directly contributes to the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony.

While high-stakes tests are used as a tool to ensure accountability they represent
much more than a means to an end. The tests themselves have countless negative impacts
including: unnecessary student anxiety (Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007; Landry, 2006);
narrowing of the curriculum (Au, 2009; McNeil, 2000; Vinson & Ross, 2001); and a loss
of teacher autonomy and professionalism (Au, 2009; Cuban, 2008; McNeil, 2000;
Mathison & Freeman, 2008; Mathison, Ross & Vinson, 2006). Testing is no longer a
simple measurement of student achievement, it has become a key (or sometimes the sole)
factor in decisions of teacher pay and retention, district-level priorities, and school
closures. Far from existing merely as a top-down bureaucratic movement, the testing
trend has become the testing culture, an ingrained understanding of “the way things are,”
to the extent that “realtors provide copies of school report cards to potential clients to sell them a home in a district with high test outcomes” (Landry, 2006, p. 31).

**Research Rationale and Purpose**

We need to gain a better understanding of the impact school has on students and what the final “product” of thirteen years of schooling looks like in terms of students’ ideologies. While it may seem as if we have a wealth of data on students given the preceding discussion of the prevalence of high-stakes testing, the fact is that these tests tell us very little of value about the experiences of students. A multiple-choice score of 49 out of 50 on a government-sanctioned test may tell us that the student has done a very good job of memorizing the content of the curriculum (or is very lucky) but it does not speak to whether this student has gained an appreciation for democratic citizenship and is ready to assume its rights and responsibilities. It also tells us nothing about how these students are beginning to form their own personal political beliefs and opinions. Much like ideology, citizenship is a highly contested and debated term, with many competing conceptions of what it means to be a citizen in a modern democracy (Evans, 2004; Ross, 2000; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

The construction of student ideologies and its relationship to democratic education and citizenship is of tremendous relevance and importance given declining levels of political participation, especially among young people (Howard, 2003; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006b; Orlowski, 2008b). With the looming spectre of neoliberal hegemony it is imperative that students understand the world they live in, their role in it, and how they might either hinder or further the cause of democracy through their actions and decisions. Kahne and Sporte (2008) note that “what happens in
classrooms can have a significant impact on students’ commitments to civic participation” (p. 754). While this is not to deny that events later in life as adults surely impact our political beliefs and values, it would seem that the stage of late adolescence – as secondary schooling nears its conclusion – is a pertinent time to investigate the formation of individual ideologies.

Haste and Torney-Purta (1992) state that an “individual’s process of actively making sense of the social world occurs within a context and set of social constructions of that world” (p. 1). Given that schools in general and social studies in particular are a primary site for students to begin making sense of their world, and given the above discussion of the educational and political contexts within which this “sense-making” takes place, the question is how exactly does this all play out?

The aim of this study is not to seek comprehensive answers, but to attempt to gain insight into this process and arrive at an understanding of how student experiences of schooling impact their political ideologies. Such an understanding will inform the ongoing debates around democratic citizenship and social studies education in general.

**Research Questions**

Generally speaking, the impact of school experiences on the development of teenagers into adults is huge. More specifically, there is little doubt that social studies classrooms, with their emphasis on civic education, are a primary site of socialization into the rites of democratic citizenship. An investigation that attempts to delve into these processes is necessarily confronted by the enormity of the topic. Giroux (2002) frames this task within Gramscian terms:
According to Gramsci, any pedagogical practice has to be examined and implemented within a broader understanding of what the purpose of schooling might become and how such a view of political education articulates a wider democratic project. Schools in this instance, are seen as central and formative sites for the production of political identities, the struggle over culture, and for educating organic intellectuals. (p. 51)

Rather than attempting to provide a broad survey of all that is at work in the interaction of social studies education and political ideology, this research is attempting to describe and analyze one piece of the puzzle, so to speak. Specifically, this research casts its investigative and exploratory glance directly on the students themselves and their unique (or perhaps highly typical) experiences within social studies classrooms. The following questions will guide the research:

- How do students describe and conceptualize their political ideologies? What is their understanding of “democratic citizenship”? What relationship exists between the two understandings?

- In what ways do student experiences in social studies classrooms influence their formation of personal political ideologies and their understanding of contemporary political realities? What other experiences influence students’ political thinking and which influences (school or otherwise) are most prominent?
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The body of literature with potential relevance to this study is, like the topic itself, vast to say the least. In addition to the obvious literature on social studies and civic education, the following list of research areas could also have bearing on the present study: ideology as a philosophic/discursive concept; political ideology in theory and practice; curriculum studies; education as a site of socialization; theories of political development and socialization; theories of citizenship and democratic participation; cultural reproduction and transmission theory; hegemony and political control; educational accountability, standards-based reform, and high-stakes testing. Luckily for this researcher, these topics need not be considered in isolation due to the significant overlap between topics. Furthermore, there are sources that deal with several of these topics simultaneously and effectively (Apple, 2004; Mathison & Ross, 2008; McNeil, 1986, 2000; Ross, 2006b). Given this context, the following literature review is presented with no illusion of being authoritative or exhaustive.

Only literature judged to possess a high measure of salience to the study is considered in depth in the subsequent review. This survey can be thought of as an hourglass, beginning broadly, narrowing, and then culminating with a return to a wider scope. This organizational strategy allows for a detailed review of literature that is often rife with nuanced understandings while never losing sight of the larger sociocultural and political contexts within which these concepts must be understood.

First, research and theory that deals with schools and the public education system in general (as opposed to subject or discipline specific educational research) is
considered. Based on the nature of this study, the literature is steeped in theories of curriculum construction and enactment, as well as the expression of both latent and overt ideologies in educational contexts. Next, the focus narrows to consider the literature dealing with social studies education specifically. Again, consideration is given to the formal curriculum as represented in textbooks and government-sanctioned curricular documents, as well as the enacted curriculum as represented by day-to-day interactions in actual school settings.

A further narrowing of the critical lens leads to the topic of citizenship and democracy within social studies education. Competing definitions of citizenship are considered as well as the debates over how best to teach for democracy, social justice, and active political participation. These goals (as well as other social studies outcomes) have their basis in the promotion of critical thinking, an aspiration that is often denied or hindered through the implementation of standards-based educational reforms and the use of high-stakes tests. Literature exploring the effects of these and other aspects of accountability schemes is the fourth topic considered. Finally, we return to a broad perspective that situates accountability discourses within the larger context of neoliberalism’s hegemonic functions and the erosion of both the public sector and democracy itself.

**Schools, Curriculum and Ideology: Not-So-Strange Bedfellows**

Since the early twentieth century, a vast amount of literature has been produced about the school curriculum; however no single definition of what constitutes “curriculum” has achieved consensus. This presents an investigation into the nature of the social studies curriculum with two problems, namely, “what exactly is ‘curriculum’? And
secondly, what is ‘social studies’?” (Ross, 2000b, p. 1). Given that social studies as a discipline and a school subject will be dealt with in greater detail in the subsequent section, we might substitute in place of the second question the broader problems of “what do our schools actually do? What (and whose) purposes do they serve?” While we might be inclined to provide the familiar easy answers – the stuff of textbook glossaries and syllabus preambles – a more critical investigation into the nature of curriculum and schooling in general is demanded by the fact that our common sense tendency is otherwise. To fail to do so is to acquiesce to the hegemonic forces in society that govern so much of our “common sense.”

Giroux (2002) provides a frame of reference for this discussion by asserting that “public education has become one of the most contested public spheres in political life at the turn of the century. More than any other institution, public schools serve as a dangerous reminder of both the promise and shortcomings of the social, political, and economic forces that shape society” (p. 44). This statement describes the identity crisis that public schools have been caught up in. On the one hand, schools have long had the responsibility of educating children and facilitating learning in and of itself, as a means to personal and societal betterment through intellectual development. On the other hand, schools are pressured by governments, business, and various other interests to “prepare” students for adult life. In this conception, education’s function is less about learning for learning’s sake, and more about learning “what you need to know” in order to be a productive adult citizen. In trying to deal with both goals simultaneously, the school becomes the site of an intrinsic dilemma, according to McNeil (1986) who states “our public schools have evolved historically as organizations serving two potentially
conflicting purposes: to educate citizens and to process them into roles for economic production” (p. 3). The design of public education is such that it is in a state of perpetual conflict with itself, as the first goal is open-ended and unpredictable, while the second is stratified and regimented. As McKernan (2008) notes, “a curriculum, to be truly educational, will lead the student to unanticipated, rather than predicted, outcomes” (p. 1).

In advocating for a curriculum that deemphasizes the role of standardized objectives, McKernan (2008) and others (Hursh, 2008; McNeil, 2000; Mathison & Ross, 2008) are not arguing for an education that is free from the influence of political ideology, only one free from the particularly damaging influence of neoliberal policy makers and corporate interests. Indeed, many are quick to point out that teaching is never a neutral act and the implementation of any curriculum is always a political act (Apple, 2004; Orlowski, 2007, 2009a; Ross, 2000). Furthermore, if we take as an epistemological given that all knowledge is socially constructed, then “by corollary, all knowledge serves the interest of some groups of people, often to the disadvantage of other groups of people. Put succinctly, all knowledge is ideological and, therefore, has political implications” (Orlowski, 2007, p. 42). In principle then, it matters little whether the enacted curriculum found in a teacher’s lesson is based on an official government curricular document or not. If all knowledge is political and ideological in nature, then it follows that the exploration and acquisition of various forms of knowledge by students is similarly politicized.

Having established that knowledge and education are always political, the question then becomes whose ideological values and interests are being promoted through this political act? Given the preceding mention of the influence external forces
have on schools, it serves to reason that the political climate outside a school’s walls will influence what goes on inside classrooms. Apple (2004) affirms that “school knowledge [is] generated out of ideological and economic conflicts “outside” as well as “inside” education” (p. 32). What’s more, “the school is not a passive mirror, but an active force, one that also serves to give legitimacy to economic and social forms and ideologies so intimately connected to it” (Apple, 2004, p. 39). In this sense then, the selection of knowledge to be taught becomes of paramount importance, as schools “do more than transmit an official culture to students. They take that culture and transform it into pieces of knowledge and units of courses and sequences of assignments that are compatible with the internal bureaucratic processes of the school” (McNeil, 1986, p. 13). Exploring how and what knowledge is taught leads us to the curriculum itself.

When considering the curriculum, it is first important to deal with Ross’ (2006b) question from above and specify exactly what we mean by “curriculum.” Ross (2006b) himself distinguishes between the enacted and the formal curriculum, with the formal curriculum being the traditional government-issued document outlining what knowledge and skills are mandated. The enacted curriculum is constituted by the “day-to-day interactions among students, teachers, and subject matter,” with the difference between these interactions and the formal curricular document being quite significant (Ross, 2006b, p. 4). Apple and Buras (2006) similarly stress that “the official curriculum is always reconstructed at the level of reception as teachers and students engage in the unending process of sense-making, resistance, and day-to-day teaching and learning” (p. 25). Given these arguments, the prescient critic might see fit to meticulously distinguish in which instances one is referring to a formal or official curricular document and in
which the focus is the enacted curriculum of the classroom. However, as Orlowski (2008a) points out, “there is a clear mirroring between the political ideology underlying the formal curriculum with the attitudes of the teachers and, by corollary, the enacted curriculum” (p. 43). Simply put, while many teachers may be more than willing to treat the formal curriculum with a critical touch and implement it in unique or radical ways, most do not. For this reason then, further mention of the “curriculum” will refer generally to both the formal and enacted curriculum, and specification will be made only where contextually or rhetorically necessary.

Taking this understanding of how the term “curriculum” is employed, we can now consider the meat and potatoes of the matter, that is, the information and processes that actually make up the curriculum. First, the political and ideological context within which all curricula are situated must be reaffirmed; as Stanley (2001) states, “there is no way to construct a neutral curriculum. At best, we can work to inform ourselves and our students of the ideology that shapes our thought and practice” (p. 12). As a result, the question of what makes up the curriculum becomes one of what ideologies are at play. McKernan (2008) adds that “every society sets up schools in order to induct students into the culture, that is, the ways of the society … The curriculum then becomes a reflection of what the people think is valuable, what they do, and what they believe” (p. 7).

The preceding statement speaks to the rationale behind this research project. If the curriculum is intended to inculcate students with the values of society, then going to the students directly and exploring their beliefs and opinions speaks not only to the impact of schooling but also sheds light on the larger sociocultural context within which education takes place. Apple (2004) frames the issue nicely and extols a similar rationale:
What underlying meanings are negotiated and transmitted in schools behind the actual formal “stuff” of curriculum content? … In short, what is the *curriculum in use*? It is only by seeing this deep structure that we can begin pointing out how social norms, institutions, and ideological rules are continually sustained and mediated by the day-to-day interaction of commonsense actors, as they go about their normal practices. (p. 48)

Apple’s (2004) comments here also further the preceding discussion of the distinction between the formal curriculum as a static document and the actual enactment of the curriculum in schools. With the two so closely linked, an understanding of the context surrounding the construction of the formal curriculum can only shed greater light on the effects of that curriculum in action. This research is based on the logical conclusion that the reverse must also be true; an investigation into the classroom use of the curriculum and its impact on students will generate insights into the larger educational context surrounding the curriculum’s development.

One of the fundamental sources of controversy in the construction and implementation of curriculum is the fact that while schools are given the responsibility for inducting students into society, ours is a multicultural and pluralistic society, especially in Canada. As a result, “there is a great deal to select from the culture and this is the tricky task of curriculum developers and policy makers” (McKernan, 2008, p. 8). McNeil (1986) also indicates the difficulties posed by the multicultural context and subsequently offers this critical observation:

In a fairly homogeneous society, the educational institution would be rightly expected to transmit to children the information and styles of learning valued by
that society. In pluralistic societies, the values are splintered; dominant groups in society may choose to impose their culture on the broader population so that the inequities may be preserved in their favour. Thus, cultural and economic reproduction are closely linked. (p. 12)

The divisions that exist within our society, whether drawn along lines of ethnicity, geography, or class, create the potential for the imposition of one culture or set of values at the expense of others. It is in this way that ideology becomes manifest in the curriculum.

In order for an ideology to be successful it must communicate “a version of social reality which is real and recognizable enough not to be simply rejected out of hand” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 15). One might presume then, that the ideology expressed through the curriculum would be one that speaks to tolerance, equality and the many other values claimed to be central tenets of a multicultural society. However, as Hursh (2008) points out, “modern capitalist society assumes a consensus has emerged around valuing economic production and consumption over everything else” (p. 23). As a result, the inherently elitist neoliberal ideology that has come to influence the curriculum so dramatically appears to many educators and student to be in touch with reality. That this “reality” is actively constructed by the same neoliberal interests is of course what makes it hegemonic in nature, but more on that later. Ultimately, the knowledge deemed worthy of inclusion in the curriculum is that which “is seen as macro-economically beneficial in terms of long run benefits to the most powerful classes in society” (Apple, 2004, p. 36). Considering the example of the Integrated Resource Packages created by the British Columbia Ministry of Education, Orlowski (2008a) concludes that the formal curriculum
is a highly politicized document that “most often serves the interests of those with the power to decide what gets into these documents” (p. 32).

The power over curriculum construction and implementation has shifted away from teachers and local administrators to government officials (Au, 2010; Hursh, 2008). These bureaucrats are themselves heavily influenced by the most privileged sectors of society who have vast sums of money with which to fund lobbyists and finance campaigns. These government policy hawks and corporate movers and shakers are, of course, among the biggest proponents of neoliberal ideology. Their increasing influence directly opposes McKernan’s (2008) conception of education discussed prior. Instead of recognizing learning as a process with intrinsic value regardless of outcomes, education is viewed by these groups as nothing more than a means to an end. As described by Giroux (2002), “No longer institutions designed to benefit all members of the community, [schools] are refashioned in market terms designed to serve the narrow interests of individual consumers and national economic policies” (p. 45). The role of public schools is shifting from one of educating future citizens to training tomorrow’s workers. While couched in language of preparing students for the responsibilities and obligations of adulthood, schools have really begun to teach “a hidden curriculum that seems uniquely suited to maintain the ideological hegemony of the most powerful classes in society” (Apple, 2004, p. 41).

This investigation of the relationship between schools, curriculum, and ideology began by posing the questions, “What is curriculum?” “What do schools actually do?” and “What purposes do they serve?” By this point in the discussion, the answers to these questions have become all too clear. When necessary, we can distinguish between the
formal curriculum of standards-based official documents and the enacted curriculum composed of teacher-student interactions and pedagogical decisions. However, more often than not, these prove to be two sides of the same coin because teachers are either unwilling – or as we shall discuss later, unable – to diverge meaningfully from the mandated skills and knowledge objectives contained in the formal curriculum. This curriculum is a selection of cultural knowledge, naturally that which is deemed to be of greatest importance and value. However, in a pluralistic multicultural context it is impossible to have one single curriculum truly represent society’s values. Instead, the curriculum is a politically loaded document laden with the ideology of the dominant class which wields power over its construction and enactment. This neoliberal ideology has little appreciation for the true value of learning and views the education system simply as a pool of potential labour from which to pluck its workers once they’ve reached maturity. Rather than preparing enlightened and critical citizens dedicated to a more socially just and democratic society, schools exist as a means to an economic end, a purpose fundamentally opposed to that which schools ought to serve. In a society where free market capitalism trumps all else, “education ceases to be a question of critical self-reflection and becomes absorbed in its turn into the technological apparatus, providing certification for one’s place within it” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 38).

Social Studies: Last Gasp or Last Hope?

It is quite possible that no single curricular field provides as fertile a breeding ground for controversy and debate as social studies. Given that social studies is not itself a single discipline, but an amalgamation of history, geography, political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, religious studies, and countless other
disciplines, there is ample fuel for debate amongst teachers, administrators, and academics over what exactly “social studies” ought to be. As a school subject, the contested history of social studies is well-documented (Evans, 2004; Ross, 2006b; Ross & Marker, 2005; Stanley, 2001; Vinson & Ross, 2001). Over the years, scholars from various disciplines have argued in favour of a greater emphasis on their respective field of study beneath the broad canopy offered by the title “social studies.” However, when the overall place of social studies in today’s public schools is considered in light of the increasing influence of neoliberal ideology through standardized curricula, government legislation, and the media, the salient social studies conflict of our times is not being waged within the contextual box of the subject, but outside of it. Stated more simply, while the nature of social studies itself remains contested what is even more contested is how social studies fits into the modern educational climate as shaped by increasing standardization and use of accountability measures. The struggle to preserve the integrity (and in some cases the mere existence) of social studies is made all the more crucial given that, more than any other subject, social studies provides a site for the development of future citizens capable of critical thought and the activism necessary to fight for a better tomorrow.

Before considering in detail the place of social studies within the broader educational, political, and sociocultural contexts, it is pertinent to begin with a thorough investigation of the subject in and of itself. In short, it is time to revisit the question from the prior section of “what is social studies?” In answering, Ross (2006b) describes the social studies curriculum as “an ideological battleground” which is “defined by a lack of consensus and contentiousness over its goals and methods” (p. 2). There is the potential
for tremendous variation between social studies programs primarily due to the inclusion of a wealth of diverse disciplines within one course. Furthermore, regardless of the balance (or lack there of) struck between the respective disciplines, social studies as a whole deals with conceptual ambiguity far more often than a subject like math does (Cuban, 2008, p. 52). As a result, even if curricular content is standardized questions of emphasis, presentation, and overall pedagogy still abound. Despite this chaotic exterior however, the heart of what social studies aims to achieve remains fairly constant, although even this statement is issued with qualification.

Traditionally, social studies has been based upon a rationale of education for democracy designed to prepare students to assume the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (McNeil, 1986; Ross, 2000). Even if this goal represents a tentative point of consensus though, simply saying the goal of social studies is citizenship education is of little consequence since this term itself is highly contested (Ross, 2000). The extensive literature dealing with citizenship education and education for democracy will be examined in detail in the subsequent section. For now it is worth noting that despite the many nuanced conceptions of citizenship, the fundamental debate is one of whether to promote a vision of citizenship that prepares students to weave themselves into the fabric of the societal status quo or one which encourages students to transform and reconstruct society (Ross, 2006a; Ross & Marker, 2005; Ross & Queen, 2010; Stanley, 2005).

The perspectives adopted by individual teachers (or imposed by department heads and other administrators) with regards to citizenship, disciplinary emphasis, and similar points of curricular contention have tremendous significance. They are not just theoretical differences to be bandied about at symposiums and in the teachers’ lounge; they are
pedagogical decisions that carry ideological weight which carries over into the classroom. As noted by Vinson and Ross (2001), “teachers’ backgrounds, knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives on teaching contexts have proven to be a tremendous influence on the curriculum experienced by social studies students” (p. 52). These teaching contexts are themselves a challenging terrain to navigate. “The paradox of social studies curriculum and practice is that it is marked by both the appearance of diversity (e.g., the various “traditions” or categories proposed for social studies curriculum and instruction) and the appearance of uniformity (e.g., stable curricular scope and sequence and entrenched patterns of instruction)” (Vinson & Ross, 2001, p. 51, emphasis in original). Faced with difficult decisions on heavily loaded issues and entrusted with the responsibility of preparing the next generation of citizens, the approach of many teachers has been to avoid unduly influencing students in any particular direction. Dealing with the unlimited potential for diversity within social studies requires teachers to assume an active role in the construction of curriculum, but instead, we find teachers attempting to retreat within those uniform aspects of the curriculum (traditional methods of assessment and instruction, official government-issued standards) so as to present their teaching as ideologically neutral (Ross, 2006a).

