SOCIAL JUSTICE PEDAGOGY AND TEACHER-STUDENT ACTIVISM:
A COLLABORATIVE STUDY OF SCHOOL-BASED PROJECTS

by

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Abstract

This research seeks a clearer understanding of the field of social justice education in Canada. Informed by multicultural and antiracist pedagogy, I explore the theoretical underpinnings and practical realities of this work among 11 activist Alberta teachers and students. Collaborative interviews with these participants reveal portraits of current activism in voluntary coalitions in secondary schools. Through guided critical self-reflection, fellow activists and I examine forming and sustaining ongoing projects. I present guiding hypotheses and assumptions that steer this research, and a theoretical framework that accommodates complex intersections of "race," class, gender, sexual orientation, and other considerations of social justice pedagogy and activism.

This research addresses omissions in the educational literature; one such gap is a lack of research attention to young people—particularly to their role as active participants in social justice movements. In addition, I address teachers' previously undervalued role as crucial participants in educational policy development, reform efforts, and research on social justice education. Attending to the relatively few accounts of school-based action projects, I describe the integrative STOP model of student and community activism.

An overview of the unique Canadian and regional contexts and recent political developments around social justice issues, and a summary of relevant research and theory from British and American literature, suggest specific areas of contention, influence, and overlap of relevance to this study.

I employ a qualitative research methodology using a specific collaborative approach, and include details of participant selection, data gathering and analysis, and ethical considerations. Two chapters develop my research results along the lines traced by my guiding hypotheses.
A concluding chapter outlines the specific significance of this research, factors that promote coalition-building, and promising avenues for further scholarly study. A value of this investigation is the rich offerings from my participants, whose reflections on their work are solidly grounded in understandings of daily activism. Their contributions show the potential mutual benefits of respectful research collaborations that both reveal and share the wisdom of social justice practitioners as theorists.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................. ii  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................. iv  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................... vi  
Dedication .......................................................................................................... vii  

Chapter One: Situating this Research .......................................................... 1  
Initial Assumptions and Guiding Hypotheses ............................................... 2  
Toward a Theoretical Framework ................................................................ 4  
The STOP Model of Teacher-Student Coalition Building ......................... 7  
Engaging Activists in Social Justice Research ............................................... 10  
Current Problems: Lack of Meaningful Teacher and Student Engagement ........................................................................ 12  
Potential Significance of this Research ......................................................... 16  
Structure of the Dissertation ........................................................................... 17  

Chapter Two: Literature Review of Educating for Social Justice ............... 19  
Regional Issues Surrounding Diversity Education ....................................... 20  
Exploring Social Justice Education in the Canadian Context ................... 22  
Our Colonial Past and Present: Confronting Denial and Backlash ............. 23  
Multicultural and Antiracist Education in Canadian Educational Literature ........................................................................... 26  
Brief Notes on Multicultural and Antiracist Education in Britain ............... 29  
Brief Notes on American Multiculturalism ................................................. 31  
Seeking Exemplary Models in Teacher Education ...................................... 34  
Getting Beyond Peripheralization .................................................................. 35  
Pursuing Educational Change in a Conservative Climate ............................ 37  
Facing Conservatism in Teaching .................................................................. 38  
Ameliorating Faculty Resistance to Reform ................................................. 40  
Addressing Hiring and Admissions Inequities ............................................. 41  
Framing Preservice Teachers as Researchers: Fostering Collaboration ...... 42  
Concluding Thoughts ...................................................................................... 44  

Chapter Three: Research Methodology ......................................................... 45  
Adopting a Collaborative Approach .............................................................. 46  
Selection of Research Participants ................................................................ 48  
Piloting Preliminary Questions and Areas of Focus ...................................... 50  
Data Gathering and Analysis ........................................................................ 51  
Attending to Roles, Positions, and Power Considerations .......................... 52
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations with Young Participants</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Participants</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating Teacher Activists</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating Student Activists</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insights from the Interviews on my Role as Researcher/Teacher/Activist</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Four: Results: Hypotheses Countered</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypotheses A and B Countered</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis C Countered</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypotheses D and E Countered</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Five: Results: Hypotheses Confirmed</strong></td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis F Confirmed</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis G Confirmed</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis H Confirmed</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Six: Conclusion and Promising Directions</strong></td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Connections and Insights</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions from Hypotheses Countered</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions from Hypotheses Confirmed</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promising Directions for Further Study</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Examples of Activities Within Social Justice Activism</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Sample of Interview Questions for Teachers</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Sample of Interview Questions for Students</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Ten Ways to Foster Activist Coalitions in Secondary Schools</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Dedication

To Merron Chorny and Cy Groves,
both now lost to this world,
but gone having enriched the lives of so many
through their love of teaching
and nurturing that love in others.
Chapter One
Situating this Research

It seems appropriate that I was initially drawn into this field of research by my students; I continue to value educational initiatives that are student-centred and respect young people as legitimate contributors. In the broad realm of social justice pedagogy this active engagement of young people along with those teachers with whom they work is of particular interest to me in this study of school-based initiatives designed to challenge discrimination.

Broadly framed, the present research seeks to chart the often contentious field of multicultural and antiracist pedagogy and map a clearer understanding of both the theoretical underpinnings and practical realities of this work among a group of activist Alberta teachers and students. It seeks to delineate and analyze the shared experiences of activists in light of current theoretical and political contexts in the overlapping fields of interest to social justice activists. Further, my in-depth interviews with these participants reveal nuanced portraits of the people who choose to engage in social justice education and activism in actual school settings. I explore the lived experience through shared understandings of educators and students currently working in voluntary coalitions in Alberta secondary schools. Through guided critical self-reflection and collaborative inquiry, fellow activists and I explore together several specific aspects of our ongoing projects.

I begin by presenting my guiding hypotheses and assumptions that steered my enquiry. Then I situate my work within the space between the broad fields of liberal and critical social theory, and toward an adequate theoretical framework of social justice education. Subsequently I present an overview of the school project, Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice (STOP), that I founded in 1987 in one of my classes, as it exemplifies an
integrative approach to addressing multicultural and antiracist stances to activism. I assess current engagement of young people in the academic literature, particularly related to their role as active participants in social justice movements. I also analyze the presentation of teachers' understandings and participation in this field; I position this research project as addressing omissions in the educational literature and repositioning student and teacher activist roles in schools and in educational research itself.

Initial Assumptions and Guiding Hypotheses

As a long-time activist and educator in this field, I did not enter this research project expecting to assume the role of a neutral and objective observer. Rather, from my own professional and academic readings and experiences I was operating with several assumptions regarding school-based activism, including that ongoing projects would be considered successful if they (a) provide students with agency and a legitimate avenue to address issues; (b) tap into current concerns in specific school and community contexts; (c) address issues at a variety of levels, and with a variety of approaches; (d) set specific goals and organize tasks and activities with outcomes in mind; (e) operate with an internal fairness--democratic and egalitarian processes; (f) provide ongoing opportunities for dialogue, debate, and consensus-building; (g) have a student-centred philosophy and organizational structure; (h) operate within a supportive social or administrative system; and (i) generate a sense of ownership, community, efficacy, caring, and fun for the participants. As expected, my participants and I explored a wide range of concerns and issues around our specific activities in schools that might be contained within the framework of social justice activism (see Appendix A).

A qualitative, collaborative approach to this research, described in greater detail in Chapter Three, encouraged me to open my enquiry to the widest possible realm of understanding during interviews. I retained a necessary degree of design flexibility, trying “not
to get too precise when formulating initial research questions.... [but to] formulate general, flexible questions” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 28). Toward that end, my study addressed the following expectations generated from my own readings and experiences. I present these as a set of “guiding hypotheses” that Marshall and Rossman (1995) describe as “merely tools used to generate questions and to search for patterns” (p. 37). I hypothesized that (a) teacher- and student-activists will neither seek nor value academic/research-based sources to inform their activism, (b) the debate between multicultural and antiracist education proponents is largely irrelevant to school-based activists, (c) administrative support from the school and district is necessary for effective social justice activism, (d) the conservative political climate and anti-diversity backlash inhibits activism in school settings, (e) current negative attitudes toward young people will limit the efficacy of school-based action groups, (f) a general denial of racism and other forms of discrimination in their communities and in Canada as a whole by the majority of students and teachers presents a barrier to social justice activism in those communities, (g) external recognition and acceptance by the broader community is important in validating and encouraging further activism by individuals and groups, (h) activism in school-based coalitions will lead many participants to further activism and political engagement in their lives outside the school, and they will extend their sharing and network-building through involvement in this research.

By testing these hypotheses against the ideas and understandings of my research participants I sought to illuminate our work in the light of actual school-based activism. As suggested briefly below, and in greater depth in the results section in later chapters, the first five of these hypotheses were countered by several of my research participants while the latter three hypotheses were confirmed by a greater number of the activists I interviewed. In interviewing four teachers and seven students, I came to realize that we have much to learn
about the creative responses that can be generated by collaborative school coalitions in overcoming seemingly insurmountable barriers to their ongoing work.

In addition, I will argue, based on my analyses of these interviews, that we have underestimated the critical agency and tenaciousness of student and teacher activists alike in taking leadership roles in formulating efficacious social justice curriculum and theory. Countering public portrayals of young people as either demonized perpetrators of violence and mayhem, or as apathetic consumers or victims of adult-driven culture, these young people show themselves to be remarkable role models for other activist students and adults alike. Likewise, the teachers I interviewed refuted their typical portrayal as anti-intellectual workers who are characteristically disinterested in theory or research. The insightful reflections from my participants on the dubious nature of public recognition, on the role of media in both promoting and countering stereotypes, on the perils and successes of gaining funding from external sources, on working cooperatively across age and community boundaries, on the politicized environment of schools and communities, and on the collaborative research experience itself, all offer abundant evidence of their previously undervalued role as crucial participants in educational policy development, reform efforts, and research toward social justice.

Toward a Theoretical Framework

The shifting field of social theory has seen much explanation and critique around competing notions of liberal and critical theory, debates that have been highly influential on theory and practice in social justice pedagogy. Many scholars accept that, in schools, the philosophical debates and conceptual distinctions may often seem to teachers and students as being somewhat arbitrary or even irrelevant to the often contradictory nature of ongoing activism. My research reveals a far greater engagement—and potential for further engagement—
of teachers with academic pursuits. Seeking a greater appreciation and understanding of this complex interplay seems a worthwhile and long-overdue pursuit.

While liberalism has held prominence in shaping the discourse of multicultural education for democracy, as argued by Coombs (1986) and Gutmann (1987), for example, more recent educational literature shows a growing attention to critical theory as a guiding doctrine for school reform (e.g., Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; McCarthy, 1993; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Although many liberals speak convincingly of empowering students for democratic participation, they seem to have been unable to launch lasting or widespread effective critiques of, or challenges to, existing structural inequities in contemporary society. Toward these ends, critical theory has provided progressive scholars with a much richer rhetorical framework for theorizing on the transformative and emancipatory goals of education, especially around issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other social justice concerns. Understanding how both of these theoretical perspectives inform specific instances of teacher-student activism, and how apparently oppositional terminologies are used strategically by activists, seem to me important early steps in scrutinizing the complex and under-analyzed daily work of social justice activists.