Seeking an enclave of neutrality within the content, activities, and standards that have been traditionally used or approved by the powers that be is ultimately futile, because “the curriculum is not an apolitical document” (Orlowski, 2007, p. 48). As discussed prior, the curriculum is increasingly influenced by neoliberal forces which seek to preserve the societal status quo that allows the most powerful and privileged classes to
maintain their position through the oppression and exploitation of the lower classes.

Orlowski (2008b) argues:

Even if a social studies teacher were to follow the curriculum from beginning to end without any supplements or alterations, this teacher would be engaged in a political act, whether or not they think so. Moreover, this adherence to the formal curriculum would almost always result in the teaching being in support of society’s dominant groups. Far from being [an] objective, the field of curriculum development is really in the business of the social construction of state-sanctioned official knowledge. Power is clearly involved in this endeavour. (p. 113)

Furthermore, the emphasis on a return to “traditional” social studies content and methods is based on efforts to maintain the status quo of inequality and to promote ideologies of domination (Urrieta, 2005). As a result, Ross (2000) concludes that “the ideology of neutrality that dominates current practices in social studies education … is sustained by theories of knowledge and conceptions of democracy that constrain rather than widen civic participation in our society” (p. 44). Placing constraints upon civic participation helps to bolster the hegemonic influence of neoliberal ideology, so teachers who promote their teaching as “neutral” are merely submitting to the status quo of the dominant order. Teachers may argue that they can still promote “critical thinking” while remaining neutral, but in many cases, what is really happening is a focus on “procedural problem-solving” that “stops short of equipping students to question, challenge or transform society and serves to socialize students into accepting and reproducing the status quo” (Ross, 2006a, p. 372).
Apple (2004) also sheds light on the cloak of alleged neutrality that many social studies educators attempt to wrap themselves in. Similar to Ross (2000) he notes that this pedagogical perspective can have broad consequences in the larger political arena. Apple (2004) proposes that “it is very possible that the standard of “objectivity” … being exhibited and taught in school may often lead to a detachment from political commitment. That is, it may not be neutrality as it is overtly expressed, but it may mirror a rather deep fear of intellectual, moral and political conflict” (p. 83). Furthermore, Apple (2004) argues that much of the literature in social studies constructs an image of society as a cooperative system, where “internal dissention and conflict in a society are viewed as inherently antithetical to the smooth functioning of the social order” (p. 87). This orientation of conflict as negative and consensus as positive would, of course, contribute to the ideological framework that promotes and maintains an unequal society. The existing social order is legitimated as change is ignored and demonized. Teachers who hide behind the mirage of objective neutrality fail to realize the need to treat texts, resources and the curriculum itself with a critical and interrogative approach (DeLeon, 2008) in order to avoid merely promoting the dominant ideology that seeks to propagate an unjust status quo.

There can be little doubt at this point that the social studies curriculum is an ideological document and that the teaching of social studies is always a political act. While the curriculum of other subjects (and indeed public education itself) can also be understood as ideological constructions, what makes social studies a unique case is its close relationship with “the real world,” as we so often call it. This is more than just a classic teacher’s cliché, it is a fact acknowledged by many students, if sometimes
implicitly. For example, Howard (2003) asked students to identify the most important things in their lives and found that all of their responses fit within the scope of social studies. Whereas subjects like calculus or chemistry often have applicability only within narrow professional fields, the issues and ideas raised in social studies impact everyone’s life regardless of their occupation. In particular, Marker (2006) draws attention to the tremendous impact the social studies curriculum can have on the way our future society functions. Given this importance and the impossibility of teaching in an ideological vacuum it is imperative to ask what type of ideology should influence the social studies curriculum and serves the best interests of not only students but society as a whole.

Clearly, an alternative is needed to the hegemonic neoliberal ideology that currently dominates educational discourse. As noted, this ideology promotes the goal of social studies as one of social integration and workforce preparation while closing off possibilities for social change. This approach is harmful because “attempts to prepare students to live in society simply on the basis of what is obvious in the present are bound to result in adoption of superficial practices that, in the end, will only make existing social and educational problems more acute and more difficult to solve” (Ross, 2000, p. 47). Instead, we need to “challenge the ideologies of mass-produced curriculum by allowing students to explore alternative histories, forgotten and overlooked knowledge systems, and discover their own cultural, spiritual, and intellectual beliefs” (DeLeon, 2008, p. 273). Similarly, Au (2009) argues that social studies can be used as a vehicle for achieving social justice where teachers are students are “agents of transformation” capable of challenging “hegemonic, status quo norms of historical knowledge” (p. 54).
Hursh (2008) offers a comparable vision of the ideology that ought to inform the curriculum:

The classroom should be a place in which we raise questions about complicated issues (such as global warming, war, economics, and language), engage in debates, and come to tentative conclusions; a place where we can assess and appreciate not only what we know but also what others know, a place in which we learn how to live together democratically in the interests of the common good. Schools can and should contribute to creating a more equal, inclusive, and socially just world. (p. 3)

In order to achieve these sorts of classrooms teachers must resist the multitude of forces that push them towards adopting “traditional” practices or the aforementioned “ideology of neutrality.” Instead, teachers must echo Gandhi’s famous words and model what they hope to nurture in their students. Ross and Queen (2010) argue that “an important part of social studies is helping kids so they can understand the world, that things change, and that they can act upon the world to expand equality and democracy in the interest of the public and not the elite and the capitalist class” (p. 161). Educators who agree need to assume an active role in promoting this change themselves and engage in professional practice that challenges rather than legitimates the dominant ideology.

Neoliberal ideology influences social studies not only through its promotion of a social integrationist perspective on citizenship education but also through standards-based reform and accountability schemes. The broader effects of these policies will be considered later, but for now it is worth considering how they challenge social studies pedagogy that aims to resist hegemonic forces, promote social transformation, and
achieve a stronger democracy. Especially concerning is the role high-stakes testing has played in the disappearance of social studies altogether. Traditionally, social studies has been a subject that has been tested less and thus more time has been spent on heavily tested areas such as literacy and math (Au, 2009; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; McGuire, 2007; Stanley, 2001). This has led Howard (2003) to conclude that social studies has become a “second class subject” and in fact, some educators have even gone so far as to advocate for more standardized testing of social studies as a means of ensuring the subject’s survival (Postal, 2010).

When social studies is subjected to high-stakes tests though, the integrity of the curriculum does not fare well. Au (2009) notes that “in order to maintain “reliability,” many history tests throw out high-level, critical thinking questions in favour of lower-order memorization of facts, thus resulting in the trivialization of historical knowledge” (p. 48). Vogler (2005) and Stanley (2001) have also found that these tests reduce historical knowledge to little more than a trivial list of people, places, and dates. Of course, the mere presence of such a test does not necessarily mean that classroom practice abandons a more constructivist pedagogy that stresses critical thinking. Unfortunately though, teachers have “overwhelmingly” stated that their practice is influenced by the sanctions attached to these tests (Vogler, 2005), while Vinson and Ross (2001) argue that standards-based reform and high-stakes testing threaten the diversity of both the formal and enacted social studies curriculum.

It is easy to react with dismay in the face of hegemonic forces seemingly bent on the reduction of social studies to a shadow of what it ought to be. However, much of the literature is quick to indicate that the situation is not hopeless. As opposed to other
subjects where the content of classroom lessons can be quite divorced from real world political, social, and cultural realities, in social studies such realities are often the primary focus. As noted by Ross (2000), “discussion of educational aims, priorities, curricular sequence, instructional methods, student assessment, and so on is not merely about knowledge but also about values and power and thus cannot be understood outside the political and historical context” (p. 47). By directly addressing the ideologies at play in these contexts and by adopting a pedagogical perspective that promotes social justice, teachers can challenge the hegemonic norms promoted by these neoliberal policies (Au, 2009).

Whether viewed as an ironic twist of fate or a logical consequence, the movement to resist standards-based reform, high-stakes testing, and accountability schemes of all kinds is a project that has a great deal at stake. The integrity and the potential of the social studies curriculum hangs in the balance, moreover, it is the potential to prepare the next generation of citizens to strive for social justice and a more participatory democracy. More than mere indoctrination and integration into the social status quo, the goal of social studies should be to foster true critical thought and empower students to resist the hegemonic manifestations of neoliberal ideology, whether they are found within a school’s walls, in the corridors of a provincial legislature, or on the front page of a daily newspaper. Urrieta (2005) implores us not to settle for less:

If all we expect from our youth in social studies education is that they memorize stores of information without using that information to formulate opinions, take a stand, question, analyze critically, and deliberate, then what a dim light of hope must we have for the future of democracy. (p. 192)
Citizenship and Democracy: Pulled Up by the Grassroots?

Declining levels of political participation, especially as measured by voter turnout levels, are lamented by many observers as a sign that the flame of democracy is beginning to flicker (Howard, 2003; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006a, 2006b). Orlowski (2008b) goes so far as to state “it is my opinion that democracy in Canada is becoming weaker over time” (p. 112). Democracy at its heart, has always been about self-rule; while it has become a patriotic cliché, “government of the people, by the people, for the people” remains a succinct and effective definition for how democracy is supposed to work. The influence of neoliberal ideology, however, works to constrain and limit political participation both through the education system as well as other venues (notably the mainstream media). The same newspapers that decry the “apathetic youth” who fail to vote are hegemonic agents who only serve to further the disconnect between the average citizen and the elites who control the highest levels of decision making in our society. Accordingly, it is little surprise that our democracy is weakening over time.

One of the enduring and foremost goals of social studies has been to prepare students to assume the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship, and much of the larger social studies curriculum debate is essentially about the issue of citizenship education and what a “good citizen” looks like (Evans, 2004). But, within the context of a democracy threatened by neoliberal hegemony and the political apathy it fosters, the importance of citizenship education transcends pedagogical debates. Indeed, the goals of citizenship education programs are a prime site for ideological conflict as “conceptions of good citizenship imply conceptions of the good society” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p.
328, italics added). If we seek to improve society we must first improve our democracy, “and making democracy work requires that schools, and social studies educators in particular, take this goal seriously: to educate and nurture engaged and informed democratic citizens” (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006a, p. 299).

Citizens capable of improving our democracy need an appreciation for active political participation, social justice and tolerance, and the ability to think critically about current societal issues and future solutions. This sort of citizenship can only be cultivated through divergent approaches to citizenship education (Vinson, 2006). On the surface then, the abundance of perspectives on the “good citizen” might very well seem conducive to democratic education. The reality though, is that according to neoliberal ideology, the good citizen exists purely in an economic sense; essentially a good citizen is a good consumer. Still other citizenship education programs teach character education and volunteerism as a substitute for critical, active citizenship. While these values are certainly admirable in and of themselves, they stop far short of challenging social injustice. As a result, Vinson and Ross (2001) conclude that “in perhaps no other field of education is it more important that curriculum and instruction accept the challenges of the day, and recognize that yesterday’s citizenship/citizenship education simply (and bluntly) may just not be good enough” (p. 59). Simply put, “citizenship education is essential to democratic education, [and] democratic education is essential to a democratic society” (Vinson, 2006, p. 72).

I have already discussed the fact that competing and conflicting definitions of citizenship have been at the core of much of the larger social studies curriculum debate, but it is now time to look more specifically at programs that aim to accomplish the goal
of fostering democratic citizenship, whatever that term may mean in a given context. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) provide a valuable summary of the issues to be considered:

What political and ideological interests are embedded in or easily attached to varied conceptions of citizenship? Varied priorities—personal responsibility, participatory citizenship and justice-oriented citizenship—embody significantly different beliefs regarding the capacities and commitments that citizens need for democracy to flourish; and they carry significantly different implications for pedagogy, curriculum, evaluation, and educational policy. Moreover, because the ways that educators advance these visions may privilege some political perspectives regarding the ways problems are framed and responded to, there is a politics involved in educating for democracy—a politics that deserves careful attention. (p. 263)

As indicated in the preceding quotation, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identified three categories of citizenship education programs in their research. While not all of the literature employs the specific labels of personal responsibility, participatory citizenship, and justice-oriented citizenship, their identification of differing emphases with regards to democratic citizenship is spot on.

Understanding the nuances of various citizenship education programs is essential if we are to gain insight into students’ political development. However, we must not eliminate student agency in doing so. To assume that students in a particular course or school automatically adopt the attitudes, values, and perspectives with which they are presented is a dangerous error. Epstein and Shiller (2005) stress:
Young people's perspectives about the social world, like those of historians and teachers, are shaped by their identities as members of families, communities, regions, and nations, as well as by their affiliations with racial, ethnic, religious, and other groups. These identities and affiliations influence if, how, and how much young people engage with social studies teachers and texts in schools and how much they learn from school subjects. (p. 201)

Just as we take care to consider the broader sociocultural and political contexts which influence the implementation and effectiveness of democratic education initiatives, we must similarly consider the context represented by students’ individual experiences and personal backgrounds which are just as likely to have profound impact on their conception of citizenship.

Having acknowledged that students will construct their personal political ideologies and their worldviews on much more than what they are taught in a social studies classroom, this does not preclude the potential impact of a democratic education curriculum. The fact remains that “the decisions educators make when designing and researching these programs often influence politically important outcomes regarding the ways that students understand the strengths and weaknesses of our society and the ways that they should act as citizens in a democracy” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 238). Haste and Torney-Purta (1992) assert that “we can only understand the specific and narrow forms of political beliefs that are reflected in voting and other explicitly political actions if we understand how the elements of political thought become part of everyday social understanding” (p. 1). If students who have taken social studies courses steeped in “democratic education” are choosing not to vote or participate in any discernible political
activity as adult citizens, then their understanding of society must be devoid of political thought. In fact, while there is certainly a significant degree of variance between different citizenship education programs, “a strikingly large number of school-based programs embrace a vision of citizenship devoid of politics” (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006a, p. 300).

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) found that the justice-oriented vision of citizenship is underrepresented in the programs they studied and therein lies the problem. The personal responsibility approach to citizenship emphasizes goals that are akin to character education such as obeying laws, recycling, volunteering, and generally acting like a responsible adult. The participatory view of citizenship is similar but emphasizes a more active role as students would be encouraged to join community organizations and to learn how they could work with government agencies to protect the environment for example. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) conclude that the personal responsibility approach to citizenship is “an inadequate response to the challenges of educating a democratic citizenry” (p. 243). Furthermore, “the visions of obedience and patriotism that are often and increasingly associated with this agenda can be at odds with democratic goals. And even the widely accepted goals – fostering honesty, good-neighborliness, and so on – are not inherently about democracy” (p. 244).

Participatory approaches come closer to promoting the development of active, critical citizens able to resist hegemonic influences and achieve a stronger democracy, but these programs stop short of addressing the root causes of many social problems (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Working with a local food bank is an admirable way to help one’s community, but it is even more important to work to resolve the underlying systemic and societal causes of inequality. The proliferation of inadequate citizenship
education is evidenced by low voter turnout, and survey results that indicate students believe the most important aspect of citizenship is helping others (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) as well as the finding that “young people are generally cognizant of the ‘slogans of democracy,’ but few appear to grapple with the attendant implications for society” (Avery, 1992, p. 45). Haste & Torney-Purta (1992) conclude that “education for citizenship has focused much more on the conventional than on the unconventional forms of political activity and on consensual rather than controversial issues” (p. 3). The result is that “in a very real sense, youth seem to be ‘learning’ that citizenship does not require democratic governments, politics, or even collective endeavors” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 244).

When these dominant approaches to citizenship education are considered within a larger political and ideological context more serious ramifications become evident; correspondingly, even more scathing critiques have been levied at these programs which prove to be democratic in name only. Ross (2000) offers one such critique, challenging curricula that claim to have democratic education as their goal: “Within the standard definition of democracy, citizens should have the opportunity to inform themselves; take part in inquiry, discussion, and policy formation; and advance their ideas through political action. In social studies education, however, democracy is much more narrowly conceived: the citizen is a consumer, an observer, but not a participant” (p. 55). This sort of citizen is tailored to the “spectator democracy” promoted by neoliberal ideology. Traditional social studies instruction promotes “spectator citizenship” through passive student roles in the classroom and the reduction of democracy to the act of voting (Ross,
2000; Ross, 2006a). Discussed in detail later, this model of democracy seeks to limit political participation while eliminating the public from the decision-making process.

In education, neoliberal ideology manifests itself through standards-based reform and accountability measures (see next section), with crucial pedagogical decisions being made not by teachers but distant bureaucrats removed as far as possible from the classroom (Hursh, 2008). Hursh (2008) argues that “under our current neoliberal policies, economic growth and efficiency have become the means by which we measure all things. Schools exist, by that rationale, to produce workers and consumers. Everything and everyone is for sale. Citizenship is reduced to consumption. The only form of citizenship that government and the markets tolerate is the consumerist one” (p. 25). McNeil (1986) similarly compares the role of a student in this context to that of a client or consumer who requires a service from the bureaucracy and must meet some requirement of the bureaucracy as a result – both of these roles, of course, are contrasted starkly with that of an active learner in the classroom.

Camicia (2009) offers yet another critique through the concept of “soft democracy” and accordingly, “soft democratic education.” When the public’s freedom to take political action is eliminated, as neoliberal ideology would have it, “decision making and voting are reduced to a soft legitimization of public policy; on the surface it appears that “the people have spoken” when in reality the people have only spoken softly. This soft legitimization leads to soft democracy” (Camicia, 2009, p. 136). Camicia’s (2009) research found that textbooks and other resources promote soft democratic education by providing students with limited perspectives and choices. “Choices supply the substance
for deliberation, and without choices, instructional materials promote a democratic education in name only” (Camicia, 2009, p. 137).

I stressed earlier that students do not become citizens solely through citizenship education programs. Just as surely as familial, cultural, and religious forces will have an impact, there are other educational influences besides those in social studies classrooms. Graham and Neu (2004) argue that “learning to submit to instruction and testing, to sit still at a desk for hours each day … and to adjust one’s behaviour to produce socially acceptable results are all by-products of the modern education system that produces not just educated graduates, but docile citizens” (p. 311). This type of citizen is undoubtedly less likely to challenge the hegemonic status quo which limits her or his social mobility. Harkening back to the values emphasized by a personal responsibility approach to citizenship, Chomsky (2003) states that “an approach to education which emphasizes such values as punctuality and obedience is very well suited for training factory workers as tools of production. It is not suited at all to the humanistic conception of creative and independent individuals” (p. 171).

One of the defining features of these limited conceptions of democratic citizenship is how they define and portray democracy itself. In these contexts, students rarely consider questions such as: “What do we mean by democracy? What kind of democracy do we want? What are the functions of education and the communications media in a democratic society?” (Ross, 2000, p. 55). Instead, democracy is more often presented as an accomplishment (something already achieved through past struggles) rather than a goal to continue working towards (Parker, 2001). Stanley (2005) stresses that America is not now (nor ever has been) a fully democratic society in either political
or economic terms. Parker (2001) maintains that this point holds true around the globe, as no actual real-world democracy is an ideal or perfect democracy, but instead they are “minimalist democracies: most adults are allowed to vote in elections that are more-or-less fair, by which representatives, most of them rich, win their seats in media performances” (p. 114). The truth is that as neoliberal hegemony continues to encroach upon our political rights and freedoms, education becomes essential to the simultaneous maintenance and reconstruction of democratic society (Stanley, 2005). Additionally, “an understanding of the flaws in our democracies will also help strengthen our democracies” (Orlowski, 2009a, p. 59). Urrieta (2005) recognizes the situation we face, and provides some sense of the direction we must take in stating, “democracy is a process in constant need of further growth, and that growth comes through critical thinking, social criticism, and deliberation” (p. 192).

It is clear that we need to promote a more critical and social-justice oriented vision of citizenship if we seek to challenge the political and social status quo. The question then becomes what should democratic education look like in order to meet this goal? Hursh (2008) argues that “because neoliberal ideals and processes encompasses almost all of society, including educational goals and processes, reinstating a progressive education focusing on the welfare of people and the planet requires rejecting the neoliberal thesis” (p. 143). Stanley (2001) also notes that the process of constructing and reconstructing cultural values is a key aspect of democracy, but that we must do so critically:

The appeal to taken-for-granted core values like social justice is not intrinsically more defensible than the taken-for-granted values of a market economy. While
traditional values will always be passed on via schooling and other institutions, democratic citizens must develop the critical competence to determine if they should continue to follow those values or alternatives, and how the values we choose will be applied in our lives. If we fail to exercise this critical competence as citizens, we fall prey to an unreflective acceptance of tradition. (p.12)

A propensity for critical thought – true critical thought, not the alleged critical thought noted by Ross (2006a) above – is the most integral skill to develop for democratic education.

In order to promote critical thinking, social studies educators need to resist forces that would steer them towards “traditional” practices. They also need to resist the pressure to acquiesce to the demands of standardization and high-stakes testing, since “citizenship is fundamentally contingent and contextual, dynamic, fluid, and evolving … and thus impossible to standardize” (Vinson, 2006, p. 68). As Ross (2006a) puts it, “indoctrination and transmission that result in an emphasis on artificial separate subjects, rote memorization of facts, and uncritical transmission of cultural values should not be an essential tenet of teaching for democracy. Rather, we should be focused on preparing informed, critically thoughtful citizens who are intent on improving our great experiment of democracy” (p. 369-370). By investigating the processes through which students construct their political ideologies, especially conceptions of citizenship and democracy, this study hopes to discover whether or not students are, in fact, thinking critically about democracy.

In addition to (or as part of) the development of critical thought, students must also be adept at conducting societal analysis; that is, they must be willing and able to
recognize the confluence of political, economic, and cultural factors in real-world settings, and to deal with not only social problems of great importance but also the underlying systemic causes of inequality and injustice. Torney-Purta (2002) offers this description:

An ideal civic education experience in a democracy should enable students to acquire meaningful knowledge about the political and economic system, to recognize the strengths and challenges of democracy and the attributes of good citizenship, to be comfortable in participating in respectful discussions of important and potentially controversial issues, and to be aware of civil society organizations. Knowledge should lead to both skills in interpreting political communication and to dispositions favoring actual involvement. (p. 203)

The last point made is also essential; students must be empowered to not only think critically about politics and society but to act upon their ideas and beliefs. Kahne and Westheimer (2006b) agree that “educating citizens for a democratic society requires that students gain a sense that they can make a difference and also identify, analyze, and challenge social and institutional practices as they work to create a more just society” (p. 295).

Finally, Urrieta (2005) emphasizes that in order to promote democratic education and the development of critically-minded citizens, we need to make citizenship education a collective endeavour where students communicate with each other and challenge each other’s ideas:

Learning how to live together is what democracy is about. It is not about systematically excluding people or enforcing a particular cultural perspective as
the only valid truth. Learning to deliberate and especially to engage in dialogue is
at the core of democratic practice and principle, only that in a democracy like our
own, this seems not to be culturally valued. Through dialogue, people learn to live
together and to value different perspectives rather than merely to tolerate each
other or pretend that we really are not that different, which is the uncritical and
naïve cultural pluralist approach to diversity.” (p. 192)
Much like critical thought itself, these processes of dialogue and deliberation are
threatened by the increasing standardization of the social studies curriculum and attempts
to depoliticize what goes on in the classroom.

To this point, I have considered literature that examines the relationship between
ideology and schools as a whole, then the social studies more specifically, and finally
citizenship education and democracy as a specific priority within the social studies
curriculum. Throughout this discussion, frequent mention has been made of how
neoliberalism impacts each of these contexts through the implementation of standards-
based reforms and the language of accountability. It is time then, to consider in detail the
broad scale of impacts these trends are having on schools, teachers, and most importantly,
students themselves. After all, as Haste and Torney-Purta (1992) have indicated, the most
salient questions of political development are those concerned with “a wider conception
of the political world, including one’s understanding of society and power” (p. 2).

**Accountability: The Neoliberal Answer to Education**

At the beginning of this paper, I made mention of the widespread implementation
of standards-based educational reforms and high-stakes testing as a means of ensuring
educational “accountability.” What began as a smattering of localized trends has become
institutionalized and mandated through legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in the United States and through provincial educational policies in Canada including the Education Accountability Act (2000) in Ontario (Scheutze, Kuehn, Davidson-Harden, Schugurensky, & Weber, 2010). By considering the educational accountability movement within a critical understanding of the larger political and economic context, these reforms can be understood for what they really are – an instrument of social control and an expression of neoliberal ideology. According to Hursh (2008), “neoliberal theory and practices have become so embedded within our economic and political decision making that neoliberalism is rarely explicitly invoked as a rationale. Yet, the education reform movement of the last several decades could neither be conceptualized nor instituted without the rise and supremacy of neoliberal thought” (p. 61). Standards-based reforms and high-stakes testing reduce the overall quality of public education and seriously diminish opportunities for students and teachers to exercise autonomy over what happens in the classroom. Through legislation that is heavy in rhetoric like NCLB, “neoliberal policymakers have skilfully packaged the reforms to make it appear that they are promoting equality,” when the reality is that accountability measures concentrate power in the hands of a small elite (Hursh, 2008, p. 67).

Allegedly, these reforms are in the best interests of students, parents, teachers, and administrators alike, however, much of the extensive literature on the educational accountability movement argues strongly that nothing is further from the truth (e.g., Gabbard & Ross, 2008; Mathison & Ross, 2008; Lipman, 2007; Ross & Gibson, 2007). Gabbard (2006) distinguishes between the different meanings of the term “accountability.” He notes that in the common sense meaning of term, it is difficult to
find fault with the notion of holding teacher’s accountable, “after all, we trust them with our children” (p. 192). This is the meaning of accountability that is advanced by the rhetoric of bureaucrats and neoliberal policy hawks who imply that to remove high-stakes standardized tests would allow teachers free reign to commit educational fraud. Gabbard (2006) describes this co-opting of the term as an “empty slogan or emotionally potent oversimplification” (p. 192). In reality, however, accountability is the means to an end. It is a set of policies and practices that diminish (and at their worst, completely eliminate) the autonomy of teachers and local administrators and substitute an emphasis on community with the promotion of individualism (Gabbard, 2006; McKernan, 2008). Accountability also carries with it an inherent, almost evangelical faith in the power of high-stakes tests as the sole indicator of educational achievement, tests which amount to an anti-democratic curriculum (Au, 2010).

To be fair, there is a body of literature that contends the effects of accountability – at least with regards to social studies – are either minimal or mixed, and that those who vehemently condemn high-stakes testing are guilty of oversimplification (Grant, 2007; Grant & Salinas, 2008; Yeager & Davis Jr., 2005). While acknowledging that any debate has at least two sides and that complex issues such as educational reform resist black-and-white understandings, the fact remains that there is a vast amount of literature that adopts a highly critical stance with regards to accountability, standards-based reform, and high-stakes testing. These critical perspectives provide compelling evidence that accountability measures have overwhelmingly negative consequences not only for education but for democracy and society as a whole.¹

¹ The National Center for Fair and Open Testing has collected a useful list of research articles and reports that make a strong case against high-stakes testing: http://www.fairtest.org/arn/caseagainst.html
In no particular order, the literature argues that accountability\(^2\) is: adversely impacting students’ mental and physical health; narrowing the curriculum taught in schools; reducing and eliminating extra-curricular activities such as sports teams, clubs, and even recess; deprofessionalizing and deskilling teachers; responsible for the misrepresentation and misappropriation of educational outcomes; reducing students’ intrinsic motivation to learn; increasing drop-out rates and widening the achievement gap by disproportionately harming minority students as well as other disadvantaged and marginalized groups; promoting poor pedagogy and passive learning; limiting dissent and distorting educational policy debates; centralizing decision-making power in the hands of a distant, bureaucratic elite; and a neoliberal project that promotes capitalist interests and not only the commodification of education but the total privatization of the public education system (Au, 2010; Hursh, 2008; Landry, 2006; Mathison & Ross, 2008; Vinson & Ross, 2001). Ultimately, accountability functions as a hegemonic means of social control that threatens democratic society.

Taking all this into consideration, it is necessary within the context of this research project to direct the most attention to only a few aspects of accountability at the expense of others. Accountability is meant to serve as part of a contextual backdrop informing the analysis and synthesis of data and the subsequent formation of theoretical conclusions; since the specific focus of this study is on student formation of political ideologies, the political and ideological facets of accountability are most relevant here. This study is not predominantly concerned with the actual act of students taking a high-

\(^2\) In the interests of parsimony, the term “accountability” and variations such as “accountability measures,” should be read as inclusive of the more specific policies of standards-based reform and high-stakes testing, unless indicated otherwise.
stakes test, teachers preparing for a test, or other concrete, grassroots impacts of the accountability movement. Consequently, only a cursory review of the literature on these topics is offered before moving on to deal in more depth with the larger administrative, professional, systemic and theoretical implications of standards-based reform and high-stakes testing.

Make no mistake; there is an emerging body of research that seeks to understand the issues associated with accountability through the eyes of those most directly affected on a daily basis. At this point, much of the research is exploratory and the findings tentative, and there are many points of contention left to be resolved. It is undeniable however, that studies dealing directly with student experiences of highlight numerous negative impacts on the test-takers themselves. These begin with test preparation that detracts from authentic learning experiences and discourages higher-order, critical, and creative thinking (Hursh, 2008; Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007; McNeil, 2000). The administration of the test itself is accompanied by anxiety, fear, and a host of other harmful behavioural and physical effects on students (Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007; Landry, 2006; Mathison & Freeman, 2005). Even after the test is complete, the experience of learning one’s results is often traumatic and student responses to perceived success or failure can have tremendous consequences on both an individual and a sociological level (Booher-Jennings, 2008; Cornell, Krosnick & Chang, 2006; Mathison & Freeman, 2005). While research such as this study may not deal directly with the day-to-day impact of high-stakes testing and standards-based reform on students in the classroom, it is important not to ignore these harmful effects altogether. Likewise, we
must not overlook the damage done to teachers themselves through the accountability movement.

As a means of (allegedly) assessing whether students have met prescribed learning outcomes and thus, (allegedly) ensuring educational accountability, high-stakes testing has become an inescapable reality for most teachers. There is nothing alleged though, about the detrimental effects these tests and other accountability measures have on teachers classroom practice. Testing is, of course, a practice many teachers employ of their own accord – but the high-stakes attached to these government-mandated, standardized tests carry significant implications. Teachers overwhelmingly state that due to the possible repercussions for their school, their students, or themselves, they have little choice but to align their teaching with these tests (Au, 2008; Vogler, 2005).

Teachers are not only constructing lessons tailored to the test, but are abandoning critical course content in favour of trivial test preparation activities that serve only the most superficial of educational purposes. As Cuban (2008) relates, “classroom stories and teacher surveys report again and again that more lesson time is spent preparing students for high-stakes tests and the curriculum is being narrowed to what is on those tests” (p. 20). This behaviour is reinforced and encouraged through teacher professional development programs which increasingly focus only on preparing students to write high-stakes tests (Howard, 2003).

As already noted in the social studies section, these tests themselves are a very poor means of assessing student achievement and tend to focus on simplistic understandings and content (Au, 2009; Stanley, 2001; Vogler, 2005). What’s more, “measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning” (McNeil, 1986, p. 20).
Consequently, the dilemma facing teachers is whether to continue teaching in authentic, meaningful ways that promote critical thinking and active learning or to promote the simplified understandings that will help students succeed on the tests. Mathison and Freeman (2008) found that most often, teachers will “sacrifice their professional integrity in order to help every child be as successful as she or he can be on the tests” (p. 86). In doing so, teachers contribute to their own deskilling and are recast as “people needing outside consultants to tell them … ways to raise test scores” (McNeil, 2000, p. 236). Furthermore, students themselves are well aware of the difference between “real” lessons and superficial test preparation activities which they describe as confusing, boring, and not as valuable as other learning experiences (Mathison & Freeman, 2005). As teachers increasingly follow mandated scripts in the classroom, their trust relationships with students are jeopardized and eroded, thus further damaging the classroom climate even after the tests themselves have come and gone (McNeil, 2000). Ultimately, many teachers choose to leave the profession altogether rather than participate in a bureaucratic system that doesn’t trust them to exercise professional autonomy over pedagogical decisions (Mathison & Freeman, 2008).

Teachers’ professional status has always been relatively low and underappreciated, but the increasingly authoritarian educational climates produced by accountability have only further undermined their professionalism (Mathison & Freeman, 2008). Corporate and government leaders have alleged that we are in the midst of an educational crisis, and that this contrived and manufactured problem of “schools in decline” can only be remedied through standards, testing, and accountability (Hursh, 2008). These “solutions” are based on the premise that teachers cannot be trusted to teach
well independent of such controls and/or that they cannot be trusted to accurately and reliably assess student learning (Hursh, 2008; McNeil, 2000). As a result, we have seen a dramatic rise in standardization, testing, and other requirements at the highest levels of government bureaucracy that have “shifted control over educational decisions away from students, their families, classroom teachers, school-based and district administrators, and school board members, toward education officials and legislators” (Hursh, 2008, p. 71).

The prevalence of high-stakes tests as the primary means of measuring and reporting student learning has also allowed test designers to exert greater control over what happens in the classroom (Au, 2008). McNeil (2000) also notes that the impetus for these controls stems from a business establishment that seeks to “fund only those educational expenses that contribute to measurable outcomes” (p. 4). The result is that classrooms are increasingly “places in which teachers and students act out the script given to them by someone else, neither teachers nor students ask the questions that matter, and learning is equated with passing a test” (Hursh, 2008, p. 3). McNeil (2000) draws the following conclusion about the accountability movement:

Their most far-reaching impact has not been the success or failure of any of the specific provisions of the reform but the precedent set for centralized controls based on accountability to a corporate elite, not to a citizen public nor to educators. These policies established a structure of centralized controls and they operationalized the assumptions that only those aspects of teaching and learning that are externally prescribable and measurable are worthy of state support. (p. 155)
One of the primary problems with the conception of education advanced by accountability advocates is that “in looking at how much is learned, we fail to look at the nature of what is learned” (McNeil, 1986, p. 207, emphasis in original). Given the deficiencies of standardized tests as valid and reliable assessment instruments, the knowledge and skills evaluated are usually overly simplistic if not downright irrelevant, especially in a subject area such as social studies (Mathison, Ross & Vinson, 2006; Stanley, 2001). As teachers are coerced into aligning their pedagogical decisions with these tests, the logical (though ironic) consequence is that accountability actually lowers academic standards (Hursh, 2008; McNeil, 2000). As Hursh (2008) notes, this means that higher test scores have no correlation with increased learning and tell us only that students are doing better on the test.

To be clear, when we say that standards have been effectively lowered by accountability, we mean that students are not learning more (as hoped and claimed) but are learning much less. Throughout much of the literature, a common conclusion is restated over and over; as a result of the sanctions attached to high-stakes tests the curriculum is being narrowed and reduced to emphasize only that content which is tested (Au, 2009; Cuban, 2008; Hursh, 2008; Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007; McNeil, 2000). This narrowing can be seen through the simplification and elimination of content within a subject area, such as in social studies, where rote memorization and lower-order thinking dominate the pedagogy of teachers forced to raise test scores at any cost (Au, 2009; Vogler, 2005). This occurs as students are subjected to more teacher-centered instruction and given fewer opportunities to assume an active role in directing their own learning (Kohn, 2008; Mathison & Freeman, 2008; Vogler, 2005). The overall curriculum of
schools is also drastically narrowed through the reduction and even complete elimination of time spent on less-tested subjects (Howard, 2003; McGuire, 2007, Mathison & Freeman, 2008). The sum of these effects is that despite claims of “higher standards,” accountability reforms lead to students learning less.

These changes in pedagogy and classroom practice occur not only as a result of deprofessionalized teachers being coerced into teaching to the test, but as a logical consequence of the educational philosophy that underlies standards-based reform and accountability programs. As Ross and Queen (2010) have concluded, “this model is based upon the idea that all children are vessels to be filled, that children are the same everywhere, and that education is apolitical” (p. 161). Popham (2008) similarly describes standards-based education as “nothing more than a posh ends-means model wherein content standards represent intended ends, teaching constitutes the means for achieving those ends, and test results supply the evidence regarding whether the means did, in fact, achieve the intended ends” (p. 17). Mathison and Freeman (2008) echo this conclusion stating that “it is essentially a utilitarian ethic that underlies test-driven curricular reform, one based on means-ends arguments. The state departments of education, and indeed the federal government, adopt the view that the ends justify the means, and teachers too are drawn into this logic” (p. 90). It is not surprising then, that “standardization reduces the quality and quantity of what is taught and learned in schools” given the reductionist view of education that informs the implementation of accountability measures (McNeil, 2000, p. 3). This warped rationale differs starkly from Chomsky’s (2003) assertion that “the goal of education should be to provide … a complex and challenging environment that the child can imaginatively explore and, in this way, quicken his [sic] intrinsic creative
impulse and so enrich his [sic] life in ways that may be quite varied and unique” (Chomsky, 2003, 164).

Divergent approaches to education and learning are increasingly threatened by the institutionalization of accountability as a means of controlling students, teachers, and local administrators (Au, 2010). Politicians and bureaucrats continue to proclaim that accountability is the only solution for our current “educational crisis,” but it really amounts to little more than a “political spectacle” (Apple, 2004, p. x). Rather than a serious and well thought out set of policies that aim to actually address the complex problems schools face, these reforms “privilege image over authenticity and work as a means of social control, political/economic dominance, and conformity” (Vinson & Ross, 2001, p. 57). McNeil (2000) explains that as time goes by, these “overt controls tend to become imbedded in the structure and taken for granted once they are in place,” exactly as intended by government officials since “certainty and continued control, rather than educational quality, [is] the political goal” (pp. 169-170). Graham and Neu (2004) note that standardized testing also helps socialize students into roles as “governable subjects” and therefore “functions as a mode of government control” (p. 295).

While accountability is sometimes casually described as a “trend” in education policy, it is clear that it is becoming deeply entrenched as the educational status quo. Given the tremendous volume of literature that adopts a critical stance with regards to accountability, the potential for widespread opposition exists. Au (2008) argues that “as soon as high-stakes testing is established as a force within pedagogic discourse, the possibility of the realization of an anti-high-stakes testing movement is automatically created. Forces both within and outside education can now unite around their opposition
to high-stakes testing” (p. 646). However, the danger is that “if the language of accountability comes to dominate public school policy, then it will eliminate the means by which the public … can challenge the system of accountability” (McNeil, 2000, p. 265). Furthermore, “when the school’s organization becomes centered on managing and controlling, teachers and students take school less seriously,” this reduces the quality of teaching which leads to increased controls; a cycle of defensive teaching and increased control is established which is very tough to break (McNeil, 1986, p. xviii). The rhetoric of accountability is already a well-ensconced educational discourse that distorts debates and discussions between teachers, administrators, and other education professionals. For example, Mathison and Freeman (2008) describe how teachers argue over which grade level a certain unit or set of content standards ought to be taught at, rather than engaging in the larger debate over alternatives to a heavily standardized curriculum.

The end result of accountability reforms is that they function as a principal element of the hegemonic control of society by political and economic elites through the promulgation of neoliberal ideology. McNeil (2000) argues that the language of accountability limits dissent and secures compliance “because it takes away the legitimacy for any other, counterlanguage to shape school practice” (p. 263). Furthermore, Au (2010) maintains:

The current hegemony of high-stakes testing not only subverts democratic deliberations of teaching, learning, and multicultural education, it also undermines democratic thinking more generally by narrowing the conversations that students, teachers, and communities can engage in as potentially active participants in the content and direction of schooling relative to broader social relations. (p. 10)
As we shall see in the next section, this is akin to the larger societal status quo where – especially in the mainstream media – any individual or group who threatens the dominant order is marginalized, undermined and discredited, while those who promote capitalist and neoliberal values are celebrated and defended. This is part of the process whereby hegemony is cultivated from within the subjugated populace themselves rather than through the outside imposition of direct force.

We have begun to investigate the nature of this process through the preceding discussions of citizenship education, the social studies curriculum, accountability, and the influence of ideology throughout these and other aspects of the public education system. However, “neither the complexities of hegemony nor the significance of education can be understood as long as one thinks of education exclusively in terms of scholastic relationships” (Borg, Buttigieg & Mayo, 2002, p. 9). It is time then, to expand our critical gaze beyond the school system itself to include all of society and examine the full scale of neoliberalism’s influence.

**Hegemony: The Neoliberal Endgame**

I have frequently mentioned the importance of developing a critical understanding of larger political, economic, and cultural contexts when dealing with issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and schooling in general. Largely, the point has been stressed that these contexts have a tremendous influence on what takes place within the smaller context of the public education system. However, we would be remiss not to consider that education occurs outside of schools. Children do not develop into adults simply by learning how to read, solve equations, and write a five paragraph essay. Indeed, many of the behaviours and attitudes that form the core of our personalities and inform much of
our decision making are developed within the larger contexts of the world we grow up in. While I have already devoted much attention to the direct impact of neoliberal ideology on curriculum and the formal school system, this influence is only one example of how neoliberalism has come to control society. Growing out of and alongside neoliberal educational reforms is a larger hegemonic project that manifests itself through the construction of knowledge, media control, mainstream societal values, political participation, and class exploitation. The end product is a world driven by greed and runaway consumerism that bears only the scantest resemblance to a socially just democratic society.