Further, conducting my research in Canadian schools around issues of pluralism and social justice requires a robust conceptualization of “race” that refutes its bio-deterministic origins while allowing for the critique of racialized arguments and policies in educational contexts. My theoretical stance applies a deliberate consideration of antiracist and multicultural education pedagogy in light of the complex intersections with political struggles across issues of “race,” ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other elements of contested social identity. My understandings in this area are informed by a diversity of scholarship from British, Canadian, and American sources (e.g., Anthias & Yuval-Davis,
1992; Hall, 1992; Jaggar, 1983; McCarthy, 1990; Rattansi, 1992; Roman, 1993) in which scholars resist monolithic or simplistic notions of pluralism and identity.

As one example, some forms of antiracist education are portrayed as relying heavily on essentialized or stable notions of culture (e.g., Dei, 1996b), a problematic theoretical position I critique in greater detail elsewhere (Lund, 1998c). I situate my own research within a non-synchronous, dynamic understanding of social justice, refined and revised in light of emerging insights from my collaboration with research participants. I follow the lead of cultural theorists such as Hall (1992), who eschews notions of identity as sets of “fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories” and therefore, rejects the biodeterministic origins of “race” as a category for dividing people, concluding that there are “no guarantees in Nature” on the basis of culturally constructed categories of difference (p. 254). Rather, my focus here is on an analysis of racism, the workings of which Hall succinctly summarizes:

Racism, of course, operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constituted categories, and its typically binary system of representation constantly marks and attempts to fix and naturalize the difference between belongingness and otherness. (p. 255)

My research participants and I shared a recognition of “race” as a social construction while acknowledging the racialized context of contemporary schooling. Our conversations explored the resultant material limitations faced by some individuals, as imposed both by the misguided attitudes and beliefs of others, and by existing systems and policies. Participants in the interviews regularly cite the pressing need to name racism and other discrimination as it reveals itself in a range of individual, institutional and societal forms.

I also appreciate the value of a broader consideration of diversity and equity to encompass a variety of related concerns on lived experiences of discrimination, oppression, and injustice. The important theoretical work being done entails seeking to identify and
Understand the complex intersections of a number of categories of social identity and conflict, including cultural, ethnic, and racialized identities, gender, sexual orientation, class, and physical ability. A broad orientation toward social justice also attends to individuals’ multiple and overlapping identities. My specific attention to antiracist and multicultural education, loosely grouped here as social justice education, might be perceived to work against a larger political project of coalition-building across other differences, yet seems a prudent delimitation considering the sheer scope of the literature in each field of study.

At this point it may be useful to include a brief description of just such a model of school-based activism that was founded by students and fuelled by their ideas. Over several years it has built a national reputation for challenging racism by showing how students and teachers can work cooperatively with a variety of community partners and across several related fields. What follows is an overview of the STOP program, an innovative coalition formed by students in one of my classes to challenge discrimination. By offering a brief summary of its formation, evolution, and activities, I am hoping to provide a glimpse into the catalyst for my own activism and this research project--an ongoing program that continues to fuel my interest and ground my enquiry in this area.

*The STOP Model of Teacher-Student Coalition Building*

In 1987, during my first year of teaching high school in Red Deer, Alberta, a group of students in one of my non-academic English classes at Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School initiated the formation of STOP (Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice). It remains a popular and viable school program, and has been widely recognized for leadership in innovative approaches to challenging racism and other forms of discrimination (Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission, 2000; Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2001; Lund, 1993, 1998b; Zachariah, 1999).
In a potentially volatile social climate, STOP continues to engage students, teachers, parents, administration, other school staff, government, media, and community agencies in a collective effort to challenge racism and other discrimination. Initial national media interest in the group was likely due to Central Alberta’s unfortunate widespread reputation for extremist hate group activity, worth reviewing briefly as it relates directly to my hypothesis on community backlash to diversity education.

Right-wing extremists had etched Red Deer onto the collective Canadian psyche with media coverage of Terry Long, Canadian leader of the Aryan Nations group, then running a “white power” training camp at nearby Caroline. Long had also run a classified advertisement in the local daily newspaper promoting a prerecorded “hate hot line” for over a year. Red Deer also hosted the trials (and appeals) of school teacher James Keegstra, an unrepentant Holocaust denier convicted in 1985 for promoting hatred in his Eckville high school social studies classes. Now the media had a story with an ironic twist—the students in STOP were actively opposing anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry.

Instead of ignoring contentious issues or engaging in fruitless confrontations with extremists, the members of STOP took proactive steps within the community to counter this extremism. Students who admitted they had often found school assignments lacking relevance to their lives had become active agents in their own education. When Provost, a town about an hour east of Red Deer endured a publicized cross-burning at a hate rally, STOP members arranged their own transportation and volunteered a weekend to work with students there. Our students knew that in the early 1980s, two homes in Red Deer had been targets of cross-burnings, later reported in Baergen (2000) and Kinsella (1994). Together the students shared ideas and resources in a collective effort to counter hate groups. One idea was to organize a school-wide Human Rights Awareness Week, featuring noon hour forums with antiracist
“skinhead punks” from SHARP (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice), the president of the World Sikh Organization, a former university professor from Iran (then a caretaker at our school), and the chair of the Alberta Human Rights Commission.

The STOP group and I have periodically confronted significant resistance to our efforts. When the national head of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Toronto travelled to Red Deer in 1989 to present STOP with a “Courage to Remember” 40-poster series on the Holocaust, the response from the extremist fringe was immediate. The Canadian Aryan Nations leader, Terry Long, made the front page of the local newspaper decrying the Holocaust as a hoax, while an item on the national award was buried in the local section. Meanwhile, numerous cars in the school parking lot were littered with KKK brochures, and STOP continued to receive revisionist “historical” evidence and pseudo-scientific studies in the mail. I received a personal letter from Long himself, seeking access to a student audience. The following year, the disgraced teacher Keegstra wrote me a three-page diatribe accusing me of cowardice and imploring me to turn from my “Talmudic masters” and face the truth about Jews.

STOP never responds personally to extremists, likening it to choosing to wrestle with a pig; one would likely end up getting dirty, and besides, the pig enjoys it! Rather, in this case, STOP laminated the Holocaust posters and donated them to the school district for use by all teachers. The group also purchased additional archival material on the Holocaust from the U.S. National Archives, and often share these resources with the local museum. Student interest led STOP to organize an annual Holocaust Awareness Symposium in conjunction with the Calgary Jewish Centre. Since 1994, several actual survivors of Nazi concentration camps have spoken to thousands of high school students in central Alberta.

STOP’s mandate is to educate rather than confront, but we often respond directly
when contentious local issues arise. For example, when a Sikh man was denied entry into Red Deer’s Royal Canadian Legion meeting room because he was wearing unauthorized “headgear” (his turban), STOP members wrote compelling letters to the parties involved and to the media. STOP also invited the victim to address a group of about 300 high school students and shine light on Sikh faith. It is illustrative of an instance where a group effectively used “intercultural sharing” in the struggle to name and confront specific examples of institutional racism, naturally bridging an apparent schism between the multicultural and antiracism supporters, outlined in greater detail in the next chapter.

Other STOP activities have included awareness campaigns on violence against women, discrimination against gays and lesbians, and Alberta’s human rights record. Specific student and teacher activism has included interrogation of school policies and curriculum materials, presentations to government officials, drama presentations to children, organizing local protests, international human rights advocacy, and public debates with political leaders on government policies (Lund, 1993; 1998b). In the examples described above, students and teachers have taken action on specific community issues of racism and discrimination in ways that respond to community backlash while overlapping the apparent conceptual distinctions between liberal and critical theoretical perspectives and between multicultural and antiracism approaches.

Engaging Activists in Social Justice Research

As our voluntary coalition has been able to work across various labels of social justice research and pedagogy, I hypothesized that other activists may simply dismiss the theoretical positioning taking place in the academic literature as irrelevant to their work on the ground. However, several surprised me by actively engaging in the ongoing academic debates, consulting and sharing with me several specific articles on this issue. Teachers are often
characterized as being either anti-intellectual or simply disinterested in academic theory (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Stringer, 1996) but several educators (and students) I interviewed refute this characterization.

I am reminded of Apple's (1982) admonishment to educational researchers: “Enter the school and see it first hand. We need to find out what meanings, norms, and values students, teachers, and others really act on in schools. Only then can we begin to see the layers of mediation that exist” (p. 96). Yet, despite the effusive language of empowerment and emancipation from many critical theorists, what is often missing in current social justice education is a tangible link to practice in schools and education faculties. Ladson-Billings (1995) notes that because theory development and practice do not happen separately from one another, there is a “synergistic and dynamic relationship that exists between the two. Practitioners are not merely waiting for scholars to develop theory before they begin to try new approaches to pedagogy. True, theory informs practice, but practice also informs theory” (pp. 752-753). This research project suggests that, as more educators build activist coalitions with their students and colleagues, a simultaneous growth in the academic interest in their social justice projects can reflexively inform both research and theorizing in a reciprocal relationship.

By engaging in forms of research, educators and students are able to explore, incorporate, and refine social justice principles in their activism. Darling-Hammond (1996) highlights the reciprocal benefits of engaging teachers in research, noting that it is “a powerful way of learning about both teaching and research. It can improve the responsiveness of research to the realities of teaching while also developing the kind of thinking good teachers must engage in” (p. 12). This helps create a broader clientele for many types of pedagogical knowledge--both personal and professional--that teachers and researchers produce in
developing pedagogies designed to engage diverse learners.

My research reveals that, as I hypothesized, benefits of collaborative research activities are reaped by my sample of teacher and student activists, some of whom helped to shape and focus the research questions from the outset. Together we engaged in a valuable conversation on our own understandings and on the complexity of activism in school settings. If, in the quest to make schools and communities more equitable, teachers and students are afforded more opportunities to “roll up their sleeves” and participate in educational research themselves, all parties stand to gain enrichment at several levels.

In the section below, and in greater detail in Chapter Two, I outline some current problems in the academic literature in this area, including a lack of research attention to young people, teacher understandings of social justice pedagogy, and analyses of actual school-based action projects. I offer a synopsis of recent provincial developments in this field.

Current Problems: Lack of Meaningful Teacher and Student Engagement

A review of current educational research literature reveals a number of problematic features on the broad topic of education for diversity, equity, and social justice. Firstly there are relatively few detailed analyses of student social action projects in Canadian schools, aside from anecdotal or uncritical summaries of a few particular programs or activities (e.g., Berlin & Alladin, 1996; Cogan & Ramsankar, 1994; Lund, 1993; Smith & Young, 1996). This dearth of academic attention to successful school-based activist programs suggests that the work of practitioners is either undiscovered or undervalued by the research community. In either case, the present study will take steps to fill this gap in the literature and hopefully illustrate the benefits of closer engagement with the activist educational community.