Schools perform a fundamental role in the establishment of a hegemonic social order because they “transmit the dominant culture, habits of mind, and perhaps most important of all, they inculcate in a large portion of the society’s population the knowledges and values that are deemed appropriate for citizenship within a given social formation” (Aronowitz, 2002, p. 113). In the same vein, Apple (2004) offers the following:

As Gramsci argued, the control of the knowledge preserving and producing sectors of a society is a critical factor in enhancing the ideological dominance of one group of people or one class over less powerful groups of people or classes. In this regard, the role of the school in selecting, preserving, and passing on conceptions of competence, ideological norms, and values (and often only certain social groups’ “knowledge”) – all of which are embedded within both the overt and hidden curricula in schools – is of no small moment. (p. 54)
As schools are increasingly influenced by neoliberal ideology through accountability reforms, the knowledge, values, and behaviours transmitted by schools are those that lend credence to neoliberalism and facilitate social control. In this context, teachers act as hegemonic agents, whether they are conscious of it or not (Apple, 2004; Orlowski, 2008b, 2009b). This has led Hursh (2008) to conclude that “the reforms in education are part of a larger neoliberal project to alter the relationship between the individual and government and the nature of democratic decision making” (p. 122). Critics of this line of reasoning might argue there is an absence of evidence pointing towards the explicit and forceful imposition of anti-democratic ideology through the education system. However, Apple (2004) refers us back to the defining characteristic of hegemony, stating that “institutions of cultural preservation and distribution like schools create and recreate forms of consciousness that enable social control to be maintained without the necessity of dominant groups having to resort to overt mechanisms of domination” (p. 2).

Gramsci “believed that what enabled the ruling class to secure and maintain power was not brute force alone, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the attainment of cultural dominance – i.e., its ability to permeate an entire society with its philosophies, values, tastes, and so on” (Borg, Buttigieg, & Mayo, 2002, p. 6). This is the fundamental difference between hegemony and other forms of social control. In more obviously authoritarian states, control is achieved through direct force, violence, and the use of terror to achieve compliance, but remembering Orlowski’s (2009a) definition of hegemony (see Chapter 1), force is not required to sustain the hierarchical organization of society because the public gives their willing consent and acceptance. Of course, the democratic spirit has not been so completely extinguished as to allow a nation of (more
or less) educated citizens to freely submit to a lifetime of subjugation beneath the ruling elite. Instead, it is a far more complex and subversive process that yields this outcome.

Reviewing the work of Paul Willis, Gordon (1984) notes that the process of cultural and social reproduction occurs as “ideas are produced within cultural relationships, rather than merely being filtered down from a dominant group. Ideologies are internalised because they are produced by and are thus internal to the group culture” (p. 110). When the context expands beyond that of an individual group to include mass society, hegemony is achieved. Apple (2004) offers the following description:

Hegemony acts to ‘saturate’ our very consciousness, so that the educational, economic and social world we see and interact with, and the commonsense interpretations we put on it, becomes the world tout court, the only world. Hence, hegemony refers not to the congeries of meanings that reside at an abstract level somewhere at the ‘roof of our brain.’ Rather, it refers to an organized assemblage of meanings and practices, the central, effective and dominant system of meanings, values and actions which are lived. (p. 4)

In essence, the consent that citizens give to hegemonic control is an unconscious approval issued through an acceptance of the world they are presented with throughout their daily lives. Furthermore, “oppressive conditions do not necessarily inspire constructive rebellion, but may instead blunt critical consciousness and lead the oppressed to act in ways that reinforce existing structures of power” (Apple & Buras, 2006, p. 10). Our understanding of the world is contained in the knowledge transmitted to us from two main sources, the mainstream corporate media and the public education system (Orlowski, 2007). Neoliberalism holds tremendous sway in both of these spheres, and so
if citizens lack the critical consciousness to refute and recoil from the constructed worldview offered in these sources, they are taking part in the ongoing production of neoliberal hegemony.

While the neoliberal influence on schooling has already been established, the ideological manipulation and control of the media is even more pronounced. Chomsky (2003) argues:

It’s not that it’s a conspiracy; it’s just that the media’s institutional structure gives them the same kind of purpose that the educational system has: to turn people into submissive, atomized individuals who don’t interfere with the structures of power and authority but rather serve those structures. That’s the way the system is set up, and if you started deviating from that, those with real power, the institutions with real power, would interfere to prevent that deviation. That’s the way institutions work, so it seems to me almost predictable that the media will serve the role of a kind of indoctrination. (p. 396)

Those with “real power,” as Chomsky puts it, are the politicians and corporations. As noted previously, Parker (2001) indicates that most elected representatives come from wealth and earn their positions through media performances while Gibson and Ross (2009) describe government as “the executive committee of the rich” (p. 32). In Canada (as elsewhere), the media is controlled by a “shrinking group of powerful corporate entities” who promote “the interests of the elite by a consistent and constant repetition of hegemonic discourses” (Orlowski, 2007, p. 36). The concentration of media ownership eliminates the possibility for counter-hegemonic discourses to reach a mass audience, hence Chomsky’s conclusion about the inevitability of indoctrination through mass
media. Controlled by an elite, and protecting the interests of the elite, the mainstream media represents the classic expression of neoliberal ideology in practice, since as Hursh (2008) points out, “neoliberalism benefits primarily the already privileged to the detriment of most everyone else” (p. 9).

In authoritarian states such as China, it is obvious where the media’s interests lay since the state directly controls the media and a culture of censorship is widely acknowledged. By contrast, a fundamental characteristic of democratic societies is supposed to be the existence of a “free press.” However, our own media acts as a hegemonic agent through its misappropriation of ideological language and the use of “spin” (Orlowski, 2007, 2009a). Chomsky (2003) deconstructs the modern meaning of a “free press” as follows:

We have a free press, meaning it’s not state-controlled but corporate-controlled; that’s what we call freedom. What we call freedom is corporate control. We have a free press because it’s a corporate monopoly, or oligopoly, and that’s called freedom. We have a free political system because there’s one party run by business; there’s a business party with two factions, so that’s a free political system. The terms freedom and democracy, as used in our Orwellian political discourse, are based on the assumption that a particular form of domination – namely, by owners, by business elements – is freedom. (p. 395)

This heavily constructed and entirely illusory aura of “freedom” allows the media to adopt the rhetoric of impartiality when in fact they are manufacturing consent in order to “further entrench certain discourses that support the dominant ideology” (Orlowski, 2008b, p. 110). Or, as McChesney (1999) succinctly puts it, “at their most eloquent,
proponents of neoliberalism sound as if they are doing poor people, the environment, and everybody else a tremendous service as they enact policies on behalf of the wealthy few” (p. 8).

Language is used as a hegemonic tool not only to mediate the social construction and understanding of what the media is and whose interests it serves, but also as a tool employed by the media itself to distort the depiction and limit the potential of counter-hegemonic forces. As noted prior, “many people consider conservative values and beliefs as common sense precisely because they figure so prominently in the discourses that mainstream media use. Anyone seen as challenging those values is vulnerable to the charge of having an agenda” (Orlowski, 2007, p. 40). These indictments are not just issued by the ideologues that pass for pundits on the reactionary Fox News network (who themselves decry the media’s “liberal bias” without a hint of irony or self-awareness), but as Urrieta (2005) indicates, the mainstream media as a whole has changed the meaning of political activism so as to protect their own interests. In essence, “activism is the active participation, in various ways, of people advocating a particular set of issues” and not simply “young people shouting at police officers in full riot gear” as is so often depicted (Urrieta, 2005, p. 189). Urrieta (2005) argues that “physical activism is stereotyped precisely as radical and passionate, rather than logical, progressive, and rational, because people who are less privileged by the system have traditionally engaged in such practices” (p. 189). Within this ideological context, activism becomes a pejorative rather than a descriptive term. This despite the reality that “those whom more progressive people in our society call “conservative” or “right wing” are very much activists fighting to support their own agendas within a system that allows them to appear neutral, logical,
progressive, and rational” (Urrieta, 2005, p. 189). The media plays a crucial role in the neoliberal hegemonic project by marginalizing those individuals and groups struggling for an alternative to the status quo and simultaneously constructing their own ideology as non-ideological and therefore palatable to mass society.

The media heavily influences the social construction of knowledge (Orlowski, 2007) and the hegemonic impacts of the media are seen in the “free market common sense which dominates public discourse” (Aronowitz, 2002, p. 120). Alongside the media’s influence on society, Hursh (2008) contends that there has been an “effort by some corporate and political leaders to transform the nature of society by repealing the social democratic policies that have guided the United States for much of the last century … in the belief that they interfere with individual liberty and the efficiency of the marketplace” (Hursh, 2008, p. 2). Similarly, Orlowski (2008a) notes that “just as ideology was instrumental in helping to build the social welfare state, it is also involved with its current dismantling” (p. 30). These efforts have been successful to the extent that “neoliberalism” is a foreign term to many people despite the proliferation of its ideological values throughout society. In a fashion totally characteristic of hegemonic social control, “modern capitalist society assumes a consensus has emerged around valuing economic production and consumption over everything else” (Hursh, 2008, p. 23).

While I have stressed the work of the media, corporations, and politicians to protect and further their own interests, it is the acceptance of these efforts by the people at large that solidifies the neoliberal hegemonic order. Theoretically speaking, if the people truly sought an alternative and intended to resist neoliberal social control they
would exercise their democratic right to vote for representatives that would challenge the status quo. The final piece of neoliberal hegemony is set in place, however, with the ideological construction and manipulation of democracy itself by elite interests.

McChesney (1999) points out that “neoliberalism works best when there is formal electoral democracy, but when the population is diverted from the information, access, and public forums necessary for meaningful participation in decision making” (p. 9). Neoliberal ideology has achieved its hegemonic position because this precise set of political circumstances exists. Ross (2006a) states that our political system is “a spectator democracy, in which the public is barred from managing their own affairs and the means of information is kept narrowly and rigidly controlled” (p. 373). Spectator democracies are based on a line of reasoning that presumes the general public cannot grasp the complexities of political decision-making and planning and therefore needs to be managed by an elite group (Ross, 2006a). Chomsky (2003) similarly asserts that “the democratic system at best functions within a very narrow range in a capitalist democracy, and even within this narrow range its functioning is enormously biased by the concentrations of private power and by the authoritarian and passive modes of thinking that are induced by autocratic institutions such as corporations” (p. 140). These modes of thinking are also cultivated through approaches to citizenship education that stress social transmission rather than social transformation. Furthermore, the increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic education system produced by accountability reforms discourages divergent critical thought through its use of high-stakes tests and mandated curriculum standards.
McChesney (1999) concludes that “a depoliticized citizenry marked by apathy and cynicism” is the inevitable byproduct of a neoliberal system where “policies that could quickly increase voter interest and participation rates are stymied before ever getting into the public arena” (p. 10). Similarly, Ross (2006a) decries the reduction of democracy to a few procedural rights that are democratic in name only, as “citizens can vote, lobby, exercise free speech and assembly rights, but as far as governing is concerned, they are primarily spectators” (p. 372). Even when the right to vote is exercised, Orlowski (2009a) notes that hegemonic discourses produce a \textit{false consciousness} that leads citizens to vote against their own best interests. Whether citizens vote or not then, they are confined to passive and carefully limited roles in the political process so as not to threaten the hegemonic control of society by neoliberal interests.

The simple fact is that “the caliber of debate and choice in neoliberal elections tends to be closer to that of the one-party communist state than that of a genuine democracy” (McChesney, 1999, p. 10). Chomsky (2003) also makes the point that the concentration of power in advanced capitalist democracies is similar to that of the Soviet Union. A political system and society that is democratic in name only stems, in no small part, from a school curriculum that has also been compared to that of the former U.S.S.R. (McNeil, 2000).

In a society where citizens are confined to the role of political spectators and activists who strive for more equitable and democratic representation are marginalized as “radicals,” there is every reason for apathy to become endemic. This disengagement functions as a tacit endorsement of the status quo; a world where consumerism runs rampant, capitalist values are accepted as common sense, the free market is infallible, and
where the vast majority of the citizenry remains oblivious to the class exploitation being perpetrated against them. Neoliberal ideology affords real power only to the wealthy while hiding behind the language of “democracy” and “freedom” that is spread by the corporate mass media. Schools, and in particular the social studies, with its emphasis on democratic citizenship, remain a fundamental site for the promotion of either indoctrination or revolution. We must strive for the latter, for if our education system continues to slip further under the hold of this ideology, the hegemonic control of society under neoliberalism will become irreversible.

Conclusion

Despite the somewhat bleak outlook presented in the last two sections, we must not allow ourselves to slip into despair entirely, for as Orlowski (2008b) indicates, “in order for counter-hegemonic discourses to take root, apathy and hopelessness must disappear” (p. 110). In the prior discussions related to the social studies curriculum and citizenship education in general, we have indicated the need for divergent educational approaches that promote critical thinking and cultivate an appreciation for active social involvement rather than mere acquiescence and acceptance of the status quo. The ability to practice these pedagogical approaches is threatened by the deskilling of teachers and the centralization of decision making through accountability reforms. Educators must resist these forces by any means necessary and refuse to surrender their freedom to shape their classrooms as they see fit. As Orlowski (2009) stresses, it is “the role of the autonomous educator [that] offers hope for counterhegemonic discourses to develop” (p. 55).
While the deck may be stacked in favour of the neoliberal elites that control the media, corporations, and government, teachers still have an almost unrivalled ability to reach students directly on a daily basis. However, Gibson and Ross (2009) state that “the primary role of capitalist schooling is social control, winning the children of the poor and working classes to be loyal, obedient, dutiful, and useful, to the ruling classes under a variety of lies: We are all in this together; this is a multicultural society, democracy trumps inequality, we all can be President, etc.” (p. 39). Still, Gibson (in press) indicates that schools can “remain an opposing force because schools are not Ford plants. Schools hold out a promise of freedom, inquiry, and creativity that many people take to heart, and it is almost impossible to successfully impose Ford plant discipline in school” (p. 5). As indicated by Hursh (2008) above, we must reject the rhetoric of neoliberalism and salvage what is left of our public education system by removing capitalist and elitist influences and returning to the business of schooling to serve the interests of society as a whole.

The most difficult task ahead of us is to overcome the apathy that is endemic not only amongst the adult citizenry but amongst our students as well. While critical educators may strive to promote counter-hegemonic discourses, these efforts will be to no avail if they fall upon deaf ears. As the old saying goes, you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink. We must begin by deconstructing the façade of capitalism for our students by teaching students about the nature of political and economic ideologies, as emphasized by Orlowski (2007). Students need to be provided with opportunities to critically examine the elitist rhetoric bombarding them from the most powerful groups in society, and as educators our role is to first alert them to the fact that this is happening.
Hursh (2008) asserts that “neoliberal governments are able to retain their legitimacy [by] blaming schools for the essential injustices and contradictions of capitalism” (p. 68). Students can become apathetic then, since they view the schools as a microcosm of society where only a select group of individuals are capable of success. Indeed, this is exactly how schools function when they adopt philosophies of social transmission and indoctrination while striving for little more than to help students “get a job.” However, if we promote a critical understanding of the need to struggle for a more democratic and equitable society then students will recognize the potential for schools to be so much more, for society to be so much more, and for themselves to become the agents of change that will achieve this. McNeil (1986) distils these sentiments to their most basic element:

For schooling to be meaningful for students today, legitimate for their investment of energy as well as legitimate as a societal institution, it must take on organizational forms and internal reward structures which affirm the potential of students to learn in a complex world. Reversing ends and means, we need to reclaim the Jeffersonian legacy and legitimate school practice by what students need to know to empower them to function as citizens. (p. 216)

Neoliberal hegemony has progressed to the extent that there is little hope for these changes to be introduced through broad institutional reforms. But hope will always lie in the power of the individual to affect change; despite the efforts of the most socially, politically, and economically powerful to disguise this fact. As educators we must exercise this power and equip the citizens of tomorrow to do the same.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Epistemological and Theoretical Perspective

This study was conducted from a social constructionist epistemological stance. Constructionism is the view “that all knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). This process of meaning making is the primary focus of the study (see Rationale & Purpose above). The “social” aspect of social constructionism emphasizes that the construction of meaning takes place within a larger societal context. For example, socially constructed understandings of the concept of “climate change” are likely to be drastically different between a farmer confronted by years of severe drought and a corporate CEO who lives in an urban metropolis. In this study, the social aspect of constructionism is of great significance, and can be understood within the aforementioned context of expanding neoliberal influence over the public education system.

Within a social constructionist epistemological orientation, the theoretical perspective of this research is one of critical inquiry. Crotty (1998) contrasts critical inquiry with other interpretive approaches, describing the latter as research “that seeks merely to understand ... research that accepts the status quo” while critical research challenges the status quo and is informed by concepts of conflict and oppression (p. 113). In this case, the conflict and oppression arises from the hegemonic practices of neoliberalism that are being adopted in the name of educational “accountability.” While
this study does not adopt a specifically Marxist critique, the concept of social class is quite relevant given the elitist ideology that is neoliberalism.

The specific methods detailed below are employed as instruments within a grounded theory methodology. Accordingly, this study was inductive in nature. No hypotheses were proffered, and while this study is necessarily situated within an understanding of previous literature and a larger sociocultural and political context, no overarching theory was being “put to the test” in this study. Rather, as per Crotty (1998), the intention is “to ensure that the theory emerging arises from the data and not from some other source” (p. 78). The goal here was to situate the understandings and ideas that emerge from the data within the critical understandings contained in the preceding discussion of context and the literature review.

**Research Site**

The research sites for this study were two high schools located in rural Alberta, approximately one hour away from the nearest large urban centre. Both Edgebrook High and Greenview High are located in small towns with populations of under 10,000. The schools draw their student body from not only the towns themselves but from the surrounding rural areas. Both schools serve Grades 9-12, reflecting the common practice in many Alberta towns to have an elementary school (K-4), a middle school (5-8), and a high school (9-12). Edgebrook serves approximately 300-350 students depending on the year, while Greenview’s student population is usually closer to 600 students. In both schools, the social studies “department” is relatively small. At Edgebrook, students will likely have the same social teacher in at least two or three grades, while Greenview

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3 School and participant names are pseudonyms. Participants were allowed to specify their own pseudonyms within sensible limits.
students may be more likely to have different teachers from year to year it is also likely they will only receive social studies instruction from two or three different teachers throughout their high school years. This fact will be important to keep in mind when we consider the impact of individual teachers on students’ beliefs and attitudes in the findings section.

The demographics of both schools (and their surrounding communities) are largely identical. The vast majority of the population is descended from English or German immigrants and visible minorities are rare in both towns. Both towns have a large number of churches and the majority of the population would identify as Christian (a fact referenced by several participants during their interviews). The population is largely comprised of middle class and working class individuals, and agriculture remains a primary source of employment in the area. In short, the communities are largely homogeneous, a fact that was also noted by many students in the interviews.

The schools were selected due to ease of access as the investigator had past professional relationships with teachers and administration at both schools as well as administrators at the division level. The Alberta social studies curriculum also presents a unique case study for investigation as Alberta Education (the government ministry) has implemented a new K-12 curriculum beginning in 2005 and culminating in the province-wide adoption of a new curriculum for Social Studies 30-1 and 30-2 at the grade 12 level during the 2009-2010 school year. As discussed below, all participants in this study were enrolled in Social Studies 30-1. The 30-1 course is typically required for acceptance into universities and typically has a heavier workload in terms of reading and writing with accompanying expectations of a higher level of analysis and critical thought, while the
expectations of the 30-2 stream are associated with a more generalized level of understanding. However, both courses cover largely the same content and the wording of outcomes is similar.

The Alberta Social Studies 30-1 program of studies is entitled “Perspectives on Ideology,” and the official curricular document offers the following synopsis: “Grade 12 explores the origins and complexities of ideologies. Students will investigate, analyze and evaluate government policies and actions and develop individual and collective responses to contemporary local, national and global issues” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 12). More specifically, the 30-1 curriculum phrases key issues in the form of questions; “To what extent should we embrace an ideology?” is the main problem students are expected to address and explore during the course, while two other questions posed by the program of studies are “To what extent should ideology be the foundation of identity?” and “To what extent should my actions as a citizen be shaped by an ideology?” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 13). Clearly then, this curriculum represents a unique context and one ideally suited for an investigation of student political ideologies. Further consideration will be given to the impact of this curriculum on the students in the findings section.

A final facet of the Alberta education system that holds a great deal of contextual relevance is the existence of a high-stakes testing system. All students in Alberta write mandatory government exams in grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 in their core academic courses. The first three rounds of testing are technically used only by the government for research purposes and do not impact a student’s academic standing within their school or class, unless a teacher or school chooses to do so independently. Students may be exempted from these exams with parental permission, although this usually only takes place in
cases where students have been coded as having special needs or learning disabilities of some kind.

The grade 12 exams are referred to as “diploma exams” (or colloquially as “diplomas” or “the diploma”) and are mandatory in English, Social Studies, Math, Chemistry, Biology, Physics, and French for students who are earning an Alberta high school diploma. The diploma exams count for 50% of a student’s final grade in the course, with their “school mark” comprised of all other assignments, tests, and other assessments at the school level contributing the other 50% of the student’s final grade. As a result, it is possible for a student to fail the diploma exam but still pass the course and receive their credits, but success on the exam remains imperative, especially for students competing for scholarships or admission into post-secondary programs. The Social Studies 30-1 diploma exam is written two parts on different days. Part A consists of two written responses, one of which is a piece of source analysis based on provided source materials and the second is a position paper in response to another source and a provided question. Part B consists of 60 multiple-choice questions, many of which may also be source-based. The results of all rounds of testing (the diploma exams as well as the grades 3, 6, and 9 tests) are made available online and are published by the media. More discussion of the nature and impact of these tests can be found in the following chapter.
Data Collection: Sampling

Data was collected for this study primarily through semi-structured interviews with 13 individual grade 12 students. Seven students (four female, three male) from Edgebrook High participated in interviews while six students from Greenview High (four male, two female) were interviewed. One group interview with five of the students from Edgebrook (the other two were unavailable) was also conducted after the round of individual interviews had taken place. The sample of students was selected by the Social Studies 30-1 teachers at each school. Teachers were asked to think of students in their classes who would be of value to this study; possessing strong communication skills and a willingness to share their thoughts and opinions. No concern was given to whether students were high academic achievers or of a specific socioeconomic, racial, cultural, or religious group. Indeed, it is not surprising that given the aforementioned demographics of the area, all students were white, and many self-identified as Christian. All students were currently enrolled in the Social Studies 30-1 course and were either 17 or 18 years old. While the investigator did not formally ask students about their academic standing, through informal discussions with teachers and references by the participants themselves during interviews, it was ascertained that all of the students were of relatively high academic standing with their grade in social studies being sufficient for honours status in most cases. Taking all this into consideration, the sampling method employed in this study might best be described as purposive sampling, since ideal participants (as described above) were sought with no specific concern for representativeness. Palys and Atchison (2008) note that this type of sampling is appropriate for inductive, exploratory research (p. 125).
Once teachers identified a group of potential participants, parental and student consent letters were distributed, and based on those returned the individual participants were selected for the study. While a relatively small number of participants may result in some limitations (see below) it is entirely acceptable within a constructionist framework. As Gordon (1984) notes, “an adherence to large samples comes from the positivist tradition, which attempts to objectify the subjects of study by nullifying subjective differences” (p.110). Such an approach can be starkly contrasted with this study where the subjective differences between participants are of great interest and significance. Both the data provided by participants during interviews as well as the interpretations and analysis of the researcher are highly subjective, and while conclusions and theories are offered in the analysis section below, these findings pertain to this group of students (and their peers) only. Implications for social studies teachers and students in general are discussed but no empirical claims of absolute representativeness are made.

Data Collection: Interviews

Each interview was approximately sixty minutes in length and was held in an empty classroom during the regular school day. Students were most often interviewed during an empty block or “spare” in their timetable. On a few occasions, students were-excused from their social studies class to participate in the interview, and the group interview at Edgebrook High was conducted while the rest of the school was attending an assembly. Interviews were recorded directly onto a laptop computer and then transcribed in order to facilitate accurate analysis.

Interviews were semi-structured in that a standard set of key questions were asked of all participants. Otherwise, the interviews were flexible and fluid with the investigator
allowing the conversations to unfold naturally while still attempting to address the same topics, themes, and ideas with all participants. The individual interviews also made use of news articles and pictures as elicitation devices.

Each individual interview began with students being shown two news articles and two pictures, one at a time, and being asked questions pertaining to each one. The intent in using these devices was to provide a tangible, concrete starting point for the discussion so as to help the students feel comfortable discussing their political beliefs, as opposed to immediately dealing with more abstract topics. Additionally, each image or story was purposefully selected because it dealt with ideologically telling concepts.

The first article (CBC News, 2009) describes a Greenpeace protest at a Shell worksite in Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta. As a result of their protest the activists were charged with mischief and breaking and entering. This brief article described both the protest itself as well as the pending legal repercussions while offering comments from the lawyer representing the accused. This article was selected because it dealt with conceptions of activism, political participation and protest, the rule of law, and perhaps most importantly, the issue of freedom of speech.

The second article (The Canadian Press, 2009) describes an appeal by a group of Hutterites from Alberta to the Supreme Court of Canada. The Hutterites are a religious minority that live on rural colonies and were fighting a decision by the provincial government that they had to have their picture taken for a province-wide facial recognition databank. They argue that having their picture taken violates the right to religious freedom. Again, this article touched on key issues related to the Charter of
Rights and Freedoms and the extent of government authority in placing limits on those freedoms, as well as bringing up issues of privacy versus security.

Participants were then asked questions on two pictures, each with a caption clarifying what was depicted in the image. The first image shows a young man sifting through a bin of winter clothing with the assistance of a volunteer at the Calgary Drop-In Centre (Gallagher, 2009). This picture was selected to provide an opportunity to discuss equality, poverty, and issues of collectivism versus individualism. The second image shows a young man clad in an Edmonton Oilers t-shirt and an Oilers banner (worn as a cape) gesturing at four police officers with riot gear on Whyte Avenue during the Stanley Cup playoffs in 2006 (Fyfe, 2006). This picture again brought up issues of rights and freedoms, security, deference to authority figures, and of course, hockey.

In addition to these prompts, the following questions were used to guide the individual interviews. Not every question was asked of every participant, nor in exactly the same order or wording, however the majority of these topics and ideas were discussed in each interview:

(1) Political beliefs and practices:

- What social or political issues are of greatest importance to you?
  - What do you think are the biggest problems in Canada today?

- Who should have the power to make political decisions, distribute resources, and decide what a good society should be?
  - Who do you think currently has this power in Canada today?

- Do you think changes in society are usually beneficial or harmful?
  - When change is needed how do you think it usually takes place?
  - When needed, how should change be achieved?

- How do you express your personal political beliefs through your actions?
  - How do you participate in the political life of your community (e.g., volunteering, protesting, petitions, consumer decisions)?
• Do your friends or family participate differently? What is their opinion of your participation or lack there of?

• Should citizens base their decisions and actions on self-interest (what is best for themselves) or the “greater good” (what is best for society as a whole)?

(2) School experiences:

• Describe some school experiences that have influenced your beliefs and attitudes about social and political perspectives.
  o Can you describe some social studies experiences that have influenced you?
  o How is what you learn in social studies relevant to your life outside of school?

• How are your school experiences helping prepare you for adulthood?
  o Do you think that what you learn in school is credible – why or why not?
  o How would you react if you were taught something in school you knew to be untrue?

(3) Conceptions of citizenship and democracy:

• What do you think is the most important part of being a “good citizen”?
  o Can you identify someone you think is a good citizen, and explain why you selected him/her?

• In what ways do you think a Canadian citizen can participate politically in our current society?
  o What forces might encourage or prevent someone from taking an active role in politics?
  o What forces might encourage or discourage your own participation in politics?

• Do you think Canada is a good example of a democratic country? Why or why not?
  o How might we go about strengthening democracy in Canada?

(4) Ideology formation:

• What influences have shaped your personal beliefs and values?
  o Can you think of any important experiences or events in your life that have affected your beliefs and values?
  o Have you always believed what you believe now about the world or have your values changed over time?
After the individual interviews were conducted, a group interview with five of the seven participants from Edgebrook High was held. Plans for a similar focus group with the students at Greenview High were unable to come to fruition due to time and scheduling constraints. The intention of the group interview was to allow for the testing of preliminary analyses arising from the first round of interview data. The group discussion also provided an opportunity to revisit points of interest that arose during the initial round of interviews, and to allow the participants to build from each other’s answers to provide additional data. The use of groups in this study is supported by Palys and Atchison’s assertion that focus groups can be a valuable source of “insightful information to the exploratory researcher who … is interested in determining issues of importance to those in the research setting or in acquiring new insights about the phenomenon from those who have experienced it” (2008, p. 159).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process first began during the interviews themselves, as critical reflection took place even from question to question, as necessitated by the semi-structured format of the interviews. During the transcription stage, a two-tiered coding system was developed as key themes and common ideas in the interview data became clear. Broad categories such as “ideological beliefs” and “citizenship and society” contained more specific codes such as “religion,” “rights and freedoms,” and “activism.” Many of the codes were overlapping and most passages of data were coded under several different categories. Transcripts were managed and coded using WeftQDA, a freeware qualitative data program available online.
In keeping with the epistemological position and the overall research design of this study, codes were not formally quantified other than a few brief tallies to indicate which side of an issue students emphasized or to provide a cursory glimpse of which topics and ideas were points of focus for the participants. Otherwise, the coded data was reviewed, recoded as necessary, and conclusions were drawn based on the ideas and opinions that arose most frequently within the interview data.

The political beliefs and attitudes reported in the findings are those that were most salient to the research questions and those that best represented points of group consensus. In a fashion entirely consistent with human nature, there were of course statements and beliefs on a variety of topics that could be classified as outliers. In some cases these exceptions held significance in and of themselves and are thusly raised in the findings section below. In other instances, these comments were judged to be simply tangential or irrelevant, often arising out of the misinterpretation of a question or a convoluted line of reasoning on the part of the participant, in these cases they were largely disregarded.

**Limitations**

An acknowledged limitation of this study is the lack of demographic diversity within the sample of participants. As mentioned prior, this was largely unavoidable since the schools and communities where the research took place are extremely homogeneous in their composition. This study is not concerned with comparing data across ethnic or class lines however, so while this fact may impact the applicability of the findings to other settings and groups of students, it should not impact the validity of the study itself.
Similarly, this study possesses a limited degree of generalizability not only due to the demographic uniformity of participants but also as a result of the relatively small sample size. However, attempts to generate theories that hold universally true are more typical of positivist approaches, and this study makes no claims to generate definitive or universal truths. The intent here is to explore an area that has previously seen little investigation and to describe what is going on with these students in these schools, with little concern for whether the findings will be empirically representative of the realities all students face. Theories and inferences drawn about the larger relevance of this study’s findings are done so with this caveat in mind.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

A purposive sampling method was used to select students based on a presumed level of astuteness and perspicacity to aid in the collection of rich data that would be theoretically generative, and to this end the research plan was successful. The interviews were insightful, often surprising, and at times greatly entertaining. While several of the participants exhibited some initial awkwardness and self-consciousness – mentioning that they wanted to make sure they didn’t “sound stupid” on the recordings – the dialogue between the interviewer and the students was conversational and the responses were thoughtful, personal, and genuine. The group interview conducted at Edgebrook High was also a worthwhile exercise as the students piggybacked on each other’s ideas to create new understandings and offered opinions on how their experiences were both congruent and discordant with those of their peers who didn’t participate in the study.

The first research question posed in this study was “How do students describe and conceptualize their political ideologies?” and essentially this question is about finding out what students believe. Given the elicitation devices used and the array of topics covered throughout the interviews, it initially seemed as if a career’s worth of scholarly articles were waiting to be mined from the mountain of opinions and values that comprised these students’ political ideologies. However, for our immediate purposes, it is those beliefs that most inform the construction of a sense of “democratic citizenship” that will be examined and explored in this section.

The second major focus of this study was to investigate the role of social studies education and other influences on the formation of these political ideologies. Whereas the
first question attempted to zero in on what students believed, this question is about why they believe it. In addressing this issue, I will first recount the participants’ responses when directly questioned on this topic, then move on to a more analytical and critical examination of other ideological influences based on more subtle references from the interviews as well as the theoretical framework previously established in the literature review.

Before delving into the specifics of the student ideologies revealed through the interview process, it is worth repeating the operational understanding of ideology arrived at earlier. When speaking of a student’s ideology, we are referring to the ideas, beliefs, and values that underlie an individual’s understanding of the world around them. An almost limitless number of different ideas and beliefs could understandably fall under this rather expansive umbrella, however as specified throughout, the emphasis here is on political understandings that inform the construction of a sense of democratic citizenship.

Some of the concepts covered in the interviews were narrowly defined and based around specific issues such as the methods used by police when dealing with unlawful citizens or the most effective methods of protecting the environment. Other concepts were broader and theoretical such as the question of whether individuals should base their decisions on self-interest or the greater good. Finally, some questions were intended to be theoretical but were interpreted and responded to in a much more tactile and practical sense, such as when the participants were asked whether they thought societal changes were generally beneficial or harmful. Despite crossing over from the actual to the ideal and back again, all of these ideas contribute to the construction of an ideology that plays a large role in determining how these individuals live their lives as members of society.
What They Believe: Political Ideologies

Each interview began with the use of a set of elicitation devices in order to engage students with some concrete issues and actual events as a means of facilitating discussion of their beliefs and opinions. The first of these articles explored students’ attitudes about the environment and various methods and approaches to conservation, while also raising issues associated with political activism and freedom of speech.

Every participant exhibited concern for the environment and most singled out climate change as a serious issue needing to be addressed. Three of the students specifically indicated at various points that the environment was the issue most important to them personally, and several students at both Edgebrook and Greenview stated that they were part of an “environment club” at their respective school. When asked about what methods could be used to protect the environment besides staging public protests, only one student emphasized a call for individual action and involvement; “there’s little things that people can do at home … like turning down the thermostat, putting on a sweater” (Rachel, Edgebrook). Despite their professed concern for environmental causes, students commonly suggested much more passive approaches focused on raising “awareness” of the problem with the hope that educating citizens would prove to be a catalyst for change.

This tendency to claim that change was needed while simultaneously having little direction on how to go about achieving that change is made all the more interesting since the issue of apathy was a recurring theme throughout many of the interviews including with regards to the environment: “We are pretty much the second worst country in terms of consumption, waste, CO₂ production, our environmental impact. As a country we seem
to be apathetic towards that, as a country we don’t seem to be taking enough initiative” (Cole, Greenview). The attitude lamented by Cole seems to be taking root amongst his peers already, as despite their recognition of environmental problems few of the participants seemed prepared to actively address the issue themselves.

The topic of environmental protests led to more general discussions of political activism and the extent to which the government should be able to arrest protesters and limit individuals’ freedom of speech. A number of the students stated they thought it was a good thing for the protesters to be arrested because doing so would actually bring more attention to their cause. This reply reflects a certain collectivist ideal as students appreciated that dedicated activists would put their own freedom at risk in order to defend a cause that is in the best interests of society as a whole. More commonly though, students thought that arrests were justified in many cases because the law is simply the law and applies regardless of circumstance. At Edgebrook, Hank summed up both of these perspectives: “I think it’s kind of cool that they’re willing to take a stand for what they believe in, but yet they also need to be sensitive to the law.”

Several students did adopt more critical stances, such as George (Greenview) who said:

I think that what the activists did was justified because if the government isn’t responding to people just talking about the issues then people will have to make demonstrations to convey what they feel. This should be considered free speech because the activists are just stating what they believe and they’re doing it through a visual approach so to speak.
However, by and large, the attitude of the participants seemed to presume that our established system of laws had been put in place to ensure citizens’ safety and ought to be respected. They did not necessarily disapprove of the protester’s methods of entering an oil sands development site and chaining themselves to equipment, but they also thought the legal consequences of these actions were acceptable and expected.

There was also a tendency from nearly all of the participants to exhibit deference towards authority both in the form of the government and law enforcement officials. When the students were asked which methods and tactics police should be allowed to use to maintain order, replies were nearly always situation-based, stating that certain actions were acceptable only in certain contexts. However, Jack (Edgebrook) went further, arguing that “in Canada there’s far too much of a stigma against police violence when it’s warranted… I think in general we put too much of a hindrance on our police officers when they’re doing their jobs.”

When asked whether they approved of the government creating a facial recognition data bank of citizen’s pictures, the participants were a little more critical. Al (Greenview) said “it depends on the reasons for this databank,” while George (Greenview) argued that “although a databank could be helpful in security and maintaining the structure of society, it might not be necessary and it could invade the privacy of citizens.” Most students analyzed the question in this way, based on whether compromised privacy was worth the potential security benefits, and when specifically asked if they would trust the government to use the databank only for security purposes they confirmed this to be true. On the whole, while most participants seemed to question this policy, they did accept it. Rachel (Edgebrook) summed up the general opinion of the
group: “Well they’re not “chipping” us yet, so yeah, I think it’s alright. (laughs) If you’re not doing anything wrong you have nothing to worry about.”

A similar degree of indifference and casual acceptance of the status quo seemed to pervade discussions centered on the topic of change (both in theory and reality). During the planning stages of this study, the original intent was to ask students about change as an indicator of their propensity for conservatism. Based on the way the dialogue unfolded in the interviews themselves however, notions of change tended to be discussed in more practical terms related to recent changes and developments in society as well as asking students how change ought to be achieved. Most participants expressed beliefs about change that were quite tentative and contextually based, with some changes being positive and others negative, and some changes having both beneficial and harmful effects. All of the participants seemed to accept social change as a reality, although with varying degrees of critical thought. As a case in point, Alexa (Greenview) had this to say:

I think change can be a good thing, either way you look at it, good or bad it’s going to happen and you just kind of have to deal with it. Like my parents a lot of the time are like “oh it would’ve been better if there was never cell phones,” like that might be true to an extent, but they’re here now and that’s the way it is and you have to deal with it. So I think there’s a lot of good you can make out of situations, you can’t really control the situation you can just control how you react to it.

While Alexa is certainly correct in her assertion that the advent of cell phones is more than a passing fad, her statement reflects a very passive consumer-oriented thought process. Change happens in society, and our role as individuals is to simply deal with that
change as we see fit, with the implication being that change is something that “just happens” and is beyond the control of citizens. As I will argue in detail later, such a thought process undeniably has hegemonic consequences.

When the conversations shifted to how change should be achieved in theory and how it is achieved in the real world, many of the participants spoke in generalities about very passive methods of change. John (Edgebrook) said that “if something needs to be changed it would be brought up to national attention so there’d be a lot of movement to try and help get a change and the government would be pressured into doing something about it.” While the idea of a “movement” does imply an active role for citizens, the ultimate decision-making power in this scenario still resides with the government. Similarly, Sam (Edgebrook) directly advocated for a non-confrontational approach to social and political change:

I think as people we have to respect the rights of other people when we want to bring about change by doing it peacefully and not infringing on other people’s rights. By raising awareness or educating, and writing letters to governments and that kind of stuff, as opposed to protesting and violently trying to bring about change.

There were a few participants who were more emphatic about the power of the individual to achieve change, however as Clayton’s (Greenview) statement illustrates, they still described a hierarchical power structure:

The process really probably comes from the people who are voicing their opinions… it starts from the bottom and it just has to gain enough momentum to eventually get to the top and then it will be heard and the idea or event will
become news and people will react to it, and thus accordingly you will get [the change].

These perceptions of social change are entirely in line with the spectator democracy promoted by neoliberal interests, where individuals are able to exercise free speech and have the illusion of influencing policy while the real governing power remains concentrated in the hands of a distant elite (Ross, 2006a).

The degree to which the participants readily accepted a passive and limited role in social change is somewhat incongruous with their frequent reiterations of the importance of equality and the concern they expressed over poverty. There is a degree of ideological inconsistency present when an individual desires social change while simultaneously confirming the marginalization of their own agency in achieving that change. John (Edgebrook) cited the example of professional baseball player Alex Rodriguez and his exorbitant salary, “I kind of find it unacceptable, when people have this overabundance of money, but then there’s people that have absolutely nothing.” Rhonda (Edgebrook) also stated that she was “concerned about the inequality in this world, how people in developed countries are prioritized ahead of others.” The students then, seem to be knowledgeable and critical enough to recognize that our society falls short of the democratic ideal of equal opportunity for all citizens, yet they did not directly situate this reality within a larger social and political context. Some students made mention of how they personally might try to remedy the problem by volunteering or through their intended studies at university, but none identified the systemic barriers in place to prevent a real redistribution of wealth from occurring.
The students’ championing of equality comes from a commitment to collectivism that emerged throughout the interviews. Students frequently mentioned the importance of helping those less fortunate, and spoke in unflattering terms about the individualistic nature of society. For example, Trudy (Greenview) stated simply, “I think people need to recognize what’s best for the greater good. I think there’s too much self-interest going on.” George (Greenview) offered a more critically nuanced opinion:

I think people need to realize that when it comes to some issues that what’s best for their self-interest is also in collective interest. When it comes to environmental issues, when it comes to freedom of speech, these are both individual issues and collective issues that have to be looked at.

As well, Cole (Greenview) asserted “I do agree with the statement from each according to their ability to each according to their need,” and Rachel (Edgebrook) indicated “I think if you do what’s best for society first, in the end it will help you…I’m kind of a collectivist.”