Further, there is limited academic interest in young people in general. Apart from standardized surveys of student attitudes on diversity issues (e.g., Griffith & Labercane,
students are rarely engaged in meaningful ways in educational research on social justice. This lack of scholarly attention to students seems a significant oversight in a discourse that ostensibly places their education at its centre. Roman (1996) speaks of a widespread “moral panic” on young people that positions them simultaneously as “subjects of consternation, outrage, concern, explanation, and, not inconsequentially, commodification and appropriation” (p. 21). My research responds directly to this observation, and shines new light on a growing conservative backlash toward “youth” culture in general; Giroux (1996) notes that “youth as a self and social construction has become indeterminant, alien, and sometimes hazardous in the public eye, a source of repeated moral panics and the object of social regulation” (p. 11). He proposes a “radical democracy” involving challenges to traditional hierarchies in schools through power sharing. To this end, he calls for a “redistribution of power among teachers, students, and administrators [to] provide the conditions for students to become agents in their learning process[,] it also provides the basis for collective learning, civic action, and ethical responsibility” (p. 129).

The inclusion of student voices in social justice pedagogy must go beyond co-opting a student or two to sit on an adult-driven committee or project. An exciting challenge for our STOP program and for this current research project has been to allow meaningful ways of engaging students in a cooperative sharing of the responsibility for bringing about change in schools and communities. Allowing their traditionally silenced voices to be heard, we expose ourselves to some risk, and inevitable conflict and debate, but as Hargreaves (1996) insists, there are other voices worth articulating, hearing, and sponsoring as well as those of teachers. In the present context of reform and restructuring, perhaps the time has come to bring together the different voices surrounding schooling--students with teacher, teachers with parents--and risk cacophony in our struggle to build authentic community. (p. 16)
Instead of framing this potentially raucous dialogue as discordant, I prefer to describe it as an ongoing composition that does not necessarily require harmony.

When young people's concerns surrounding social justice are attended to by academics, their insights into issues of racism and other discrimination can be revelatory. One of the few examples of this engagement appears in Roman and Stanley (1997), who recognize that "young people are not passive receivers of knowledge waiting to be acted upon by 'the right' or 'correct' interventions, as is often assumed in academic research and in pedagogical practices" (p. 205). Instead, their project describes a classroom of 30 grade seven students as active agents of social change whose struggles with making meaning of culture, racism and national identity are of central interest to the educator-researchers. These young people "articulated complex multiple and conflicting discourses regarding their understandings of racism and nationalism and what teachers could do to challenge them" (p. 223) and serve as a reminder for me of the need for their greater involvement in educational research and activism.

A similar model of engaging young allies is proposed by SooHoo (1995) who describes her collaborations with students as a "syncopated rhythm." She observes that many educators systematically devalue student voices, and often "make unilateral decisions on what constitutes worthwhile knowledge because they lack faith and trust in students' capabilities" (p. 218). Her research project engages students as key informants and active collaborators/co-researchers throughout the investigation; she reports: "By empowering students with research responsibilities, voice was given to a group who historically have not been part of the research community" (p. 219). Students "equipped with privileges to investigate learning and learning conditions.... critiqued teachers' attitudes, pedagogy, curriculum, and governance" (p. 219). For all of the challenges that emerge, this work suggests that such collaborative research efforts hold tremendous potential for enacting social justice
ideals in the most relevant ways for students in schools. My intentional engagement of young activists as respected participants in my own research answers this timely call and signals an overdue acknowledgement of their significant roles as activists and informants in this area.

In addition, there are no in-depth studies into teachers’ understandings of the complexities and contradictions in shaping social justice pedagogy in Canadian school-based programs. Many scholars recognize that teaching in Canada is a traditionally conservative profession with practitioners who typically resist change and innovation (e.g., Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Solomon, 1995). This seems particularly true in relation to progress in social justice educational areas. For example, in a survey of over 1000 teachers across Canada, Solomon and Levine-Rasky (1994) uncover the dimensions of educators’ resistance to multicultural and antiracist education. They assert that, “given the stability of the teaching culture and the ideological perspective that informs it, together with the depoliticized and uncritical framework of teacher education institutions, the relative lack of self-awareness and ‘race’ consciousness that teachers demonstrate is rationalized” (p. 11). Indeed, Solomon and Levine-Rasky find that educators consistently seek to avoid contentious issues, and specifically that “denial and reluctance to name the problem of racism and thus the need for an antiracist pedagogy remains a most tenacious obstacle” (p. 12).

In another discussion of the above study, Solomon (1995) finds the terminology of oppression and conflict especially problematic for many teachers; in fact, such “discourse may generate more dissent than teachers are prepared or even care to handle. Such oppositional language goes against the assumed Canadian culture of consensus and compromise” (p. 257). My own experience as a long-time teacher and activist confirms these generalizations about many teachers, but I also recognize the tremendous potential of a small number of informed and committed activists to make a serious impact on conservative school
 Rather than setting out in advance the specific research focus and guiding questions, I opened my research design to incorporate how teachers and students understand and incorporate the various conceptions of and approaches to multicultural and antiracist education in their own terms. Allowing their voices to interact with the theorists, research literature, and actual school practices has initiated what Roman and Stanley (1997) propose as "an unfinished project to shift the burdens of risk-taking from isolated courageous students and teachers to schools, school districts, and faculties of education in conjunction with progressives in movements of critical multiculturalism and antiracism" (p. 226). Including current practitioners in several stages of my research allows our mutual exploration of critical current issues, and addresses directly the under-analyzed roles of teacher and student activists as producers of knowledge on social justice issues.

*Potential Significance of this Research*

The value of this study’s contributions to the field of social justice activism is based upon the participants arriving collaboratively at significant understandings of the practical experiences of a relatively small number of activists. In drawing insights from the work and thoughts of educators and theorists who share an educational goal to address issues of equity and justice in Canadian schools, this collaborative research project allowed my participants and I to seek a more nuanced and complex understanding of the way social justice pedagogy is theorized, contested, and enacted in school-based coalitions. To the extent that these insights might inform others working in similar settings and who share similar goals, I consider this research a valuable first step.

Throughout this endeavour I have a standard for the validity--or the term I prefer, soundness--of my findings which can be traced back to the validity claims that apply to
everyday human interactions: I have sought to produce a sound and trustworthy account. I expect my findings to be of direct pedagogical relevance to both teachers and students, presented in a manner that will also speak to a broader audience of activists. The descriptions and analyses of school projects from the perspectives of activists offer complex, concrete models of social justice activism within Alberta, thus contributing to the literature a much-needed, current sampling from the Canadian educational scene. By documenting the innovations, traditions, benefits, and challenges of a variety of school-based programs, it is my hope that this research will strengthen the vibrant and diverse community of people already committed to social justice.

I also wish to inform a wider ranging audience within the educational community with findings of relevance to professional development and curriculum planning committees, school and district administration, and teacher education faculties. Further, as this study addresses discrimination specifically in Alberta school contexts, my findings will also enable a reexamination of assumptions in provincial and national multicultural policies, thus filling an important gap in current curriculum research. I hope this research may also inform public policy and initiatives in the areas of public education, equity, and human rights.

Structure of the Dissertation

In the next chapter I offer further analyses of the research literature on social justice education specifically as it relates to my study of school-based action projects. I begin with an overview of the unique sociopolitical Canadian and regional contexts and recent developments around diversity policy and public debate. I then summarize relevant research and theory from British and American literature, suggesting specific areas of contention and conflict, influence, and overlap with the discourses in this country. I sketch out a theoretical framework for this enquiry, negotiating the contested terrain of liberal and critical theory
toward a stance that allows for intersections of race, class, gender and other considerations in a more robust conceptualization of social justice pedagogy and activism.

Chapter Three offers an explanation of my research methodology, including a justification for my choosing a qualitative model, defense of a specific collaborative approach, and details of my participant selection, data gathering and analysis, and ethical considerations. I include excerpts from my data as examples how my role as a recognized teacher-activist plays itself out in our interviews. Following this are two chapters that develop my research results; my concluding chapter outlines the specific value and significance of this research and suggests promising avenues for further study.
Chapter Two

Literature Review of Educating for Social Justice

In the opening chapter I argued that teacher and student activists are positioned to play an instrumental role in addressing social justice issues in contemporary Canadian society by virtue of their location in school settings. My research has entailed collaboration with those who have already begun to take up the challenge of addressing inequities in schools and society. Although individual commitment to social justice on issues is admirable, it is an inadequate end goal considering the significant reform needed in schools, school districts, and faculties of education. Understanding how Canadian educators and students are currently addressing discrimination, and analyzing their perspectives on this challenging undertaking, will inform the quest to allow schools to fulfill their democratizing purpose: to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students regardless of their ethnic, cultural, racialized, or other identities.

Our ongoing work is also situated within, and informed by, a unique historical and political context in Canada, which forms the subject for this chapter. I noted earlier that the voices of student and teacher activists currently engaging in social justice projects in schools have often been excluded from this conversation. This study addresses that silence by valuing those perspectives and engaging them directly with theory and research sources. The students and teachers I interviewed speak as respected participants in this ongoing debate, their understandings grounded in the gritty terrain of daily activism and very much informed by the lived experiences with current contentious diversity issues as they present themselves in schools across Alberta.

I begin with a brief exposition of one wide swath of the larger fabric of social justice
education, limiting my focus here to addressing multicultural education and antiracist education as they have been defined and used in their relatively brief existence. Following an overview of some current regional political and policy developments in this field, I attend to the Canadian academic scene and follow with a brief overview of British and U.S. discussions in this field. The complex interplay of evolving and often conflicting views of scholars, policy makers, and activists finds its way into conversations in my research in subsequent chapters.

Regional Issues Surrounding Diversity Education

Situating this research project in secondary schools in Alberta has required my paying close attention to public discourses and political developments within Canada and in our region. It is noteworthy that recent conservative reforms to public policy have already significantly affected school, municipal, and provincial multicultural policies and programming in Alberta. As one example, Alberta Premier Ralph Klein’s conservative cabinet initiated legislation that terminated the Alberta Multiculturalism Commission (AMC). Klein’s cabinet ministers contradicted the findings of their own public review and significant community outcry when, in July, 1996, they introduced and passed Bill 24, rescinding the Multiculturalism Act by using the undemocratic method of “forcing closure” on debate in the legislature. The AMC has been replaced by a less autonomous “advisory council” that makes recommendations to the Minister of Community Development, seriously limiting its authority and accountability in monitoring program development and administering funding. In addition, funding was cut by 50% from $2.2 million to $1.1 million annually, not from general revenues but from a burgeoning Lottery Fund, currently generating over one billion dollars annually. Even though fiscal restraint was stated as the impetus for such targeted cuts, very little of Alberta’s current multi-billion dollar surplus is expected to find its way into community programming or education for diversity.
Similarly, the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) effectively terminated its Multicultural Education Council in 1996, citing inadequate membership despite a consistently robust financial status. It was amalgamated with another small specialist council on second languages in 1996 to create the Intercultural and Second Languages Council. A recent assessment of this council reveals few executive members with a strong background or interest in social justice education, and no current educational projects with teachers in challenging racism or other discrimination. I do not intend to denigrate the sincerity or commitment of its current members, but to note that its focus on antiracism seems to have been blunted by the amalgamation. The Alberta Association for Multicultural Education continues its volunteer work in this area as a non-profit group, but faces the discontinuation of all program funding from traditional government sources such as both the Alberta Community Development Department and from Canadian Heritage.