Despite this predilection for collectivist ideals, not all students were so clear when asked whether individuals should base their decisions on self-interest or the greater good. Students lamented the inequality of society were much less forceful when directly addressing the issue of collectivism versus individualism in this way. Many used the language of “finding a balance” between the two perspectives, while others initially responded in favour of one viewpoint but ended up directly contradicting themselves and espousing the opposite position by the conclusion of their answer.

Most striking was the example of Hank (Edgebrook) who responded passionately to being shown a picture from the Calgary Drop-In Centre: “I love it personally, I’ve
been down to the drop-in centre myself and it’s actually really cool, I see it as a very unselfish thing.” Hank made frequent mention of his concern over the inequality that exists on both the local and global levels. However, he later stated that his personal ideology was a “mix” of collectivism and individualism, while referencing some very traditional capitalist rhetoric; “you can work as hard as you want to get what you want, I think [that] determines where you go.” This statement represented a marked departure from an earlier comment that the homeless were often stuck in “situations that you haven’t necessarily put yourself into.” Hank also positioned himself firmly as a collectivist by bemoaning individualistic aspects of the education system such as scholarship competitions.

While Hank’s example was perhaps the most dramatic, many of the other participants also employed some very familiar individualist and capitalist rhetoric despite claiming that collectivist values were those they identified most closely with. Al (Greenview) argued that the government has a responsibility to ensure the basic needs of all citizens are met and stated that “it’d be nice if people would make their decisions based on the greater good.” Al also stated “the problem with the economy is there has to be competition for our economy to progress, if there isn’t competition then the economy’s not going to work.” These two beliefs are not necessarily mutually exclusive; Susan (Edgebrook) expressed similar viewpoints and referred to her ideology as that of a “welfare capitalist.” But even with this caveat in mind, the ideological picture painted by these statements certainly has inconsistencies.

These inconsistencies can be read as further confirmation that neoliberalism has had a hegemonic effect, especially if we refer back to Orlowski’s (2009a) statement that
hegemony manifests itself through the representation of the elite’s interests as universal interests that are accepted as the natural order. Al’s presumption about the necessity of a competitive economy shows how one perspective or school of thought can be ingrained as “common sense” when it is propagated by hegemonic influences. I will examine the role of the school in the formation of ideologies such as Al’s in more detail below, but Apple (2004) argues that schools acting as agents of cultural and ideological hegemony “help create people (with the appropriate meanings and values) who see no other possibility to the economic and cultural assemblage now extant” (p. 6). This would seem to be the case here, where capitalist rhetoric has been transformed into a taken for granted understanding of the way the world works, despite the fact that this construction of knowledge directly contradicts other deeply held values.

While a range of opinions and ideas were expressed by the participants, a general impression of their ideological tendencies has begun to emerge. At the risk of generalization, these students are passionate about the environment, equality (or the lack thereof), and the collective interests of society. They are also tentative and passive about acting upon their beliefs and while they readily identify social ills they have yet to build upon these beliefs with concerted efforts or ideas to achieve real change. It was quite common for them to support apparently contradictory positions and values and on the whole there seems to be a marked degree of inconsistency and confusion within their ideologies. All of these points of analysis suggest that the students have been influenced by hegemonic forces in society, an influence which becomes more pronounced when we explore the values and beliefs that contribute to their conceptions of democratic citizenship.
What They Believe: Conceptions of Democratic Citizenship

The “Program Rationale and Philosophy” section of the Alberta social studies curriculum describes the role of social studies as follows:

Social studies develops the key values and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills and processes necessary for students to become active and responsible citizens, engaged in the democratic process and aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and world. (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 1).

As discussed previously in the literature review, such a goal takes on even greater importance in a world where democracy is increasingly constrained, limited, subverted, and corrupted. As students who were in the process of completing their last social studies course before graduating from high school, the participants in this study represent the culmination of democratic citizenship education, at least within the context of the Alberta public school system. By examining their opinions and beliefs we gain insight into the potential influence they will have on our democracy as well as the influence the world has already had on them. Ultimately, they reveal that there is hope for a better future and grave doubt as to whether it can and will be achieved.

It became clear early in each interview that the participants were quite well-informed and politically engaged. None was shy to share their opinions on current events, and they specifically identified issues of importance such as climate change, the economic recession, and the war in Afghanistan. Without minimizing the importance of an informed, educated and opinionated citizenry, another crucial component of active democratic citizenship is to take some form of action based on those beliefs and
participate in the political life of your country. The topic of political participation was discussed in both a hypothetical sense (what ways could a citizen participate politically in Canada?) and a personal sense (what ways do you personally act on your political beliefs?), with both lines of inquiry raising some important issues.

When students were asked about the opportunities available for Canadian citizens to become politically involved the actions they suggested were quite general, passive, and largely predictable. Most spoke of writing letters to politicians, attending local meetings or rallies, becoming a member of a political party, and the importance of being informed about current events. John’s (Edgebrook) reply was fairly typical: “you could help with a non-profit organization, help with elections, you could just help the community in any kind of way that would benefit everyone else including yourself.” A few students mentioned that protests were an effective method of influencing the political process, but one of the most frequent suggestions was that voting in elections was extremely important. George (Greenview) echoed the sentiments of his peers with this belief: “I think one of the largest ways is to actually go and vote, we have very low voter turnouts in Canada, if people just recognize that their votes actually make a difference that can help immensely.” Several of the students used this rhetoric of votes “making a difference,” and Clayton (Greenview) argued that “if everyone says someone else will go vote, who will vote?” These statements, while perhaps true, support Avery’s (1992) assertion that students are well-versed in the “slogans of democracy” but may well lack a deeper critical understanding of the political process.

Rachel (Edgebrook) was one student who did offer a more critical view of political participation. When asked how Canadian citizens are able to take part in the
political process she replied, “I’m actually not sure, because it doesn’t seem like it’s very open. As we discussed in social the other day, we do not have a direct democracy. So it’s hard for people to really be involved in decision making and things like that.” Rachel’s reply can be contrasted with a similar one from Al (Greenview) who said he wasn’t sure how people could participate, but he simply hadn’t “looked into it” due to a lack of interest. Rachel’s impression that the political process seems inaccessible shows awareness (albeit indirectly) of the antidemocratic influence of neoliberal forces, while Al’s expression of political apathy is a consequence of this very same process that aims to exclude the public at large from the decision making process.

This is precisely how hegemony becomes entrenched; as the political process becomes more distant, elitist, and undemocratic, citizens become detached and apathetic since they have no real input which further solidifies the boundaries that prevent public involvement and concentrate power in the hands of the wealthy. There is little doubt the participants were well aware of the most obvious manifestation of this process – the political apathy that pervades our society, and especially their peers. In a couple of cases (such as Al’s) the students readily acknowledged their own apathy, but complaints about the apathy of others were far more prevalent. Jack (Edgebrook) shed light on how our society has become a spectator democracy, arguing that “I think people are far too apathetic about politics right now, in general I think people see elections as their only time to hold the government accountable for decisions they make.” George (Greenview) said “I don’t think my peers care, they’re mostly apathetic about what’s going on in the country and what’s going on in the world. I think this apathy is quite common in more
than just the youth.” Sam (Edgebrook) simply stated “my friends don’t think… they’re really apathetic like that.”

As these criticisms of societal apathy featured prominently in many of the interviews, the discussion often turned next to the underlying causes of this apathy and some common ideas emerged. One of the most frequent was, as Rhonda (Edgebrook) put it, “just being too busy in your life to want to learn about what’s going on outside your direct little life.” Clayton (Greenview) was one of a number of students who offered a similar explanation, although he specifically singled out the influence of economic self-interest, saying that widespread apathy exists because “a lot of people are involved in the rat race deal, they just want to get money, want to have a good life.” Both of these responses offer some critical insight into the problem, but they also show how ingrained neoliberal ideology has apparently become in the daily lives of these students, where bettering society and being informed about the world is less important than fulfilling your own immediate desires.

Cole (Greenview) provided an example of deeply analytical and sophisticated critical thought in response to this topic:

I wonder if it’s maybe just taught to use through our own history, maybe through historic cases where it is really difficult to make a difference…it’s really hard to advocate change especially in Alberta, in a province that has been a single-party state essentially for such a long period of time, and the reason that it’s so difficult to make changes, to have progress, is because people are mostly apathetic. They’re apathetic to concerns within their lives, and interesting enough maybe they’re apathetic because they don’t feel that they can make a difference… So if
you have a functioning democratic system why wouldn’t more people be inclined to use this privilege?

It is the combination of a neoliberal emphasis on material wealth and self-interest alongside a deeply flawed and corrupt democratic process that fosters citizens’ disengagement from the political life of their community. This is a trend that the participants observed taking hold in their peers and that several acknowledged in their own actions. However, this political marginalization becomes truly hegemonic when it is unwittingly participated in; that is, when individuals who claim to be politically engaged and active aren’t readily aware that their actions fall short of what is needed to sustain a healthy democracy.

This reality became very apparent when considering the students’ responses about how their political beliefs are actually manifest into concrete actions and decisions that reflect real participation in the political world. With the exception of one student who said they were a member of the youth arm of the NDP, most of the student’s responses reflected very passive levels of political participation. Several students readily admitted they weren’t involved in their community in any way and several others only expressed their political beliefs through discussions in social class. When students did indicate specific activities, they were taking a view of citizenship that was more aligned with “personal responsibility” rather than a “participatory” or “justice-oriented” conception of citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). For example, Rhonda (Edgebrook) said “I volunteer for various things. I’ve volunteered for a summer children’s fun group, taking them to the pool and watching over them at the science centre,” while Alexa (Greenview) recounted her involvement as follows:
Well, I talked a lot about the community and helping out people who are less fortunate, there’s this soup kitchen in Red Deer I go to a lot and I do those kind of things, we help out with Samaritan’s Purse, we donate money to a child in Africa, we do a lot of things like that, help out with just money donations and stuff.

Several other students volunteered at drop-in centres and shelters for the less fortunate. While such efforts certainly make a difference in the lives of those experiencing hardship they fail to address the underlying causes of these social problems. Moreover, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe conceptions of citizenship that emphasize personal responsibility as “conservative” and “individualistic” (p. 244). In short, if we are to resist the hegemonic power of neoliberalism, we need more critical citizens that are both willing and able to assume an active leadership role in the fight for fundamental social change.

Another frequent response was that while the student wasn’t politically involved at the present time, they planned on changing their behaviour in the future. John (Edgebrook) acknowledged the limitations of this position: “I’d like to do more when I’m older. I’m planning on going to school to help be a counsellor, but as of right now I’m just kind of planning to help but not really following through on it yet.” While John’s response was vague and more humanitarian than explicitly political, Susan (Edgebrook) offered a more emphatic, although still hypothetical outlook: “I haven’t seen an issue yet where I’ve felt the need to protest, but as my life will go on, if there’s an issue that I stand strongly for… then I will definitely stand up for what I believe in because that’s important.”
These discussions of the importance of voting, the efficacy of activism, and the value of volunteerism are directly tied to the most important facets of students’ conceptions of democratic citizenship – the nature of the decision making process, the structure and role of government, and ultimately what “democracy” itself means. While each of these topics is prone to pat definitions and easy answers, it should be clear at this point that the truth in practice is far more problematic. The neoliberal influence of corporations, the mass media, and government bureaucrats has corrupted the democratic process while simultaneously distorting the depiction of this influence. The beliefs of the students interviewed in this study provide ample evidence that the efforts of these elite groups have had significant success at the grassroots level; however there were isolated responses and pieces of conversation that hint at a truly critical understanding of where the power in our society ultimately lies.

When directly asked “who should have the decision making power in society,” that is the power to make important political decisions, students were fairly unanimous in their replies. “The people should have that power” was the participants’ refrain, with many students specifically pointing out the appeal of a system of direct democracy where all policy decisions would be a matter of public debate. Many of the participants raised either this idea or that of proportional representation on the grounds that despite our electoral rights (or “votation” as one student called it) it is far too easy for our elected representatives to ignore the opinions of their constituents. Several students, including Jack (Edgebrook) argued that political parties and the expectation of “toeing the party line” deter politicians from truly representing public opinion:
Right now we put all of our trust in our representative officials, we don’t have any direct connection to it at all, and I think one of the most troubling things is when you get a situation where all of the representatives are expected to vote with their party even though that may not represent the will of the people in a certain district.

While Jack’s thoughts on the subject were fairly astute, many of the other participants failed to exhibit the same critical stance.

When asked whether our elected representatives really represented our interests a number of students expressed opinions similar to John’s (Edgebrook): “I’d say yeah, because you’re voting for the individual that’s part of the party and you believe in what that party believes, so they’re kind of speaking on behalf of you and your beliefs.” These students expressed the desire for citizens to be more directly involved with the democratic process yet also exhibited a tendency to passively accept the status quo as an acceptable method of decision making. Students have inclinations towards a more authentic democratic experience but have yet to develop the critical analytical skills that allow them to distinguish between these aspirations and our current political reality. Furthermore based on their earlier comments about political participation, they seem to lack the drive to take personal action to achieve this change.

One student’s response did stand out when discussing the topic of decision-making power. George’s (Greenview) comments are a clarion call of hope that the hegemonic tide of anti-democratic neoliberalism might be resisted:

I think that the people of a nation should have more of a say in how their nation is run and they should have the power in what their nation is doing, in our system
and most democracies you do have a disconnect between public opinion and what
the opinion is of the elected officials and I think that the actual citizens should
have more of a say in their government than what they actually do… I think it
comes down to undemocratic corporations having a lot of influence over
government policy.

George (Greenview) was one of only two students to directly note and criticize the
growing corporate influence over the decision-making process, with the other case
occurring when Cole (Greenview) cited the specific example of oil companies carrying
great sway over provincial politics in Alberta. The problem however, is that George was
the exception to the norm in this study which is itself comprised of students who are
already the exception to the norm based on their comments about the political
engagement of their peers.

Many of the students exhibited an inherent and taken for granted trust that the
government does serve the interests of citizens first and foremost. Some of this evidence
has already been alluded to earlier when discussing students’ general deference to
authority. Even as some students were criticizing the government or politicians, there
were subtle comments that revealed a deeply-seeded faith in these same policy makers.
Trudy (Greenview) mentioned that “the government is there to help,” while Jack
(Edgebrook) referenced social contract theory in stating that “the government is
responsible to the citizens that it governs to make decisions that are going to be beneficial
to the citizens.” He elaborated on this point to say that he felt if the government wasn’t
meeting the needs of its citizens then it wouldn’t remain in power for very long.
This trust in the government and acceptance of the current political process (despite a professed desire for more direct citizen involvement) likely stems from the students’ conceptions of democracy itself. These beliefs came to the forefront when students were asked if they thought Canada was a good example of a democratic country. Nearly every student felt Canada was a very good example of a democratic nation. There were two common reasons offered to support this assertion, the first was the right to vote. “I see us being a good representation of a democracy, we all have the freedom to vote, anyone can run for office” (Hank, Edgebrook). Clayton (Greenview) said “I do believe Canada is a very good example of a democracy, and what other countries should model themselves after… we have the opportunity to vote… we have the right to vote.” The second justification was that Canada was a good democracy in a comparative sense. Cole (Greenview) answered, “Yes, especially speaking in relative terms to the rest of the world.” Rachel (Edgebrook) stated Canada’s democracy is “better than other countries. I don’t want to complain too much about our government because we’ve got it pretty good.”

While a couple of students were more guarded in their endorsement of Canada’s democratic health, these two reasons (those centered on voting and those from a comparative stance) were offered by nearly every other participant. The reduction of democracy to the act of voting is a hallmark of an increasingly elitist and exclusionary political process. The fact that students identify our right to vote as the minimum requirement for a good democracy shows that this reductionist understanding of the democratic process has been hegemonically accepted and affirmed. The fact that there are extremely reprehensible political regimes in the world does not relieve Canadian citizens
of the responsibility to hold their elected officials accountable in an authentic democratic process; however this is exactly where such a rationale leads. It also promotes a very passive acceptance of the status quo akin to Parker’s (2001) argument that democracy is mistakenly thought of as an accomplishment, while ignoring Urrieta’s (2005) suggestion that the democratic struggle is ongoing and requires constant growth.

Students were asked how Canada could be made more democratic and their responses further demonstrate that their conceptions of democracy were narrow, limited, and largely representative of the hegemonic implementation of neoliberal ideology. A number of the students cited proportional representation as an electoral reform that would make our democracy more truly representative, however when questioned deeper, many students couldn’t describe how such a change could be achieved, and simply recited a “textbook-style” definition of the term. As John (Edgebrook) said, “there’s something in social the other day that caught my attention, proportional representation… I think that would work better,” however he was unable to elaborate further on this idea. Similarly, another common reply when asked how we could strengthen democracy was “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure.” This inability to conceive of alternative solutions is similar to the students previously noted tendency to possess strong beliefs but not the ambition to act on them. Furthermore, these student’s democratic beliefs seem to support Vinson and Ross’ (2001) assertion that “citizenship transmission” is most emphasized in social studies curriculum as opposed to an emphasis on social reconstruction which seeks to address societal shortcomings.

Ultimately, the goal of any citizenship education program is to foster the development of citizens who are capable of advancing and improving society. What
varies of course is the description of what these citizens are like, whether they will be focused on humanitarian efforts or social critique for example. Through the exploration of student’s personal political beliefs, their propensity for political action, and their conceptions of the democratic process a picture has begun to emerge of these students as future citizens. However, they were also directly asked what they thought were the defining characteristics of a “good citizen.” As you might expect, there was a considerable range of responses, but a few ideas were held in common by several students.

The most frequent replies aligned themselves with Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) description of a “personally responsible” citizen. These students described the importance of respect for both authority figures and fellow citizens and stressed other values such as honesty and compassion. Hank (Edgebrook) was one of these students and he emphasized that a good citizen should be a “role model” for “the next generation.” As noted before, these are all admirable qualities for a person to possess; however this vision of citizenship stops short of challenging the societal status quo.

Other students used this question as another opportunity to call attention to the apathy that afflicts society but most of these students described a good citizen as someone who’s informed and aware of what’s going on in the country, rather than someone who’s politically active. A tendency emerged here for students to speak in general terms that were laden with buzzwords and rhetoric but with few specific details and actions. Rhonda (Edgebrook) described the ideal citizen as “someone who’s involved and knows what’s going on with their government and other governments around the world. Someone who’s willing to help others, whether that’s as a volunteer or not… morals, having good
character is important.” A few students mentioned that it was important not only to be informed but to question decisions that are being made, but these remarks were brief and superficial.

In sum, these students described their political ideologies in language that is consistent with the critical context established in the literature review of this study. While most of the students were passionate about certain issues and had clearly spent significant time thinking about the world around them, their social critiques lacked sophistication and the desire for change. When confronted with the “biggest” questions – those that addressed systemic political and social problems for example – many students defaulted to passive and tentative positions that relied heavily on rote understandings and flimsy rhetoric. The frequency of contradictory statements also implies that these students’ ideologies remain under construction; this despite the fact that each of the participants asserted that their beliefs hadn’t undergone much change during their lives. At the least, it became very clear that the students had constructed their worldviews by drawing from a variety of influences, and it is these forces that we now turn our attention to. A visual representation of the ideological beliefs described above, as well as the ideological influences described in the following sections, is included at the end of the chapter (see Figure 1).
Why They Believe It: Personal Ideological Influences

The question of why we believe what we believe is not an easy one for many of us to answer. There is a tendency is to explain our ingrained values and patterns of behaviour with statements like “well that’s just who I am.” Hegemony works in this fashion as well, with controlling and exclusionary systems becoming entrenched on such a broad yet largely unconscious level that they become accepted as a common sense understanding of “that’s just the way it is.” It was for this reason that each interview aimed to explore not only what students believed but how they came to believe it and why they viewed the world the way they did.

Students were asked these questions both in narrow contexts related to specific beliefs as well as in more generalized ways. For example, if a student said that equality was an important value they would typically be asked to explain why they thought this and what experiences had caused them to hold that opinion. On a broader scale, one of the questions posed to participants at the end of each interview was simply, “what have been the biggest influences on your beliefs?” In both instances, there was a fairly narrow range of responses, with one particular source indicated as the dominant influence on nearly every student’s ideology.

The students overwhelmingly identified their family, and specifically their parents, as having played the greatest role in the development of their personal ideologies. As Hank (Edgebrook) said, “parents I think have probably been the biggest thing, since you’re young that’s all you know, all you see, until you grow you don’t really know anything else.” Rachel (Edgebrook) said her father in particular was her role model, “so much of what he believes just rubs off on me. I just wonder if I had anybody
else as a father I’d be totally different. Your family influences you.” These and other students typically mentioned how having parents who were well-educated and informed about the world helped them follow a similar path, and how they saw qualities in their parents (such as kindness and honesty) that they tried to emulate.

Students reinforced that family was a major influence on not only their beliefs, but those of their peers as well. While discussing how many of their peers didn’t care about social studies, Rhonda (Edgebrook) argued:

I also think it’s the way you’re raised because if your parents don’t care about what’s happening, if they don’t care about the government or voting, it’s instilled in you not to care. Like if they say they didn’t like a certain subject in school and you’re asking them for help with homework and they say they don’t enjoy that subject that can indirectly affect the way you view that subject.

Statements like these make it clear that parents and family have the potential to exert tremendous influence over the ideological development of students and can do so in either a negative or positive way. These effects cannot be discounted, given that parents have a persistent role in their child’s life while individual teachers are likely to come and go with each passing year and semester. While we can’t re-educate parents to ensure they help steer students in the right direction, we can encourage the development of today’s students to become more critically minded, socially conscious, and politically engaged when they reach adulthood. In fact, the only other ideological influence raised with frequency was that exerted by schools.

In discussing the role schools had played in their ideological development, the students also revealed a number of interesting opinions about the functions and practices
of schools, and in particular social studies. It is pertinent here to first explore some of the students’ general impressions and understandings of the education system since these dispositions affect the ability of schools and teachers to have a meaningful impact on students’ development as democratic citizens.

The students valued the idea of education and thought it played an important role in society. Susan (Edgebrook) noted that “one of the key components of Canada being a democratic nation is to have an educated body of people and we’re so lucky to have an amazing education system in Canada.” However, they had mixed views about whether school was truly preparing them for adulthood. Many students appreciated that their high school classes were helping them prepare for post-secondary studies, however others noted that they felt school sheltered students a bit from the responsibilities that come with being an independent adult citizen. Most often however, the students’ distinguished between the role and relevancy of different courses.

The students frequently pointed to social studies as the one class most relevant to their lives and whose content and methods would have the most bearing on their lives in the future; given this study’s sampling method, these attitudes were largely expected. John (Edgebrook) indicated that he plans to pursue a career in counselling or social work, and said that social studies was a class that was important to him while classes like chemistry, biology, and physics seemed less relevant. Similarly, Trudy (Greenview) said “not saying that all the other classes aren’t important, but I do think social is one of the most important classes that people can take… I think it’s so important because it’s not just a class it’s something you’ll take with you in real life,” she contrasted social with math, opining that “you’re not going to use all the math equations you learn.”
While the participants were unanimous in their appreciation of social studies as one of the most important school subjects, they were just as unequivocal when asked whether their peers had the same views. Susan (Edgebrook) commented, “I think it’s incredibly undervalued and you hear people complain all the time, like oh, we learned about this revolution that happened 200 years ago, why is this relevant to me now.” Clayton (Greenview) showed similar disdain for the attitudes of his peers in saying, “for my grade, in grade 12, I think most of them are a giant group of lemmings and just believe that social is something you need to get through, just so you can get out of school.” George (Greenview) stated “I think that school has taught me that, for the most part, people are generally apathetic.” These differences (between the participants and their peers) will be analyzed and commented on further in the last chapter, but it is worth keeping in mind that the impact of social studies described by the interviewed students below can be sharply contrasted with the apparent stolidity of other students.

When describing the role that social studies had played in the formation of their personal ideologies, many participants indicated that specific teachers had been a source of inspiration. Rachel (Edgebrook) reflected on her social teacher from grade 10: “just seeing that one teacher be so into teaching, it just seemed like they were really into what they did. It’s always inspiring when you see somebody just love what they do and they’re really good at it… I never cared about social problems more than I did that year.” Al (Greenview) added that “teachers that I respect in the classroom, maybe some of their ideas will rub off on me because I respect them so much,” while several other students noted that the passions and beliefs exhibited by their teachers had become important parts of their personal ideologies.
Evidence such as this provides a strong reason to avoid embracing the illusion of neutral teaching. Whether students agree or disagree with our perspectives, it is important as social studies teachers to be passionate and opinionated, rather than trying to project an image of detached impartiality. If we hope to nurture the development of citizens with strong political beliefs and the zeal to pursue solutions to social problems, teachers have a responsibility to model this behaviour in the classroom, regardless of the constraints of increased standardization and accountability measures. Clayton (Greenview) provided a tangible example that confirmed this impact:

School never really influenced my political beliefs or anything until probably grade 10, that’s when I met one of my social teachers who has influenced me greatly in the political sector because he has a different political belief than I do, but he also helps you understand that even though you might not agree with his political beliefs you still should listen to that opinion so you can form an idea or a statement [of your own].

The participants also talked at length about the general impact that their social studies experiences have had on their personal ideologies. A number of students mentioned how learning about specific events such as the Rwandan genocide or the French Revolution had caused them to view the world differently and adjust their priorities. Other students pointed generally to the importance of learning about current events, and how class discussions caused them to be more interested in the world around them. This was one of the most common responses – that social studies had influenced their beliefs simply because they had gained a deeper understanding of the issues raised in class.
A number of other participants mentioned that social studies contributed to their political beliefs by presenting them with source material from which to form their own opinions. On this note, George (Greenview) said:

When it comes to social studies, I think it provides case studies for me to form an opinion from and I’m able to get a broad sense of different incidents that have happened throughout the past and throughout the world. I think that contributes somewhat to what I believe.

Jack (Edgebrook) made a somewhat similar comment; although he indicated that his family’s influence (and in particular their religious beliefs) had played the greatest role in his ideological development, he did reflect on how social studies had strengthened his views:

I guess I get a better understanding of the opposing view to my own opinions, but I think generally, with social class, I gain some understanding of the other side, so that I can better judge between my own opinion and someone else’s, but generally I think my opinions haven’t really changed in social class. I find more justification for my own beliefs through class.

Other students also felt that social studies (and in particular the use of open-ended class discussions and debates) provided a place where they were able to solidify previous predilections by exploring historical events and other course content which they might have otherwise never been exposed to.

Rhonda (Edgebrook) summed up the collective sentiment of the participants when she stated “the dominant influences for sure are my family and school, there’s really nothing else that comes close.” Most of the talk of school’s influence revolved around
social studies, as per the focus of this study as well as the aforementioned interests of the students. However, there were passing references to other school experiences that had influenced the students’ beliefs. Several students mentioned that school provided a site for them to interact with their peers and that this socialization had helped them learn how to deal with people more effectively. Other students pointed to such experiences as involvement in extra-curricular clubs, interactions with teachers and aides outside of the classroom, and school-based charity drives as having played a role in the formation of their ideologies.

While Rhonda’s statement about school and family being the two greatest influences held true for the other participants, a few students indicated that their religious beliefs were a key part of their personal ideology. These participants described how through church youth groups they had participated in various charity activities that had drawn their attention to social problems such as homelessness and mental illness. However, as Hank (Edgebrook) did, these students also usually talked about religion’s impact as being about people rather than specific tenets of their faith, “church has been a huge thing, and church is not just a book, it’s a group of people, and that group of people really influence you… it’s the people you put yourself around who really mould you I think.” While not discounting the important role that religion plays in many people’s lives, it is difficult within the context of this study to separate the impact of religion from that of the family, since young people most often inherit these beliefs from their parents. As a result, the two forces directly acknowledged by the participants as having most shaped their ideologies were their families and their school experiences, especially in social studies.
Why They Really Believe It: Unacknowledged Ideological Influences

Human motives are difficult to understand at best and utterly incomprehensible at worst, and for this reason it is important to examine what other influences may have contributed to these student’s ideological growth besides those directly specified by the participants. Rather, by framing the interview data within the critical context established in the literature review, the students reveal other influences on their development as citizens even without their personal acknowledgement of these forces. In some instances these forces are simply latent and less obvious then the direct intervention of a parent into their child’s life for example. In other cases, these forces are distinctly hegemonic and therefore unrecognizable except from a perspective that is attuned to the subtle nature of this form of social control.

In the group interview at Edgebrook High, an interesting exchange occurred while discussing the varying levels of engagement that the students had observed in their peers. Jack was making the argument that students who weren’t interested in class weren’t influenced by school very much when Rhonda replied:

The apathetic people, maybe they don’t get much out of their actual class material, but even just the fact that you have a fixed schedule everyday, and even just the schedule can teach you important things later on in life, you know, to get to work on time, to follow your schedule, they can learn to motivate themselves more.

This brought up the issue of whether the participants felt school’s biggest impact came through the skills and knowledge developed in specific courses, or whether it was the “life lessons” (for lack of a better term) such as punctuality that were more prominent.
The students then agreed, that it was these “indirect” lessons that would carry the most value. As Susan put it, “I think you can be as passionate about education as you want and you could be the smartest person ever but if you don’t know how to wake up on time, show up for school, and be responsible like that, that knowledge isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

Trudy (Greenview) had similar perceptions of school’s influence and pointed out that “you’re learning more than what the class is actually teaching and I don’t think a lot of people realize that.” These indirect lessons described by Trudy and the Edgebrook students form the hidden curriculum of schools. McKernan (2008) describes the hidden curriculum as “latent or covert but present in school culture… [it] is mediated through implication rather than direct teaching and is embedded in the culture of the school” (p. 36). Through their descriptions of the impact of the hidden curriculum these students lend credence to Graham and Neu’s (2004) argument that school socializes students into passive and obedient roles as citizens. The fact that these students embrace these latent teachings and value them at least as much as social studies lessons fostering critical democratic citizenship also supports Apple’s (2004) assertion that the hidden curriculum serves the ideological hegemony of society’s elite classes.

The hegemonic influence of the hidden curriculum was further reflected in a statement by Hank (Edgebrook). When describing school’s influence on his beliefs, he had this to say:

School teaches you to go to school, finish school, get a job, you know, go to college then get a job, get married, have kids, big house, five cars, kind of the “American dream” theory, that’s what it feels like North America is all about…
there’s a time for everything, but I think school kind of encourages you to do everything for yourself.

Judging by the comments of other participants, Hank’s experience was not an isolated instance. When asked about the role school was playing in helping prepare them as adult citizens many students framed their answers explicitly around the notion of “getting a job.” Based on the responses of these students then, the hidden curriculum not only schools students in the value of compliance, it also reinforces the importance of individualism while cultivating economic and capitalist conceptions of citizenship. This confirms that the hegemonic influences at play here are closely aligned with the ideals of neoliberal ideology.

As mentioned above, the hidden curriculum is latent within the culture of a school; it is expressed largely through bells, schedules, and detentions rather than through the content of lessons delivered in the classroom. However, this distinction has become more and more difficult to make as the impact of high-stakes testing has become more pronounced. Considering that these students were (at the time of the interviews) only one month away from writing their first round of diploma exams worth 50% of their academic course grades, the issue of testing arose in many of the interviews. In none of these cases did the students speak favourably of the tests. In fact the closest thing to a positive opinion related to the tests was that one student described them as a “rite of passage” that symbolized the challenge of completing high school. Otherwise, the students levied a number of criticisms against the diploma exams that confirm many of the previously made arguments about the detrimental impact of high-stakes tests.
A complaint from several students was that the tests themselves were a poor assessment device based on the true goals of a subject like social studies. While these students had yet to write the actual diploma exams, they had taken numerous “practice” exams that were comprised of questions taken from past versions of the test. In the group interview at Edgebrook High, Jack said:

A lot of the material that we seem to get on the tests is really irrelevant to what’s happening or how things interact in actual society. It seems like the test only pays attention to this idea or that and it doesn’t really get this whole structure that’s made up of these ideas, it just gets little individual sections.

Susan noted how this compartmentalized view of the course content was incongruous with the intent of the course itself:

It’s not really encouraging thought, it’s encouraging memorization and I think the whole point of social studies should be to encourage thought and create informed people. A lot of the stuff we learn is just fact, and you have to learn this and learn this and learn this but if you don’t know how to analyze it and relate it, it’s kind of pointless.

Susan and Jack’s criticisms were echoed by other students who felt that the multiple-choice questions that make up the bulk of the test were poorly constructed and often very confusing. One student remarked that it was difficult to tell what knowledge or ideas the questions were even assessing, while another remarked that the biggest challenge was “reading the question in a certain way.” Ultimately, Rhonda (Edgebrook) concluded “it might not be a very good reflection of how much people know.”
The participants also mentioned how the high-stakes attached to the diploma exam changed their classroom experiences for the worse. Rachel (Edgebrook) felt strongly that “teachers have to change the way that they teach the course because they have to prepare students,” while George (Greenview) stated:

I think when you have diploma exams that are worth 50% of your mark that lots of your course ends up being taught to the exam, so you’re not necessarily learning all the material but you’re learning how to write the exam… [without the exam] you might be able to learn better.

George’s belief was reinforced by the participants in the Edgebrook group interview who unanimously agreed that removing the diploma exam would encourage better learning and make for a more authentic social studies course. As Sam (Edgebrook) put it, “if they took away that exam we would be able to focus more on the learning, not just learning certain things.”

Clearly then, despite (and perhaps exacerbated by) the shortcomings of the test itself and its detrimental impact on the way social studies is taught, the students must devote a great deal of attention to the diploma exam. Rhonda (Edgebrook) acknowledged that “there’s a lot of pressure to absorb everything you can in order to write the diploma,” while other students similarly spoke of the “stress” and “angst” associated with the test. Jack (Edgebrook) confirmed the significance of the test by saying, “part of the reason we’re in social studies is to write the diploma. It’s not the main reason, but it’s definitely a big worry for a lot of the people in the class.”

With a test that is at best superficially relevant holding so much sway over the students, it is not surprising that many have failed to develop the deeply critical
understandings of democratic citizenship that are required for active political participation. The students are well aware that devoting large amounts of time (both in and out of class) to preparing for the diploma exam isn’t helping them develop a true understanding of key social studies concepts, yet they are left with little choice. Plus, the presence of this test likely amplifies the pre-existing tendency of many of these students’ peers towards political apathy. If Clayton’s (Greenview) earlier comment holds true – many students view social as “something you need to get through” in order to complete high school – having a diploma exam that prizes memorization over critical thought provides these students with an “easy out” of sorts. Rather than being challenged to engage in an authentic way with political concepts and current events, these students can simply “put their head down,” as one student described, and learn only the simplified, watered-down content tested by the exam. The ultimate loser in this situation is not only the integrity of social studies as a crucial academic subject, but society as a whole, which becomes populated more and more by politically vapid citizens unable to achieve (or even perceive the need for) social change.

Outside of the school context, there were other ideological influences arising from the interviews that were not immediately indicated by the students themselves. The role of the media, for example, was most often described in terms of how it influenced other students and people in general rather than in a personal sense. Al (Greenview) exemplified this with the following comment:

I think what I care about most is that people don’t take everything at face value. It seems like a lot of what happens today, it’s what’s portrayed in the media on TV, everything’s put at face value, commercials, TV shows, that’s how it is. People
need to take the time to understand something before they make a decision, they say that’s happening, they don’t ask why it’s happening.

Al clearly believes that media exerts a negative influence on people who aren’t able to treat the information presented to them with a critical eye. However, while some students similarly emphasized the importance of critical media literacy, other students seemed to embrace the media as a positive influence.

Sam (Edgebrook) made a series of comments in her interview that exemplified the contradictory ways in which the participants viewed the media. On the one hand, she was one of the few students who acknowledged the media’s influence in her own life, saying that “they show us what’s going on, it’s another big influence on what I believe... without media you wouldn’t be able to see first-hand what’s going on in those countries and what needs to be done to help them.” However, at another point in the interview, Sam said the media “don’t really give you the whole story… they just give you bits and pieces of it… I think they should really try to better inform us not selectively inform us.” Several other students noted that the media was a useful tool for staying informed, and then subsequently criticized the media for being one-sided. The coexistence of these two ideas was reconciled and explained by Jack (Edgebrook) who noted that, when it came to the media, “generally my position is more interpretation than absorption. So not so much that I get political views from watching the news, but I strengthen my political views by watching the news, by interpreting what I see and by applying what I already know in comparison to that.”

Unlike Jack, a number of other participants seemed unaware of the incongruous picture of the media they had painted. This leads to two conclusions, first that these
students’ ideologies are still being developed and therefore subject to certain degrees of inconsistency. The second though, is that these student’s critical media skills lack the sophistication necessary to truly analyze the role the media plays in shaping how citizens view the world. While it is true that even a biased media with an ideological agenda driven by profit motive can do a competent job of keeping people abreast of world events, it is imperative that citizens remain cognizant of the media corporations’ motivations when “delivering the news.” While many of the participants in this study showed glimpses of this ability, they also provided evidence that suggests further growth is possible.

The media’s greatest influence is not on any one student or group of individuals, but is located in its ability to shape the collective consciousness (and the subconscious) of society. This is, after all, where the “mass” in mass media comes from; the ability to project the same message to entire communities, nations, and even the world fosters the embedding of hegemonic common sense understandings of issues that in reality are ideologically divisive. The resultant impact is seen as groupthink becomes valued over critical debate and analysis. These students indicated the social pressure to conform to the beliefs and opinions of those around them was a significant barrier to political engagement and participation:

I believe maybe now more than ever individual opinion and individual freedom is being kind of washed away because, going back to the whole lemmings idea, you believe this but all your buddies think this thing, so you’re kind of pushed into not worrying about what you think. (Clayton, Greenview)
I think peer pressure is a huge factor, well what are the other people in my community going to think? Is anyone else going to back me up in this protest?  
(Jack, Edgebrook)

Since there’s all the different viewpoints in communities, there’s peer pressure pretty much from other people that are telling you to do this and do that, or like, you’d be threatened if you do this or that. (John, Edgebrook)

In a lot of the cases, people are too afraid because… if they live in a small community, and people don’t agree with what they believe they might not speak out. (Susan, Edgebrook)

Like Susan, many of the students invoked growing up in a small town as one of the factors contributing to this peer pressure, however the problem exists in communities of all sizes. Much like the media example previously, students spoke in general terms about the influence of this pressure rather than directly reflecting on how it affected them personally. However, given the frequency and similarity of the students’ comments, there is little question that pressure to conform from their immediate peers and their community in general has played a role in the participants’ ideological development, even if this force has been actively resisted. As with the influence of parents described earlier, it is difficult to directly counter the ingrained attitudes of entire communities of adult citizens, but it also underscores the importance of educating students to become more critical and independent citizens in the future.

It is imperative to remember then, that while the construction of knowledge is often highly individualized, it occurs within a very real social context such as that
mentioned by the students above. The education system might exert only a minimal influence on the “already-educated” adult population, but it can play a significant role in the shaping of our future society. By countering tendencies towards groupthink within secondary social studies classrooms, students will be better prepared to construct critical understandings of citizenship that can persevere in spite of the prevailing hegemonic status quo. As critically minded students become the norm and not the exception and as these students carry these attitudes with them into adulthood, the nature of this status quo can be slowly changed at the grassroots level. If such a process can become commonplace on a broad scale, then the conformist pressure these students mention will become a positive force that aids in the construction of critically-minded citizens.

Conclusion

The participants in this study provided comments and opinions that cast great insight into not only their own lives and those of their peers, but also served as a unique lens through which to view the functioning of society at large. The purposive sampling method yielded students who were well-informed and passionate about issues such as the environment, inequality, and the growing political apathy they saw all around them. However, these students also revealed themselves to have apathetic tendencies of their own by unconsciously supporting conceptions of democracy and citizenship that reinforce the existence of a hierarchical power structure which leaves room for only passive and menial forms of political participation. While specific participants offered outstanding examples of social critique, others phrased their responses in generalities and employed individualistic rhetoric that belied their espousal of collectivist values. These students indicated their families and their school experiences were by far the greatest
influences on their ideological development, however indirect references also point to the impact that hegemonic forces such as the hidden curriculum of schools and the mass media have had. In sum, the results of this study confirm that neoliberal ideology is acting in a hegemonic fashion to shape the beliefs and values of tomorrow’s citizens. But most importantly, analyzing the ideological development of these students as they’ve constructed their conceptions of democratic citizenship has led to a greater understanding of how the elitist and socially unjust doctrine of neoliberalism can be resisted and countered.

Figure 1: Summary of Findings
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

The aim of this study was to investigate students’ personal ideologies and the influences that contribute to their formation. I have found that students conceptualize democratic citizenship in largely familiar terms that emphasize notions of personal responsibility while limiting participation in the political decision-making process to passive modes and superficial actions. Experiences in social studies classrooms play a key role in the formation of these beliefs, one that is exceeded only by those values imparted to students by their parents and family. However, the ability of social studies to challenge the hegemonic common sense that pervades much of society is limited by the constraints of accountability as well as the pressure exerted by society to accept a status quo that while flawed, is still “better than other countries.”