One promising development is the ATA’s recently formed Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Committee, currently undertaking several initiatives including an invitational provincial symposium and a summer institute in conjunction with the University of Alberta. Another is the Cultural Diversity Institute founded at the University of Calgary in 1998 to pursue academic research and community programming; however, its work is dependent on overcoming its ongoing struggles with funding during a time of limited budgets for post-secondary education.

So even though some government, community, and other organizations addressing diversity still exist in Alberta, many of them have faced restructuring and downsizing in recent years. As the teachers I interviewed confirm, this lack of political will to address racism and other discrimination influences the work we do in this field. The regression in programs and funding was identified as a frustration of activists, but not necessarily as an
inhibitory factor to social justice activism for a variety of reasons, addressed in more detail in the chapters to follow.

Exploring Social Justice Education in the Canadian Context

In its relatively brief history, the field of education attending to social justice issues in Canada has undergone much transformation in response to a dynamic social milieu. Specifically on ethnocultural and racialized issues, it has evolved in the past few decades under the umbrella of multicultural education with significant influences from, and interactions with, antiracism and other perspectives (Fleras & Elliot, 1992; Moodley, 1995; Young, 1995). I conducted my interviews within the specific sociopolitical context of Alberta's public schools. However, with much of the research and theorizing in this area informed by American conceptions of multicultural education and British formulations of antiracism, I will also draw on insights from some of these sources as the backdrop for my research.

Canada remains one of the few nations with multicultural ideals entrenched into national government policy (Moodley, 1995), first introduced in policy statements by Prime Minister Trudeau in 1971, followed by each province enacting its own version of multicultural policy, beginning with Manitoba in 1972 and Saskatchewan in 1974. More recent relevant documents include the 1982 *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the 1984 *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*. As well, this country's historical immigration patterns and policies, social and educational institutions, and public responses differ in significant ways from those of other countries, affecting the singular development of Canadian educational policies, curriculum, research, and practices in this area (Fleras & Elliot, 1992; Kymlicka, 1995, 1998; Moodley, 1995; Whitaker, 1991; Wilson, 1981).

Complicating the current discourse on diversity is a pervasive notion that Canada has
always stood for harmony and acceptance; evidence exists that this is a profound distortion. The assumed absence of racism in Canada is refuted by a long history of discriminatory government and corporate policies and practices. As several of my informants in this project have attested, this denial of racism and reluctance to name specific instances often creates barriers to addressing problems as they arise in schools and communities. As one local historian notes, my home province has also struggled with an undercurrent of hatred:

A darker side of Alberta that is not commonly part of the outsider’s perception, having been largely overlooked by both academic and popular historians, is a semblance of the Ku Klux Klan mentality—a religious and racial bigotry that penetrated society far beyond the Ku Klux Klan membership and which emerged during Alberta’s formative years when its foundation Anglo-Saxon stock felt its racial purity threatened by a wave of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants. (Baergen, 2000, pp. 11-12)

Even the obvious actions of contemporary racist hate groups in Alberta and elsewhere in Canada are downplayed, though their recent resurgence “has become increasingly visible, and increasingly violent... [and] has grown to become a significant social problem” (Kinsella, 1994). This growth is compounded in Alberta by its hidden discriminatory past, the influence of which is felt in current public discourse against the French language, immigration, and homosexuals. Baergen (2000) agrees, noting that “Alberta continues to struggle with heavy historical baggage in its quest to overcome racism” (p. 284). Those who dismiss these disturbing developments as the work of a small number of extremists may also wish to deny the historical evidence that such racist perspectives have long permeated mainstream Canadian society.

Our Colonial Past and Present: Confronting Denial and Backlash

Since European settlers began arriving, systematic discrimination has been practiced against individuals and groups based on racist ideologies and ethnocentric views about the
The primacy of British cultural norms, beginning with the colonization of First Nations peoples. Official government policies, formulated and implemented with popular public support, served to entrench, among other examples, racial segregation in schools, forced assimilation of First Nations Canadians, racialized immigration restrictions, anti-Semitism, the mistreatment of Chinese immigrant railway workers, and the displacement and internment of Japanese-Canadians (Baergen, 2000; Boyko, 1995; Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 1995; Porter, 1965; Walker, 1985; Ward, 1992). For various reasons, such unsavoury aspects of Canadian history have been excluded, distorted, or downplayed in virtually all current social studies school materials, and by many in political and administrative positions.

Scholars have begun the monumental task of examining past forms of colonialism and subjugation based on racialized categories, toward educating for a socially just society (e.g., Said, 1993). Reflecting on this matter, Willinsky (1998a) observes that “schools have offered students little help in fathoming why this sense of difference in race, culture, and nation is so closely woven into the fabric of society” (p. 5). Placing the onus back on the education system to correct its past wrongs, he concludes that students “need to see that such divisions have long been part of the fabric and structure of the state, including the schools, and they need to appreciate that challenging the structuring of those differences requires equally public acts of refusing their original and intended meanings” (p. 5). To me, this is a clear call for precisely the models of school-based activism being explored and promoted in this research.

Currently, there is strong public debate in Canada about the value of any form of antiracist or multicultural education, and indeed, of the concept of multiculturalism itself. The most vocal critics identify multicultural policies as a significant cause of ethnic tensions (e.g., Bibby, 1990; Bissoondath, 1994; Gairdner, 1991; Resnick, 1994). Central to their theses is a call for assimilation to a mainstream culture and restricting (non-white) immigration to uphold
“Canadian traditions” (Bissoondath, 1994), thereby framing ethnic diversity itself as a threat to national unity and traditional values. A comprehensive rebuttal and cogent critique of some of these and other anti-multiculturalism writers appears in Puttagunta (1998). These arguments may be decoded as little more than a transparent desire for entrenching the status quo and denying legitimate concerns around diversity and equity issues. To borrow from Willinsky’s (1998b) critique of similar arguments by American critics of multiculturalism, I would concur that such a call for unification “does little to honor the history of a nation tragically built out of racial division” (p. 398).

Indeed, others have noted our national tendency toward white-washing our racist past. Boyko (1995) observes: “Canadians are often guilty of ignoring or warping our past while sanctimoniously feeling somewhat removed from, and superior to, countries struggling with racial problems and harbouring histories marked by slavery or racial violence” (p. 15). It will be more instrumental to our understanding of effective pedagogical responses to racism to acknowledge specific sources and manifestations of racism in Canada, as painful as these may be to face; following Boyko’s timely advice, “let us look truthfully at our past, admit our mistakes, atone for our crimes, and celebrate our progress” (p. 15). Several of the participants in this project were able to do just that in their personal accounts of school-based activism, pointing the way to a form of national healing that Archbishop Desmond Tutu insists is a necessary prerequisite to social justice reform (in Wiwa, 2001).

Echoing this conversation in the school reform literature, Shields (2000) calls for creating schools that “consider seriously how to become inclusive without conformity, identify and celebrate differences as well as similarities, and emphasize the contributions of all participants” (p. 291). Her proposal for respectful communities of difference reasonably bridges the plurality of approaches—and divisions between them—that characterizes this field.
Within the academic discourse there seems to be widespread consensus on the historical basis of racism in Canada, and on highlighting the benefits of immigration and cultural pluralism toward building a strong and vibrant democracy. Much of the contention in this field focuses on the recurrent and sometimes acrimonious disputes between supporters of two specific variants of social justice research and theory.

**Multicultural and Antiracist Education in Canadian Educational Literature**

Some Canadian researchers have depicted social justice education as a highly divisive field of study, describing conflicts between multicultural and antiracist camps in dichotomous, oppositional terms (e.g., Kehoe, 1994; Mansfield & Kehoe, 1993; McGregor & Ungerleider, 1993). I wish to avoid simplified bipolar constructions or positions that deny the complexity of school-based activism. Nevertheless, tracing the development of these two apparently contradictory strands of social justice education seems a worthwhile pursuit toward understanding the lived world of school activists.

Briefly, traditional multicultural education has been wedded conceptually to notions of original federal multicultural policy that promoted ethnocultural retention (e.g., Ungerleider, 1996). It is characterized as consisting of short-term programs and supplemental curricular material designed to cause attitudinal changes in individual students and teachers. The goal has been to foster appreciation of the cultural heritages of others toward increasing inter-group harmony (e.g., Kehoe, 1984; Young, 1984). Magsino (1985) differentiates among six variants within the multicultural approach, including education for an emergent society, education of the culturally different, education for cultural understanding, education for cultural accommodation, education for cultural preservation, and multicultural adaptation. Such models of multicultural education have been criticized as disregarding hidden forms of oppression. Coombs (1986), for example, warns of “the danger that celebration of diversity
and enhancement of cultural communities will be used by dominant social groups to distract us from the important business of doing away with social injustice" (p. 13).

Antiracist education in Canada has emerged to explore more directly the embedded biases in learning materials and existing inequitable power sharing in schools (Thomas, 1984). As outlined below, much of this work has been informed by British and American sources. Some Canadian antiracist educators complain that traditional multicultural programs fail to name and address racism and other discrimination, implicitly support assimilation to a mainstream, and may actually foster ethnic stereotyping by treating cultures as static and foreign (Bannerji, 1995; Dei, 1996a; Lee, 1994).

My research and experience suggest that current so-called multicultural educators typically adopt a variety of approaches, many of which incorporate antiracist ideals in both their underlying intentions and their implementation. Indeed, there is a growing recognition by many multicultural scholars and activists of the highly politicized nature of their work. Rather than focusing primarily on harmonious inter-group relations through prejudice reduction and curricular supplements, several Canadian multicultural education proponents have adopted a more critical and transformative stance (e.g., Moodley, 1995; Ghosh, 1996; Solomon, 1996).

Antiracism educators have come under fire from multicultural educators as well, for adopting too negative and oppositional a stance, for focusing on skin colour only, often portraying all whites as racists and all Blacks as victims, and for denigrating the important race relations groundwork accomplished by multicultural educators (e.g., Friesen, 1991; McLeod, 1992; Moodley, 1995). These particular critiques are borne out in a national study of the ongoing resistance of many Canadian teachers to embrace antiracist approaches to equity issues in schools (Solomon, 1996; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1996).
Some scholars reject or downplay the bipolarity of this field and observe remarkable agreement among researchers and theorists addressing ethnocultural concerns (e.g., Banks, 1995; Fleras & Elliot, 1992; Lyons & Farrell, 1994; Mock, 1996). Fleras and Elliot (1992) view antiracist education in Canada as “situated squarely within the category of multicultural education” (p. 313) while offering a more radical “edge” for addressing diversity within school systems. Between multicultural and antiracist perspectives in Canada, Mock (1996) notes, “in fact there are intimate connections, historically and particularly in the legislation. One cannot be achieved without the other” (p. 5). Addressing a large cross-Canada study of teacher attitudes, Solomon & Levine-Rasky (1994) also find commonalities between the two approaches, including “links to civil responsibility, moral accountability, enhanced political sensibility, and critical participation embedded within a commitment to work on equity issues” (p. 63). Likewise, in a recent comprehensive review of the American literature in this field, Gay (1995) reveals a “high degree of consensus... on the major principles, concepts, concerns, and directions for changing educational systems to make them more representative of and responsive to the cultural pluralism that exists” (p. 40).

Such conciliatory perspectives, although apparently downplaying key ideological differences between certain articulations of each position, evince what I discovered to be a common strategy with my research participants: finding a contingent means of achieving political solidarity against injustice. Reflecting the pluralism being addressed, it seems reasonable to expect that educators need not speak with a single, consensual voice. Educators currently addressing diversity issues often occupy shifting spaces between and across multicultural and antiracist perspectives—not necessarily a middle ground—but one that can be framed broadly as social justice education.

In the daily practice of some activist educators, my research reveals, academic debates
are not ignored as I and others have suspected. In fact, many of the student and teacher activists with whom I collaborate often read and discuss theoretical and research literature in this area. Several routinely share sources with other activists, some recommend a variety of readings as part of their education efforts, and others actively sought literature referred to in our interviews. Rather than ignoring the contention between proponents of multicultural education and antiracist education, activists often consciously choose to use these labels simultaneously or in contradictory ways in initiatives challenging discrimination. Other researchers working this area have observed similar strategic uses of apparently conflicting terminology (e.g., Berlin & Alladin, 1996; Cogan & Ramsankar, 1994; Smith & Young, 1996). This seems a promising means of addressing the complexity of labelling, academic debates, and political positioning in this field.

My research seeks a more nuanced understanding of such strategic uses of conflicting terminology toward progressive ends. In fact, this project has specifically situated “educators and students scrutinizing the common ground, as well as the conflicting moral and political stakes, of the discourses of multiculturalism and anti-racism” (Roman, 1993, p. 83). Seeking an interpretive analysis of this complexity as it is experienced and expressed by school-based activists seems a worthwhile and long-overdue pursuit.

Brief Notes on Multicultural and Antiracist Education in Britain

It is useful to this project to understand how multicultural and antiracist education are framed differently in other countries, and more specifically, how these competing conceptions influence and complicate Canadian theorizing and activism in these areas. For example, the work by antiracist educators in Britain has been highly influential in shaping notions of ethnic identity and racism in the ongoing redefining of multicultural policies in Canada for the past several years (Bonnett & Carrington, 1996; Troyna, 1993). In contrast to
the Canadian context, Britain’s recent political history has included more restricted immigration policies, a strong national identity based on an assumed monocultural (white) homogeneity, and no official national policies on multiculturalism. Admittedly, similar public statements from Stockwell Day, Official Leader of the Opposition Canadian Alliance Party in Canada, echo these sentiments. For decades, to be British meant to be white and Christian, and other ethnic groups were constructed as outsiders and a threat to national cohesiveness (Gilroy, 1992). From this exclusivist milieu have emerged antiracist educational initiatives that have typically been highly oppositional to white racism and focused on Black resistance (Short & Carrington, 1996). It is worth noting here that, in Britain, Black typically refers to people from Africa, the Caribbean, India, and South Asia.

Scholarship on the complexities of national and ethnic identity formation and social construction has been given considerable attention by British academics for the past several years, leading to theoretically sophisticated and provocative formulations on notions of “race” and “difference” (e.g., Hall, 1986, 1992; Rattansi, 1992). There now exists a particular form of “cultural racism” that has flourished in recent years as Britain has undergone a significant conservative resurgence. The “new racism” that has emerged makes invisible the references to “race” and skin colour, replacing them with an ethnic absolutist presentation of British national identity (Gilroy, 1992; Gundara & Jones, 1992). Briefly summarized, Thatcher’s Conservative government implemented policies and offered thinly-veiled racist rhetoric in the largely conservative media surrounding notions of national identity. Anti-racism was attacked as encouraging Black hatred of a white society, and any social justice efforts in the schools were dismissed as programs from the “loony left” (Bonnett & Carrington, 1996; Gillborn, 1995). The similarities to conservative reforms currently taking place in Canada, mentioned in the opening of this chapter, makes the establishment of links
between social justice practitioners and scholars across both countries both desirable and inevitable.

Bonnett and Carrington (1996) note that while scholars and grass-roots activists in Canada have imported some key aspects of British antiracist activism into the multicultural education discourse, “the politically marginalised and vilified anti-racist ‘community’ in the UK has felt itself unsupported and intellectually isolated” (p. 271). In addition, there have been acrimonious debates within social justice movements, polarized along multicultural and antiracist lines (Hatcher & Troyna, 1993; Troyna, 1993). As in Canada, multicultural education in Britain has traditionally focused on prejudice reduction strategies aimed at reducing “ignorance” of other cultures toward greater cultural harmony (Lynch, 1987). Short and Carrington (1996) refer to the antiracist mission as focussing “on the need to eradicate both individual racism and racial inequality in education” (p. 67) including examining the appropriateness of the curriculum along with “targeting issues such as racial harassment, stereotyping [and] the recruitment and promotion of ethnic and minority staff” (p. 67). Further, Reed (1995) recognizes that collaborative antiracist activism in schools attempts to “encompass understandings of the complex interplay of issues around ‘race’, class, gender, sexuality, disability and special educational needs” (p. 78). This broader vision for the future of social justice pedagogy shares a great deal with critical formulations of multicultural education that have developed recently in Canada, and over the past several decades in the U.S.

**Brief Notes on American Multiculturalism**

Educators concerned with social justice issues in the U.S. have used the term multicultural education to address a variety of social concerns regarding ethnic, class, gender, sexuality, and cultural issues. Many have avowed a “critical multicultural” stance toward
education, specifically to allow for the interrogation of existing systemic inequities in curricular content, teaching practices, hiring procedures, and policies (e.g., Giroux, 1993; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; McCarthy, 1993b; Nieto, 1996; Sleeter, 1996; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). In this regard, the American use of the term “multicultural” automatically implies a uniting of cultural harmony concerns with antiracism educational goals. Free from the backdrop of governmental policies on multiculturalism—and the resultant decades of debate and backlash—the term does not carry the same ideological baggage it does in Canada.

Nonetheless, progressive educational reform activists and multicultural scholars in the U.S., like their Canadian and British counterparts, have faced a great deal of public criticism in recent years (e.g., Bernstein, 1994; Bloom, 1987; Schlesinger, 1992). As elsewhere, much of it emerges from assimilationist conservative political positions by critics who wield popular phrases such as “educational standards” and “national pride” while dismissing multicultural education as divisive, anti-American, or self-serving “political correctness.” I characterize my research as part of a larger political struggle against this conservative backlash currently taking place in Canada and other Western nations (Apple, 1993; Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Lund, 1998b; Puttagunta, 1998).

In educational scholarship in the U.S., many have criticized the confusion surrounding terminology in this field. As in Canada, a remarkable diversity in labelling exists, as a few examples from multicultural education literature illustrate. Sleeper and Grant (1987) identify five categories, including teaching the culturally different, human relations, single group studies, multicultural education, and multicultural and social reconstructionist, while Banks (1995) breaks the approaches down into content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school community. Similarly, McCarthy (1993a) has identified four types of multicultural education—cultural
understanding, cultural competence, cultural emancipation, and critical emancipatory—while Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) categorize the field as entailing conservative, liberal, pluralist, left-essentialist, and critical multiculturalism. McLaren (1997) goes further to describe conservative, liberal, left-liberal, critical/resistance, and his obvious preference, revolutionary multiculturalism. Meanwhile, Kanpol (1995) strives for a “border pedagogy of postmodern multiculturalism.” This dizzying assortment of terms and concepts may often obscure rather than clarify ideological positions, causing frustration among social justice practitioners. I am not suggesting, as some scholars have, that teachers and students are either disinterested or anti-intellectual (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Stringer, 1996), but simply that they might benefit from educational material with greater clarity and apparent relevance to their daily activism.

There is a growing recognition by many scholars and activists alike of the politicized nature of their work around ethnocultural pluralism, and of the pressing need for coalition-building to influence educational policy and structural concerns. Rather than focusing primarily on harmonious inter-group relations through prejudice reduction workshops and minor curricular supplements, more educators and researchers than ever seek to implement school reform on a systemic level. From this more critical stance, as Gay (1995) recognizes, educators acknowledge “that the democratic and human rights imperatives demand that existing educational programs, structures, and practices be reformed to make them more accessible and responsive to groups that historically have been oppressed, silenced, and disenfranchised educationally, economically, and politically” (p. 41). This approach allows for the critical examination of inequities in curricular content, teaching practices, hiring procedures, and policies.

Similarly, Canadian educators interested in what have traditionally been considered
antiracist concerns--akin to variants of American “critical multicultural” stances--may find pedagogical support from Canadian authors addressing practical implications for schools (e.g., Fleras & Elliot, 1992; Ghosh, 1996; Melenchuk, 1993; McLeod & Krugly-Smolska, 1997; Oberlander, 1997).

Seeking Exemplary Models in Teacher Education

Taking the lead in transformative efforts have been some American scholars working to modify preservice programs from a critical multicultural position (e.g., Banks & Banks, 1995; Cabello & Eckmier, 1995; Jordan, 1995; McCall, 1995; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993; Phuntsog, 1995; Shade, 1995). In a recent comprehensive review of exemplary programs, Hidalgo, Chávez-Chávez, and Ramage (1995) found that “teacher educators often have taken the lead in advocating school reform and increased teacher engagement in the public schools” (p. 774). However, these are too often the exception rather than the rule in teacher education. Grant and Secada (1990) located just 23 studies of American universities addressing pluralism from 1964 to 1988. In a subsequent revisiting of the literature, Grant (1994) located 44 studies pertaining specifically to multicultural teacher education--still a relatively small number. He charges that U.S. teacher education programs in general have not kept up with the changing demographics of contemporary schools, lamenting that “the subject matter, content, and nature of the experiences offered in preservice courses have undergone little change, especially in comparison to the clearly unmet needs of urban students and students of color” (p. 1).

The situation in Canadian universities mirrors these observations, with very few academic accounts of teacher education programs on issues of racialized and ethnic diversity and equity. A recent survey of the literature reveals a small number of journal articles documenting modest modifications to Canadian university and college education programs
Faculties of education have contributed little to this struggle and have received little attention in the multicultural or anti-racist education literature in Canada. While some faculty members have taken part in the critique of school practices (and have build academic careers theorizing about such practices) our own worksites and practices have been virtually ignored and left beyond critique. (p. 45)

Teacher educators, activists, and researchers wishing to take up this significant challenge confront a long history of inaction variously explained as apathy, intolerance, or some other combination of bureaucratic afflictions. Seeking meaningful reforms to schooling in Canada in this context offers challenges, but the alternative of maintaining the status quo in the face of ongoing inequity and discrimination seems to me downright irresponsible.

**Getting Beyond Peripheralization**

Based on their study of university calendars from across Canada, Henley and Young (1989) conclude that a focus on diversity in teacher preparation “is not afforded a high priority in many Canadian universities and that where multicultural education is addressed it is often done through isolated course offerings which cannot possibly provide to students the kind of exposure necessary to address adequately the complexity of the culture-society dynamic” (p. 27). Granted, many educational foundations courses include topics such as diversity, pluralism, or multiculturalism, but their treatment in class depends on the expertise and experience of the individual instructors. Some teacher education programs offer optional courses on specific issues such as Native education or bilingual instruction. A small number of universities have developed separate degree programs in these fields or related areas such
as intercultural education (Friesen, 1991; Young, 1995).

Some may view the above developments as evidence of a promising trend, but others contend that such additions offer the teaching profession a disservice, just as “celebratory” multicultural programs in schools are criticized for being superficial and culturally essentialist. These few supplementary courses may help marginalize people based on differences, and push diversity issues into the narrow spaces of “special days” or add-on units, included only when time allows. Likewise, this supplementation or “tinkering” does little to address systemic inequities in schools or universities, nor does it necessarily help usher in meaningful changes across the program. Grant (1994) concludes that “the common response of merely adding multicultural courses to the curriculum of teacher preparation is insufficient, ineffective, and potentially misleading—even damaging” (p. 7), yet it remains the typical response of faculties of education on calls for change.

In a recent study of the UBC teacher education program, 48 beginning teachers completed retrospective surveys (Housego & Badali, 1996). Although social justice issues were not among the survey items, in the open-ended section some respondents expressed a desire for more relevant optional “courses contributing to understanding ethnic minorities” (p. 388) and recommended better “practical preparation for dealing with multicultural issues” (p. 390). After a recent review, UBC’s teacher education program currently reveals no substantive modifications with regards to addressing social justice concerns.

Research on teacher education in the U.S. seems unanimous that for substantive reform to occur in a program, an “infusion” of social justice principles must take place across the curriculum of the entire faculty (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1995; Grant, 1994; Hidalgo et al., 1995; Shade, 1995; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1995). Even so, what this may look like in program design and implementation, course content and configuration, and practicum components for
Canadian universities remains largely theoretical. The addition of one or two new “multicultural” or “diversity” courses is the most likely response from a university administration addressing ethnocultural equity issues specifically, despite the limited impact on preservice teachers. I recommend a more broadly integrated model of social justice reform for substantive changes in the outcomes for teacher education candidates.

_Pursuing Educational Change in a Conservative Climate_

There are no simple prescriptions for a clear path to be pursued by school systems or by teacher education programs seeking to become more equitable and responsive to the needs of a diverse society. Numerous practical considerations include a significant modification of programs, entailing staff and faculty retraining, a major revamping of existing courses and curricula, and other substantive changes requiring considerable time and effort. For example, adopting an intensive professional development program involves schedule revising, reallocating resources, and establishing mechanisms for ongoing input and modification. As some of my research participants note, a strong administrative commitment and reliable funding sources are helpful but not requirements for substantive reforms to existing educational systems. Having influential leadership spearhead such initiatives is cited as a key factor in the success of such reforms (e.g., Britzman et al. 1997; Nimrod & Emsg, 1995; Shade, 1995). Other accounts of secondary school change efforts also highlight the importance of the school-wide adoption of the desired positive transformation, and “buy-in” from the widest possible diversity of participants (Bohn & Sleeter, 2000; Gaskell, 1995; Herr, 1999; Lightfoot, 1983; Shields, 2000).

A significant obstacle toward this end is the aforementioned current political climate of cutbacks and pressure from conservative education reformers emphasizing uniformity and a return to “the basics.” At first glance, a push for higher standards seems reasonable, yet
motives for these initiatives may include supporting existing hierarchies and inequities (Barlow & Robertson, 1994). A conservative social climate entails often tenacious resistance to any equity reform efforts in schools and universities alike (e.g., Apple, 1993; Fleras, 1996; Lund, 1998a; Solomon, 1996). This can be especially daunting for junior faculty and beginning teachers who are in many ways the least powerful agents in their institutions.

During a time of fiscal restraint and conservative rhetoric, education for social justice becomes an especially contentious issue for administrators. Fleras (1996) describes an antagonistic climate in Canadian universities, often because “antiracist initiatives have been denounced as irrelevant in the absence of empirical proof of a ‘problem.’ They have also been criticized as a misallocation of scarce resources, unnecessarily inflammatory or divisive, and unbecoming to a university enterprise” (p. 78). Those who implement such reforms may be criticized that their initiatives “spring from motives for damage control or empire-building, rather than for compassion or justice” (p. 78). Fleras advises that “responding to this challenge will entail both political will and financial muscle, at a time of fiscal restraint” (p. 83), no small challenge to teacher educators.

These barriers also exist for teacher and student activists in public school settings. Like their post-secondary counterparts, social justice supporters must continue to invent innovative funding initiatives for new programs, seek collaborations with government and not-for-profit community agencies, and organize effective lobbying for increased expenditures in this area. Although progressive educators and social justice activists face a rising tide of backlash that threatens what little gains have been made, it is important to note that much of the resistance to such change in education originates from within.

**Facing Conservatism in Teaching**

The problematic framing of “training” a teaching profession has been viewed, by its
very nature, as a conservative pursuit naturally resistive to change (Britzman et al., 1997; Kincheloe, 1993). Kincheloe (1993) offers that “prospective teachers encounter few experiences that challenge the status quo in schools” (p. 14). Although an inherent conservatism may inhibit progressive initiatives, many educators such as the ones I interviewed have taken responsibility to seize those opportunities that inevitably arise, and strive to create more such spaces for the critical engagement of fellow teachers and students on issues related to social justice and diversity.

Teacher education programs often attract students who may not wish to disrupt current situations in schools, and who may not value professors who try to do likewise. Many are likely attracted to the profession because they enjoyed their own schooling, and some will have conservative values. However, recent research in Canadian universities suggests that a more critical attitude in teacher candidates toward social justice issues may be surfacing in faculties of education (e.g., Britzman et al., 1997; Housego & Badali, 1996; Young & Buchanan, 1996). Young and Buchanan (1996) report that a majority of the preservice teachers responding to their survey at the University of Manitoba express support “for a version of multicultural education that calls for an inclusive curriculum and an inclusive teaching force” (p. 61) and a majority believe racism to be a major problem in Canadian schools. Respecting the potential for critical engagement with pre-service teacher candidates and public school students will mean identifying and optimizing those fruitful pedagogical moments as they occur throughout the respective education programs.

To this end, Britzman et al. (1997) recommend modifications to the teacher education program at York University toward engaging faculty and students alike in rethinking the nature and purpose of education. For preservice candidates this means focusing on how they “think about and speak to the relation between education and inequality” (p. 17), and actively
engaging in ongoing debates around the structure and outcomes of their own educational experiences. Rather than seeking the correct “solutions” to classroom problems, teacher education candidates are encouraged to view their university and teaching experiences as a means of engaging creatively and collaboratively with others toward negotiating meanings and their own roles in larger social systems (pp. 17-19). These efforts require a sustained level of energy and commitment, yet offer tremendous rewards for those whose goal is to nurture socially responsible, culturally sensitive, and equity-conscious teachers.

Ameliorating Faculty Resistance to Reform

Some professors may resist addressing diversity and equity issues because of perceived career risks to those who embrace its transformative tenets in opposition to the views of more conservative students and institutional structures. Teacher educators can expect some students to perceive their efforts toward any such reforms as an affront to tradition or standards. Greenman and Kimmel (1995) offer an illustrative instance of the inhibiting effect this can have on faculty: “Through negative evaluation, students often punish professors and facilitators who confront issues, take risks, and create discomfort. In many institutions, these evaluations are used as the sole means of teacher assessment” (p. 367). Similarly, classroom teachers commonly feel “apprehension about confronting the tensions inherent in a dialogue about antiracist education” (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1996, p. 30). The resultant lack of will on the part of understandably cautious educators can work against an institution’s equity initiatives. Developing a strong theoretical framework on learning and engaging a large portion of teachers are crucial early steps to overcome this.

Convincing teachers or education faculty of the value of addressing social justice issues means having empathy for the diversity of educators’ starting points. Obviously this is a formidable task, as any faculty member’s knowledge is comprised of deeply held
personal and professional beliefs about learners and learning, and about what it means to educate someone. Existing attitudes and behaviours must be viewed as a foundation for any new knowledge in order to bring about gradual, incremental changes in the daily practice of all faculty in a program. This makes common pedagogical sense and fits with constructivist models; teachers understand that the best learning occurs when they begin with what students already understand, building upon and challenging that initial knowledge base as they encourage lifelong learning. A greater sense of ownership and common goals is the most likely result of a cooperative and developmental approach to change.

One goal of educational reform along these lines is to have individuals internalize the intrinsic value of addressing ethnocultural diversity and equity issues. As Nimrod and Emberg (1995) discovered during a major project across six Canadian community colleges, an effective means of achieving success involves a system-wide commitment to reform at several levels. In particular, attention must be paid to needs assessment, professional development for equity leaders, a variety of in-services and workshops, policy changes, and ongoing administrative support. Attending to equity need not entail professors discarding what they already understand about schools and preservice teachers, or about their own subject area specialties; instead, they add to that base. Pre-service teachers are sent a clear and consistent message from all faculty, not just those identified as multicultural or antiracism specialists.

Addressing Hiring and Admissions Inequities

Addressing inequitable hiring practices and the resultant lack of diversity among faculty and staff are also essential for opening school systems and teacher education programs to input from diverse perspectives (Lundy & Lawrence, 1995; Sleeter, 1993, 1996; Solomon, 1997; Stovel, 1996; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1995). Teachers and professors of colour, for example, can be role models for students who have never seen themselves represented in
the institutions in which they study. Their personal experiences with racism and with finding success can inform both mainstream teachers and students from marginalized groups. A more representational faculty also sends a symbolic message that those behind the program practice the inclusiveness they advocate. Addressing cultural and racialized equity issues in personnel matters entails taking many different steps toward long-term transformation, beginning with policy changes and modifications of hiring policies and practices—some reforms implemented immediately, and others incrementally over several years.

A related important issue that has received very little attention in the Canadian context is the recruitment procedures used to attract certain students to the profession. Lundy and Lawrence (1995) analyze demographic data from the applications and admissions records of applicants to ten Ontario university teacher education programs, encountering challenges of missing or incompatible statistical data and changing terminology on ethnicity. Not surprisingly, they confirmed that more teacher candidates from “visible minority” and First Nations backgrounds are needed to reflect the diversity of the population served by public schools. Furthermore, based on interviews with preservice teachers from these groups, Lundy and Lawrence offer several recommendations for attracting and maintaining candidates; these include carefully implemented affirmative action for attracting and accepting applicants, increasing the intake numbers, establishing large cohort groupings, and implementing curricular and instructional modifications (pp. 15-16). Clearly, faculty hiring and in-servicing, admissions policies and practices, and other core elements of a teacher education program must be evaluated and modified, immediately and decisively, if more equitable forms of teacher education and public schooling are to continue to take shape in Canada.

Framing Preservice Teachers as Researchers: Fostering Collaboration

Some scholars call for a deliberate overlapping of the roles of teacher and researcher in
teacher education programs, with preservice teachers incorporating forms of field-based research into their early practica (e.g., Britzman et al., 1997; Clarke, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teacher candidates and their supervisors benefit from this linking of practice and research. Ladson-Billings (1995) believes this may help bridge the theory-practice gap in education, as “this willingness to listen and learn from practitioners is providing researchers and teacher educators with opportunities to build a knowledge base in conjunction and collaboration with teachers” (p. 755). With the guidance of faculty members, preservice teachers may learn to view their teaching experiences in new ways, while gaining insights into multiple perspectives on diversity and equity issues within their own practice.

An important finding in teacher education literature is that beginning teachers are more likely to find success and avoid early “burnout” when they establish connections with other professionals. This is of particular relevance to new teachers engaged in multicultural and antiracist education in their practicum and early career placements. In follow-up interviews with 38 students involved in an innovative teacher education program, Cabello and Eckmier (1995) found they stressed the importance of networks, a factor not included in their research questions three years earlier. What the early career teachers had valued most was “the opportunity to develop a support network among their peers and with university faculty.... [that] helped them from burning out at school... [and served] as a source of support and professional enrichment” (p. 41). My present research supports this, with virtually all participants expressing the desire for increased opportunities for networking and establishing connectedness with others pursuing similar objectives. Fostering a professional environment that values a commitment to collaborate with others to challenge inequitable structures and practices would seem a worthwhile goal for any school administrator or teacher educator who shares social justice concerns.
Concluding Thoughts

It is naive to expect to transform schools, school systems, or teacher education programs overnight. No one imagines that system-wide changes will happen without confronting a multitude of organizational barriers and challenges posed by these institutions. Even so, changes such as those outlined above, reinforced in later chapters by the voices of current activists, driven by a shared commitment to various forms of social justice education, will inevitably help shape Canadian public schools and education faculties as exemplary learning environments toward a more egalitarian future.

Rather than avoiding the many problems associated with educational reforms, responsible educators are under some pressure to address them directly and immediately, capitalizing on what Sheehan and Fullan (1995) see as “the preconditions for convergence” of policy and practice currently existing in public education. Their candid comments on educational reform can serve as a wake-up call to educators and researchers committed to social justice who realize that change is difficult, research dollars are scarce, [and] work in schools and with teachers takes time.... However, to not attempt change is unacceptable. At issue is not only the viability of teacher education institutions but the long term health of our teachers and our schools. (p. 100)

In the next chapter I present and justify my selection of a qualitative, collaborative approach to this research project and explain my method for selecting student and teacher participants. I outline the steps I took in piloting preliminary questions and areas of focus, and in formulating my initial guiding hypotheses. Following a brief description of my data gathering and analysis procedures, I explain the ways I addressed ethical concerns raised by this research project, and include illustrations from my interview data.
Chapter Three

Research Methodology

My approach to this research falls within the broad category of qualitative methods. Given that I had long been involved in organizing similar programs to the ones in which my research participants were taking part, I decided that study should entail both my soliciting and sharing understandings about the everyday life of social justice leaders, thereby valuing the discovery of participants’ perspectives on their own activism. This view of inquiry sees research as an interactive process between myself as researcher and the research participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). In fact, I have intentionally tested this research project itself as a vehicle for facilitating social justice activism, an instrument of community building among a small group of teachers and students.

I believe that the development of theory and the improvement of practice in education can and often do take place at the same time. This is particularly true for those engaged in movements working toward progressive social change around contentious issues of diversity, equity, and human rights. As Dei reminds us, “the antiracism worker must ground theory in actual political practice. Social justice activism is more than theorizing about change. It is about engaging in political practice informed by theory of social change, at the same time as the theory itself is refined by political practice” (1996a, p. 127).

Despite our shared goals toward social change, I am reluctant to apply uncritically the term “action research” to describe this study. I reject the often anti-theoretical positions taken by its proponents in educational research literature, such as Stringer (1996), who complains that “teachers, health workers, and human service practitioners often find that the theoretical knowledge of the academic world has limited relevance to the exacting demands of
their everyday professional lives” (p. 6). Likewise I am concerned by the omission or superficial treatment by some action researchers of political and social issues affecting pedagogical situations (e.g., van Manen, 1990). Carr and Kemmis (1983) are exceptions; they characterize action research as “an embodiment of democratic principles in research, allowing participants to influence, if not determine, the conditions of their own lives and work, and collaboratively to develop critiques of social conditions which sustain dependence, inequality or exploitation in any research enterprise” (p. 153). However, I would extend their notion of social conditions to include the researchers’ responsibility to conduct an inquiry with participants into the underlying institutional and structural sources of oppression, and advance their goal of developing critiques to include naming concrete collaborative actions to be taken by practitioners.

Adopting a Collaborative Approach

Since my specific setting of interest is public schools, I have taken advantage of my own experience to adopt a collaborative role in my research. As a teacher-activist myself, I support the notion that a primary goal for educational researchers is “to develop theories of educational practice that are rooted in the concrete educational experiences and situations of practitioners” (Carr & Kemmis, 1983, p. 116). To this end, I have shared my own grounded knowledge in this field with the participants while being careful to ensure that they have had a full opportunity to discuss their own views and values.

I have successfully worked with students and teachers across the multiple labels of social justice pedagogy as evinced by the integrative STOP program. As a winner of national teaching awards, and as a school consultant on diversity initiatives and author of multicultural curriculum and policy, I fully expected to share my own experiences when appropriate during my data gathering, and to draw upon them along the way to inform my analysis. Some
examples of how this plays out in the interviews are included in a section below.

Based on his comprehensive study of school diversity and equity policies across Canada, Corson (2000) recommends that more research "needs to examine the micro-contexts of implementation [of educational policies on diversity] by using careful, ethnographic approaches to see if planned reforms are truly reaching those who live in remote areas or those who inhabit marginal cultural and social spaces" (p. 180). The present study attempts, in part, to fulfill that pressing educational need, and goes further to inform the activism itself. While it is not an ethnography of microcontexts, it does consist of participants’ structured and probed reflections on those contexts.

I gathered primary data mainly in the form of in-depth collaborative interviews. Although my research involved interviews, participant-observation, and other data gathering methods over two and a half years, I did not spend an extended length of time immersed in any one setting. Most importantly, I sought a respectful engagement with the everyday activism of the participants, adopting certain features of a critical ethnographic approach adapted from Simon and Dippo (1986), and refined more recently by Carspecken (1996). That is, while paying deliberate attention to my own values and assumptions I endeavoured to understand participants’ perspectives in their own terms, through a commitment to a collaborative process of discovery and analysis through interaction.

My stance here was sensitive to structural and institutional constraints on social activism--particularly in school settings and in a conservative political climate--some of which may not have been articulated directly by the actors in those settings. This sometimes involves significant personal or professional risk, as is noted by some of my participants. As Herr (1999) observes from her own research exploring social justice concerns in secondary school settings, there are often unanticipated outcomes that may result from enquiries that
question existing practices and policies of an institution. She warns that school-based researchers “should expect then that as our research efforts help the push for school change, forces within the institution will push back” (p. 15). Also, my own assumptions, biases, and identity in my role as researcher were subject to analysis, as I situated my observations, the participants’ accounts of their practice, and my own participation and analysis within complex existing social contexts.

In attending to the standards and justifications of critical ethnography, I also acknowledge my concern with the precarious positions often taken by critical researchers, arising from confusing theoretical stances and unspecified desired social outcomes. Also uncomfortable for me is the problematic goal of “empowerment,” as if power is something to be disbursed by researchers (e.g., Shor, 1996; Simon, 1987). I attended to the complex and variable power relationships that emerge in research, but eschew simplistic notions of its one-way movement or manipulation. Nevertheless, I consider my stance to be critical in a broader sense, acknowledging structural and systemic barriers to equity. I believe framing racism and other discrimination simply as instances of individual misunderstanding would have seriously limited my enquiry.

Selection of Research Participants

I identified existing social justice groups using a “community nomination” method of selection, following the work of Foster (1993), locating them through direct contact with my network of teacher colleagues, professional associations, government agencies, community activists, and the like. Initial contacts “snowballed” into further meetings and observations with others to corroborate my emergent understandings. Programs were selected from schools in both urban and rural settings in Alberta. Individual student and teacher participants were identified based on their leadership roles within ongoing social justice action groups, and their
willingness to work collaboratively in this research endeavour.

My participants in this project included seven student and four teacher activists from across Alberta. Their personal length of experience in this field ranged from one year to over 25 years. One of the teachers and two of the student activists were male. According to my observations and participant accounts, this gender imbalance accurately reflects the demographic make-up of the groups themselves, and certainly warrants further exploration. Three of the participants lived and engaged in activism in rural or smaller urban settings. Two of the teachers worked in junior high schools and the remainder of participants were students or staff in senior secondary schools. I strived to select participants from of a variety of ethnocultural groups; by their own self-identification, my participants included people from Asian, white Anglo-Saxon, African-Canadian, South American Latina, and Indo-Canadian backgrounds. More detailed descriptions of participants and school groups appear in the results sections.

The following are traits that comprised the criteria for my selection of relevant school projects. Teacher-student groups I sought (a) were equitable, respectful coalitions of students and adults, (b) addressed broad notions of justice, inclusivity, and equity, (c) attended to diversity and issues of identity and representation, (d) reflected an ethical sense of altruism, other-directedness, and caring, (e) were situated within a format that honoured an egalitarian, democratic context of responsible citizenship, (f) included some critical interrogation of systemic biases, curricular content, and everyday practices in schools and communities, and (g) strived to challenge discrimination based on several possible social signifiers, including ethnicity, skin colour, language, physical appearance, dress, cultural features, weight, height, disability, mental challenge, country of origin, sexual orientation, gender, age, source of income, and social class.
Piloting Preliminary Questions and Areas of Focus

My past experiences and skills have served me well in this particular dissertation research project. For example, in the past I have engaged students in reflective interviews about their personal writing (Lund, 1986; 1989), and both teachers and students about teaching (1991b). I have also compiled and edited a compendium of educators' written accounts of their own practice, including four interviews I conducted specifically for the collection (Lund, 1991a). More recently I have interviewed educators and analyzed their conceptions of intelligence (Lund, 1994). I have also recently conducted a pilot study of teacher understandings of student activism as part of a series of assignments for a graduate seminar on ethnographic research methods. My interviews and observations of a Vancouver high school teacher currently engaged in social justice activism with students was both fruitful and illuminating. We found a common language to explore the complexity and challenges of working for equity and justice within school-based coalitions with students, and that success informed the current study.

Likewise, I strived to shape my initial research assumptions and questions using a selected team of long-time social justice activist colleagues from various settings around the province. These included a teacher-coordinator of a well-regarded student leadership camp in cultural diversity, a former anti-racism coordinator for a large urban school district, and the administrator of a non-governmental diversity serving agency. By e-mail, fax, and telephone, we brainstormed and shared ideas about possible questions and areas of vital concern for this study.

We agreed that interviews would begin with my gathering information about each participant's teaching assignment or grade level and any relevant background training or personal involvement with diversity work and/or experiences with forms of discrimination.
Participants would then be asked to describe their own role in their school’s particular group or project, and share specific aspects of its formation, goals, procedures, membership, and examples of activities. Further exploration was recommended into issues of administrative support, political climate, sustainability, achievements, challenges and barriers to their social justice activism. A more specific list of salient issues emerged from this informal conversation; I brought this back to the team for further refinement. The result was my guiding hypotheses, included in the opening chapter, and a list of open-ended questions to facilitate sharing by teacher and student participants, included as Appendixes B and C.

Data Gathering and Analysis

I spent about two and a half years gathering data with the participants, as I continued to teach and coordinate the STOP program in Red Deer. Initially, I observed directly the group meetings and public presentations of some social justice projects, with my observations recorded in dense field notes. In addition, I recorded social routines in the surrounding school and community of each specific setting. This included my keeping notes on casual observations, conversations, and interviews with participants. I also collected supporting relevant documentation from each group, including school promotional materials, statements of group goals or activities, relevant news coverage, and literature produced by the projects.

Interviews with student and teacher participants took place at mutually agreeable times in a variety of settings according to convenience and opportunity. There were almost as many different types of sites as participants, including a university foyer, school staff room, civic conference centre room, school cafeteria, and school classrooms. In the case of Sina, our interview took place in a coffee shop, creating a casual backdrop for our dialogue. However, I later discovered that the regular roar of the coffee grinder and hissing of the espresso machine
were less than helpful during the transcribing of this particular interview! During this series of in-depth interviews I sought to discover together with each participant the meanings these students and teachers attach to their activism.

Because an important part of my study was to test the dissertation research itself as a means of facilitating activism, I sought to elicit specific means of accomplishing this during each interview. As reported more fully in the results section, this included a mutual process of offering specific suggestions for social justice activities, sharing contacts and funding information, mentioning upcoming conferences and events, networking with other fellow activists, and encouraging follow-up contact regarding specific projects.

Each participant allowed me to record our interview on audiotape cassettes that I transcribed at regular intervals, and controlled in accordance with the standards of the ethics review board at UBC. My data analysis acknowledged the impossibility of a “neutral” interpretation; accepting language as a social code implicated each participant in the meaning making process. Such an analysis considered my role in the research account, and permits other interpretations of data. The emergent meanings and ideas generated through the interviews inevitably shaped and focused subsequent interviews and interactions.

*Attending to Roles, Positions, and Power Considerations*

The interviews were conducted much in the manner of a conversation between colleagues, a dialogic process that naturally entailed some self-disclosure on my part. As a fellow teacher and social justice activist, I incorporated my insider status to gain the respect and trust of my teacher participants in an honest and ethical process of building rapport. As a long-time educator and parent of two children, I expressed genuine interest in the unique experiences and perspectives of the student activists. I had a genuine commitment to learn and grow together with each of my participants, but was conscious, nonetheless, of our
potentially differential power locations within institutions and across other social boundaries. I took specific steps to foreground this awareness as I made research decisions along the way.

After participants and I negotiated shared meanings in interviews, I brought the transcripts and my preliminary analyses of them back to the participants in order to incorporate a democratic process of data generation; participants had the right to modify their words to reflect more accurately their intended meanings, to delete material, and to contribute to analysis if they so desired. This was not undertaken with the goal of “equalizing” our respective roles in the research project. I was aware that participants were unlikely to place the same value on this stage of the research, and were under no obligation to take on this additional role. There were no significant alterations of interview data. Our emerging understandings are an important aspect of the reciprocity between participants in this study.

Specific aspects of our different positionalities that may have influenced our engagement included my association with a university and the additional scholarly intentions emerging from my involvement with this project—namely, this dissertation. What I have taken from the interviews and observations may be put to use in ways beyond the improvement of my own daily practice. I was sensitive to the fact that I would be using the meanings we generated for my own academic purposes, and fully informed my participants of this, along with other detailed information about their involvement. I provided them with a safe and comfortable venue in which to collaborate, with ongoing reminders of their freedom to withdraw at any time. Of course, this did not absolve me of my unwavering commitment to do no personal or professional harm to my participants. In fact, as I explain below, I believe that there was significant reciprocity built into this study.

One teacher, Gail, and I had known of each other in the activist community before the interview, and had sought funding from the same sources in the past, so we were not
complete strangers discussing our activist groups operating in different high schools. Still, she may hold preconceptions of what a research session might entail; Gail concludes the interview by saying, “Well, this was quite painless! Thank you. I was kind of worried about how official it might be, being a doctoral kind of thing.” Teachers are often stereotyped as being skeptical of academia, and this may be based on the reality of perceived power differentials and hierarchical issues that characterize traditional interactions between schools and universities. However, as I outline in the next chapter, the teachers (and some students) I interviewed have an active interest in keeping current with academic and professional literature they perceive to be of relevance to their daily practice as social justice activists. My role here as a bridge between those worlds may serve as a reminder, both of the potential for collaborative approaches toward social justice activism, and of the mutually beneficial relationships that can be nurtured between scholars and activists in this field.

I also recognize that I hold an undeniably public position as an acknowledged “expert” of sorts in the field, a situation that likely figured, perhaps in contradictory ways, in interactions with fellow teacher-activists and student activists in this field. I addressed this somehow in each first contact with the participating teachers and students. Although I did not seek to disavow my perceived status, I endeavoured to note how it influenced aspects of this study. I expected that for some individuals, an awareness of my “successes” in this field would inhibit their own candid admissions of conflicts, struggles, or perceived failures. As I note below, I now believe it actually had the opposite effect, creating an insider’s trust that opened our conversation to more honest reflections.

Ted is one teacher who really seems to enjoy discussing issues related to racism and diversity. He expounds on his past work as a researcher and writer in this field, and opens up new avenues of exploration for future studies. As founders of parallel groups addressing
diversity within the same province during the same era, we often find ourselves completing sentences for each other, clearly “on the same wave length” for much of the interview. Like others with whom I spoke, Ted offers that he would value being sent regular correspondence from the various social justice groups with which I am associated, and welcomes being kept abreast of my research as it unfolds.

I also drew on my past experiences to facilitate informed questioning, open the dialogue to relevant issues, and contribute my share to the collaborative building of frameworks through which to understand our practice. My commitment to collaboration means that I did far more listening than talking, welcomed and responded thoughtfully to any oppositional or contradictory views, and remained open to challenges to my own beliefs and activities. Indeed, as I strived with others to arrive at useful understandings of social justice pedagogy, even moments of conflict became rich opportunities for understanding, and for mutual personal and professional growth.

Ethical Considerations with Young Participants

Opening my research to include the voices of young people engaged in social activism in schools offered a unique set of challenges, some of which I tried to anticipate in advance. As mentioned above, I did not view this sharing as “empowering” students but simply fulfilling a long-overdue responsibility to engage them meaningfully in this discourse, respecting their agency as activists who wish to share ideas and seek a deeper understanding of social justice issues. My identity as a teacher, while beneficial in liaisons with other teachers, may have set up preconceived barriers to trust and disclosure based on established notions of roles and professional distance. Again, I drew on my skills at rapport-building, my genuine interest in the issues, my role as a parent, and my experiences with students over several years of teaching, coaching, and coordinating student programs. There are special
emotional vulnerabilities of adolescent life, and power issues in adolescent-adult engagements that cannot be “mediated away” by any predetermined plans. The complexity of personal identities and exposures that emerge in such research relationships is daunting, but I believe my strict adherence to high ethical standards served me well in this endeavour.

I kept a personal research journal in which I recorded potential concerns, questions, my subjective responses to the data, participants, the settings themselves, and my reactions to other elements of my research project. This assisted my revealing and addressing my own biases, assumptions, blind spots, conflicts, and value judgements during such an intensive research enterprise. Throughout, I also remained conscious of my own position of privilege along virtually every possible category, defined by a social system that accepts these characteristics as an unstated dominant norm. There were no simple means of addressing this, apart from a commitment to deliberate, conscious, and ongoing critical self-reflection in every social interaction.

To the extent that the insights that follow in this and subsequent chapters inform others working in similar settings and who share similar goals, I consider this research project worthwhile. To produce a trustworthy and reliable account I took several specific steps in meeting the goodness requirements expected of all scholarly research. Like many other qualitative researchers, I do not intend my work to be replicable, for no two observations can be identical, just as no two interviews yield the same data. Likewise, another researcher will interpret those data differently as well. Moreover, I recognize that no research is ever neutral, and to ensure that mine is fair, sound, and has the most beneficial impact possible, I have (a) kept careful, organized, retrievable documentation, (b) guarded against ungrounded personal value judgements, (c) ensured an abundance of evidence in my raw data supports my findings, (d) reported my results in an accessible manner, situated within a historical context, (e)
showed an openness for ambiguity and alternative explanations of data, (f) acknowledged the various limitations of this research and my findings, (g) observed and reported on the fullest possible range of activities I observed, and (h) showed sensitivity and adhered to high ethical standards with my participants (adapted from Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

*Research Participants*

What follows is a brief description of each participant with some identifying details blended or obscured to ensure anonymity. In every case, pseudonyms are used, school names and locations are omitted, and any personal information that could identify the person is altered. My purpose in disallowing their identities to be revealed is to protect them from any unforeseen negative consequences of possible uses of these data. They had agreed to be interviewed on the condition of anonymity in accordance with the university’s ethical review standards, and that promise is honoured in this way. I believe this also provided a safer and more honest discussion of their work. In some cases, their frank critical assessments of school environments, curriculum, administration, and official policies, for example, may have opened them to some negative repercussions.

*Participating Teacher Activists*

Bonnie is an experienced diversity educator, with several years of service on volunteer community boards and committees that focus on ethnocultural and human rights issues. She has been the recipient of local and provincial awards for her leadership in antiracist education, and continues to serve on diversity-promoting committees in the province. She identifies herself as a Black educator, of West Indian origins, who has taught in Canada for longer than 25 years. Married, she is the parent of two boys. Her current assignment is at a diverse junior high school in an urban setting, teaching Language Arts and Social Studies. Having taught for over 25 years in the public system, Bonnie has often taken up diversity issues in her
classroom teaching, and in more formal ways as well. She is currently the coordinator of an ambitious antiracist program in her school, in collaboration with a community agency. I know Bonnie through our involvement with a non-governmental provincial committee that promotes multicultural education, and we regularly correspond by e-mail. I welcomed this formal opportunity to engage in a more in-depth manner with her on issues to which we are both strongly committed.

Ted is a senior English Language Arts teacher at a large academic high school in an urban centre in Alberta. He has taught for over 20 years and has quite an extensive background in the field of diversity education, having served on several multicultural education boards and committees over the past 15 years. His identity as a married, able-bodied, white, Anglo-Saxon male was addressed in our interviews, as we reflected together on the apparent benefits and limitations of activism from within membership of a dominant group. Ted was on a committee that founded a well-regarded diversity leadership training program for students, and until a few years ago, was active in its ongoing management. In recent years, Ted’s renewed personal focus on administration, on teaching a new program of study, and on his classroom instruction, has limited his direct involvement with diversity programming. Even so, he remains very interested in the area and shared with me a wealth of reflections on his many years of direct activism with students. I had known of his work through a variety of colleagues who had worked with Ted, and through his reputation from his past involvement with boards on which I currently serve. In many ways he is a symbolic mentor to my own activism in the province, and I felt it was my honour to have him accept my invitation to collaborate in this research.

Cathy is a single, white female educator in a high school in a small town in southern Alberta. She has taught overseas in Asia for one year and has taken courses in multicultural
education as part of her university training. She has taught in Alberta for about four years now in both the Sciences and Humanities and is currently the coordinator of a group of students who participates in an annual diversity leadership camp and organizes the school’s antiracism awareness activities. Although she says she has been mistaken for being of First