The question now becomes one of consequence. The primary focus of this study was to describe what was happening in one context with one group of students, but we must now consider what these findings tell us about the larger contexts of democracy and citizenship, social justice and social studies, our schools and our society as a whole. While keeping in mind the caveats about the limited representativeness of this study and while making no claims that the following arguments be regarded as universally applicable truths, we nonetheless turn our attention to the implications this study potentially holds for the world beyond these two high schools and these thirteen students.
Implications for Democratic Citizenship

The students in this study showed that they are capable of being productive, active citizens who contribute positively to the general wellbeing of their communities. However, the problems facing our society cannot be solved with displays of charity, goodwill, honesty, and compassion. Deeply systemic social problems like poverty will not be solved through soup kitchens, but through addressing the underlying and overlooked factors that lead to an uneven distribution of wealth. Similarly, “raising awareness” among friends and family is not enough to inspire political leaders to take decisive action on climate change when there are corporations with billions of dollars at stake demanding the government serve their interests first.

With few exceptions, the participants in this study identified and engaged in very passive methods of political participation. Talking about important issues and social problems in class, with peers, and with your family is a good starting point for civic involvement, but if individuals don’t move beyond this stage then it remains as Shakespeare said, nothing more than “words, words, words.” Everyone has a personal ideology, a set of beliefs, values and opinions that they hold dear, and most people will talk and debate about these ideas. What is necessary though, is for citizens to develop a more acute awareness of when these ideas are being contradicted, oppressed, and inhibited by the social status quo.

Social studies needs to provide students with more examples of active political participation and more engaged forms of citizenship. This can be done by employing a framework such as Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) three models of citizenship within the classroom itself. If questions about “what type of citizenship” are an important
pedagogical and theoretical consideration among educators outside of the classroom, then it only makes sense to involve students in this discussion as well. By showing students that “citizenship” can take many forms and stressing the benefits of perspectives that emphasize active participation and social justice (rather than personal morals and ethics) students can develop an appreciation for the various approaches to democratic citizenship. Doing this requires a more explicit effort on the part of social studies teachers to focus on the nature of citizenship as an independent topic; in the process we must move beyond the traditional rhetoric that simply stresses the “rights and responsibilities” of citizenship and the importance of voting and being informed. Cultivating justice oriented citizenship will help resolve the inconsistencies that exist between individuals’ ideological beliefs and their actions as democratic citizens. Consider an example raised often in the interviews – that of global inequality.

Many students mentioned the disparity that exists between the developed world and developing nations. Several students mentioned going on a school trip to India, and how this had really opened their eyes to the realities of life in these very different countries. Another student spoke how she hoped to work in Africa someday to help educate children there. These concerns appear in the media through the coverage of disasters such as the recent earthquake in Haiti and through events like the Live-8 concerts organized by Sir Bob Geldof. However, these concerns are being raised at a time when the Federal Government is failing to meet it’s foreign aid commitments, to the extent that their performance has been called “nothing short of an international embarrassment” (Canadian Council for International Co-operation, 2010). In a truly
democratic society, this should be a source of public outrage, but instead it barely receives recognition.

The underlying constraint to developing a justice oriented citizenship lies in citizens’ attitudes towards change. As described by the participants here, change is something that happens on its own, it is largely inevitable and uncontrollable, and depending on the situation it may be either good or bad. Such views not only allow for the hegemonic concentration of power in the hands of government and corporate elites, it also strips any sense of agency from the citizens themselves as they become alienated from the decision-making process. Essentially, the citizenship model embraced by these students (and society at large) seems to say: it’s good to care about issues, it’s good to address these issues when you can through community actions, but you can’t do much more than that because some things just can’t be changed. When these passive attitudes towards change and political participation are combined with a deference to authority, the hegemonic status quo not only remains unchallenged but is strengthened, thus subsequently making real change seem like even more of an impossibility.

This passive stance is compounded by the fact that popular conceptions of democracy have become terribly anemic. While noting some problems with Canadian democracy, most students maintained that Canada was an excellent example of a democratic nation, with many pointing to the fact that you can still hold the government accountable through voting in elections. However, this is only a superficial method of participating in the decision-making process, one that provides the illusion of “making a difference” and having “every vote count,” while doing little more than providing a ceremonial legitimation of the hierarchical distribution of power in society. As
McChesney (1999) has pointed out, “neoliberalism works best when there is formal electoral democracy, but when the population is diverted from the information, access, and public forums necessary for meaningful participation in decision making” (p. 9). While several students noted that technically anyone could run for election if they wanted, the reality is that doing so entails meeting certain financial requirements as well as gaining the official permission of a political party. Considering the intertwining of neoliberal interests, corporate political donations, and corporate control of the mass media which presents us with our information, it is little surprise that the public becomes apathetic to a political process so estranged from the needs of the greater good.

The students interviewed here suggested that “the people” ought to have the power to determine how society functions, with numerous suggestions that a system of “direct democracy” would be ideal. However, the restoration of a more democratic political system requires more than rhetoric and slogans, it requires critical and active citizenship. History is often presented as a journey of progress, development, and improvement. Democracy is not an accomplishment or a victory won by vanquishing tyranny, it is a newborn child possessing great potential but requiring constant attention. If the political status quo is to be disrupted enough to allow for a more open, transparent, and equitable system to be established, such a change requires impassioned effort from citizens.

At present, neoliberalism has a hegemonic grip on society and thus constrains the development of a justice oriented citizenry. The political process is narrow and restrictive, and the upper echelons of power are responsible to corporate interests first and the people’s interests second. Free markets have been equated with day-to-day freedom,
as evidenced by the irrationality of the debate over American health care reform where “socialized” medicine is equated with allowing bureaucrats to decide who lives or dies (FOXNews.com, 2009). The fact that the general public fails to realize insurance companies play a similar role already points to the media’s role in distorting reality. The ideals of neoliberalism serve only those espousing them, those at the most elite levels of government and business, yet they have become embedded as “common sense” understandings of the way the world works. Still, these forces can be resisted by critically minded citizens who envision a more just and democratic society. Real change however, will remain out of reach if the citizenry unwittingly contribute to their own control and marginalization by failing to question whether alternatives exist. So it is that the path to a better, more democratic society must be forged by a new group of citizens, a path that can begin in the classroom.

**Implications for Schools and Social Studies**

Throughout this study, the merits of being critical in political, social and ideological contexts have been espoused and championed as something akin to the magic ingredient that will overcome neoliberal hegemony. By implication then, if a shortage of criticality is a root cause of the hegemonic status quo, our school system must need to do more to promote critical thinking, and indeed this is the case. There will always be limitations to what the public education system is able to accomplish in this regard as the construction of citizenship takes place within a social context that includes not only schools but also families, media, and a myriad of other interactions with the world itself. Yet schools can still serve as the catalyst for broad social change at the grassroots level. By devoting greater attention to the nature of citizenship itself, and emphasizing
conceptions rooted in criticality and social justice, the impact of other social interactions outside the education system will eventually be altered so that instead of propagating hegemony they reinforce the development of future citizens as critical thinkers. However, just as it was imperative to consider what type of citizenship was sought when discussing citizenship education, we must similarly advocate not just for critical thinking, but what type of critical thinking we need.

The distinction to be made here is between critical thinking and critical pedagogy. Each of these concepts has a body of educational literature and theory supporting it, and they are closely related. Burbules and Berk (1999) point out that “both imagine a general population in society who are to some extent deficient in the abilities or dispositions that would allow them to discern certain kinds of inaccuracies, distortions, and falsehoods” (p. 46). Certainly, this has been a key point of analysis in this study – that students need to be better able to detect the misrepresentation of information. However, while critical thinking focuses on separating fact from fiction and probing the “assumptions, commitments, and logic of daily life,” critical pedagogy engages with these questions on a different level (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 46). Critical pedagogy “regards specific belief claims, not primarily as propositions to be assessed for their truth content, but as parts of systems of belief and action that have aggregate effects within the power structures of society. It asks first about these systems of belief and action, who benefits?” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 47). The critical pedagogical perspective then, is one that deals directly with issues of social transformation, social justice, and the deeper political and ideological motives that shape the world around us. This perspective also reflects a social constructionist epistemology by focusing on the process by which systems of belief
and knowledge come into being. Ultimately, as Burbules and Berk (1999) note, “critical thinking’s claim is, at heart, to teach how to think critically, not how to think politically; for critical pedagogy, this is a false distinction” (p. 55).

The perspective adopted here is one of critical pedagogy. Critical thinking and critical pedagogy are both important tools that will help students and citizens in general to construct a more informed understanding of the political world, but I would contend that emancipation from the hegemonic influence of neoliberalism requires the development of critical pedagogy on a broad level. The participants in this study displayed numerous instances of critical thought, such as John’s (Edgebrook) statement that the media shows “our Canadian viewpoints of the war in Afghanistan but you’re not seeing the perspective of where the insurgents are coming from.” Similarly, statements made by several students about the extent to which elected representatives truly base their decisions on the desires of their constituents are the product of critical thinking. While these are important questions to raise, they fail to achieve the depth of analysis necessary to develop a critical and justice oriented citizenry that understands the nature of hegemonic social control. Indeed, there were only one or two students in this study who flashed the ability to take this next step as George (Greenvien) did when he asserted, “it only makes sense that elected representatives would end up aligning themselves with corporations because that’s how they get money… for their electoral campaign. So a corporation’s interests become quite represented in government.” Even though insights such as this were rare occurrences in this study, they illustrate that these students are capable of critical pedagogical thought if it is cultivated.
While evidence of critical pedagogy was limited to a handful of comments, instances of critical thinking were also relatively infrequent. This tendency to display more basic levels of thought and analysis arises as a result of increasingly regimented classroom practices dictated by standardized curricula and the impact of accountability schemes. High-stakes tests in social studies emphasize lower-order thinking skills such as the memorization of names and events (Stanley, 2001; Vogler, 2005) and teachers are increasingly aligning the content of their lessons with these tests (Au, 2010). As a result, students are often given little opportunity to engage in either critical thinking or critical pedagogy, and they have little incentive to do so if these skills aren’t going to increase their chances of success on a test with so much riding on it. We can see the truth here in Apple’s (2004) argument that “schools create and recreate forms of consciousness that enable social control to be maintained without the necessity of dominant groups having to resort to overt mechanisms of domination” (p. 2). If students aren’t inspired and encouraged to develop skills of critical pedagogy then their citizenship education prepares them to be passive consumers of the societal status quo rather than agents of social transformation.

If we seek to “fix” the deterioration of our democracy and overcome passive citizenship we must first alert students to the fact that it’s “broken.” As Ross (2000) points out, traditional social studies instruction has emphasized procedural conceptions of democracy that limit the ability of citizens to engage in direct political action. These conceptions don’t just reinforce the existence of our spectator democracy, they prevent students from imagining any alternative. Rather than teaching students that a good citizen
supports the government, we need to teach them that a good citizen questions whether the
government is worth supporting.

With the reality of government-mandated curriculum unlikely to disappear
t entirely, the responsibility for changing the nature of social studies and democratic
citizenship education falls on the shoulders of teachers. Note that this does not mean
teachers will change the nature of citizenship itself entirely on their own, as a social
construct that change must take place within a much broader context. However, teachers
can initiate this process through their classroom interactions with students. Despite the
erosion of professional autonomy due to accountability, teachers can and must strive to
adopt the practices that will benefit not only students but our society. The participants in
this study indicated that their most influential social studies experiences were a direct
result of specific teachers who challenged them to think critically about the world.
Teachers need to emphasize not only this critical thought, but critical pedagogy as well.

There are many ways for teachers to promote critical pedagogy and justice
oriented citizenship within their classrooms. Orlowski (2008b) describes media literacy
exercises for students that challenge them to “re-frame” newspaper articles from a
different ideological perspective and recounts the success of an assignment that required
students to attend a political protest. DeLeon (in press) urges teachers to explore the
literature on social movements and protest, to examine the contradictions of the state and
capitalist democracy, and to engage in “epistemological sabotage” through the
deconstruction of government-mandated exams and the critical questioning of textbooks.
Greg Queen (Ross & Queen, 2010) has created a unit titled “What Is History? Teaching
about Inequality” that deals with such themes as racism, globalization, and imperialist
war while focusing on the issue of social class. Vinson, Ross and Wilson (in press) invoke Debord’s concepts of dérive and détournement as a means of promoting critical citizenship. Their ideas include the blurring of traditional boundaries that separate school from larger society and the use of parody and satire to challenge hegemonic cultural institutions. Teacher education programs ought to draw on ideas such as these to prepare social studies teachers to engage in critical pedagogy from their first days in the classroom.

If we are to work against neoliberal ideology and its hegemonic influence on society, social studies educators need to abandon attempts at neutrality and impartiality that only legitimate the dominant social order and embrace “teaching methods that are openly political and urge their own critique” (Ross, 2000, p. 53). When we consider the power that seeks to reduce citizenship to a passive acceptance of the political, economic, and sociocultural status quo, this seems like an uphill battle to be sure. This challenge can be overcome not only through interactions within social studies classrooms but through the actions of social studies teachers outside the classroom as well. Jones (2008) provides a blueprint for a system of authentic accountability that dispels the neoliberal misappropriation of the term and creates a framework to improve student learning and empower teachers. Mathison and Ross (2006) similarly implore teachers to reclaim and reinvent the discourse of accountability as a means of improving schools while promoting democracy and equality. The Rouge Forum (http://www.rougeforum.org) is a group that unites educators, parents, and students to work towards a more socially just and democratic society through academic research, social critique, and political actions that challenge the hegemonic status quo. Organizations such as this remind us that we must
not lose faith in the very real difference that a teacher’s actions can make and that the struggle for change is not a burden to be carried alone.

**Future Research**

Given the importance and complexity of the issues considered in this study, there are many different means of continuing to investigate the ideological development of students within an educational context. A great place to begin is to expand on the small sample size of this study. Interviewing a larger group of students with a more diverse demographic make-up would lend credibility to the findings of this study. In particular, future research should seek to explore the experiences of students in urban school settings in a variety of communities to determine whether there are findings here that are unique to small schools and small towns. In doing so, the research could also consider the experiences of students from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as students from more divergent socioeconomic backgrounds.

Similarly, expanding the sample of participants would lead to a greater array of research sites. Considering the aforementioned influence of individual teachers, looking at students from a variety of classes and a variety of schools might well yield fresh insights. Future studies might also seek to examine the relative effects of different curriculums (the British Columbia social studies curriculum versus Alberta’s for example) and their accompanying systems of testing and assessment. While this study has specifically avoided the positivist-based notion that “more” is automatically better when it comes to research, it remains true that investigating the experiences of more students with more teachers in more schools will nonetheless lead to more data, and thus the opportunity to confirm, contradict, or build upon the theories developed here.
Since the key problem of this study was one of ideological growth and development, another logical extension would be to conduct a longitudinal research project. By tracking the changes in students’ beliefs and values over time, the investigator might better be able to connect certain ideological characteristics with specific influences. At the least, such a study would also provide useful information as to when the greatest potential for transformation exists in a student’s journey from childhood to adulthood. The resulting conclusions would allow educators to adjust their pedagogical emphases accordingly.

Finally, while this study focused on the impact of social studies as well as other influences on students’ political ideologies, a study that concentrated on this subject alone would make a great contribution to the literature. Investigators could employ classroom observations to gain a better sense of the actual classroom practices that students are experiencing, while simultaneously considering the way in which the enacted curriculum either challenges or reinforces the status quo. Interviews could be conducted not only with students, but with social studies teachers and curriculum developers as well in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the ideologies that inform their roles in the education system.

In the end, even if future studies intend to mirror the structure of this study the simple introduction of new data collection methods would likely result in a wealth of fascinating data to analyze. In particular, employing a variety of group interviews both of small and large size would allow students the chance to engage with issues in a more comfortable and familiar way since they are used to debating political ideas in class discussions. The experience of this study certainly points to the use of a combination of
both group and individual interviews as a necessity for any future research. As intriguing as it is to probe a student’s beliefs and opinions one-on-one, it is equally captivating to watch as participants challenge and confirm each other’s ideas with less direct involvement from the researcher.

**Citizenship Under Construction**

Our world is an ideological one. We each have a personal ideology, one comprised of ideas and beliefs culled from our family, our friends, our education, our *life*. However, the ideological diversity of our society is threatened by neoliberalism. This is an ideology based on elitism, where the general public is deemed unfit to participate in the decision-making process and therefore prevented from participating in a meaningful way in the political process. This ideology accomplishes this exclusion by encouraging apathy, so that the majority of the population unwittingly consents to be controlled by a distant group of bureaucrats and corporate leaders. This is an ideology that equates consumption with progress, and wealth with power. Neoliberal ideology serves the interests of the few at the expense of the many, and yet it remains more influential than ever. Neoliberal ideology exercises a form of hegemonic control over society, where its rhetoric has become embedded within the collective consciousness as a taken for granted understanding of the way the world works. Dissent and debate are redirected towards trivialities as the core assumptions of neoliberalism are regarded as common sense. But there is nothing natural about inequality, exploitation, and oppression.

With this picture of our society as a backdrop, this study explored how a group of students at two Alberta high schools formed their own personal political beliefs and values. The subject of social studies, where students gain much of their formal
knowledge of the world, was identified as the most salient context where neoliberalism’s influence would be countered or reinforced. There is evidence to support both conclusions as these students vacillated between passive acceptance of the status quo and passionate calls for progress. Much of this study has focused on neoliberal contributions to the erosion of our democracy, the damaging of our schools, and the marginalization of collectivist ideals that serve the greater good of society. But the students that lay at the heart of this study represent tomorrow’s democratic citizens, and where there is a future there is hope that it may hold solutions to the problems of the day.

Schools are charged with the duty of preparing young people to assume the responsibilities of adult citizenship, but this doesn’t mean their goal should be social transmission. Our schools must help students to construct themselves as agents of social transformation, with the knowledge, skills, and desire to fight for social justice, economic equality, and the restoration of true democracy. As the subject that deals most directly with all of these concerns, the subject of social studies is the site where this development must take place.

The greatest challenge for social studies is to provide students with exposure to alternatives to the status quo, whether this is in relation to the role of citizens in society, the inner workings of the political process, the function of the mass media, or any of the other aspects of our world currently dominated by neoliberal forces. Like the prisoners in Plato’s allegory of the cave, students must be brought into the light and shown the real world that lies behind the shadows projected before us on a daily basis. By doing so, we can help them form ideologies that enable them to cast aside the chains of hegemony. Many students already recognize the importance of social studies and its relevancy to
their lives, and if we inspire all students to share this sentiment, then our classrooms can serve as a base for the construction of more democratically-minded citizens capable of engaging in not only critical thought but critical pedagogy. These students already profess support for values of collectivism, co-operation, and equality and express distaste for apathy in those around them, but if we fail to directly encourage these values because we wish to remain educationally “neutral” then we are complicit in the maintenance of neoliberal hegemony.

Admittedly, a primary finding of this study was that the influence of parents is perhaps the greatest factor in a student’s formation of their ideology, but this need not mean that the influence of schools is of little consequence. Instead, the education system ought to be regarded as a foundation from which the nature of other social interactions might be transformed. Today’s students are tomorrow’s parents after all, and the progress made in one generation will be reflected exponentially in the next. If we have a more critical and informed population, then the tremendous pressure exerted through the corporate mainstream media can be countered. We can teach for critical media literacy in the classroom, but the bulk of media is consumed outside of school walls, so it is imperative that the lessons first introduced in social studies persist long after class has been dismissed. If our society awakens to the reality of neoliberal hegemony and we learn to analyze information rather than simply consuming it, then the project of social transformation will not need to be championed by the schools alone, it will be taken on by the citizenry en masse.

Nearly every participant in this study expressed at least part of their ideology with passivity and tentativeness. Many students provided statements and supported policies
that contradicted their professed values, while still others reflected on the degree to which they lacked the knowledge necessary to strengthen their ideological positions. All of these instances point to the fact that these students’ ideological conceptions of democratic citizenship remain very much *under construction*. Just as our democracy remains a work in progress so too does the job of developing citizens able to take up that work. However, we must recognize that the practices and theories of the past have contributed to the status quo we now seek to change. If the citizens of tomorrow are under construction, our responsibility as educators is to help them build a better society.

In a study that directed its investigative focus squarely on a remarkable group of students, it is only appropriate to let one of them have the last word. In a spare classroom at Greenview High cluttered with old posters for extra-curricular activities, Cole cut straight to the heart of this entire study when he said, “you can’t solve problems with the same conscience that created them.”
References


Grant, S. G. (2007). High-stakes testing: how are social studies teachers responding?

*Social Education, 71*(5), 250-257.


Orlowski, P. (2007). Bob Dylan was right – It is a political world: The case for critical media literacy. *Our Schools, Our Selves, 17*(1), 33-49.


Appendix

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

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INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:

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Other locations where the research will be conducted:
School Division (Alberta) Data will be collected in division high schools. Expected study sites are obtained from Superintendent of the school division (see attached document).

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):
Gregory M. Overguard

SPONSORING AGENCIES:
N/A

PROJECT TITLE:
Citizenship Under Construction: Student Ideologies and Social Studies Education

REB MEETING DATE: October 22, 2009

CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: October 22, 2010

DATE APPROVED: November 9, 2009

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School Division Approval

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:

- Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
- Dr. Ken Craig, Chair
- Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
- Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair
- Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair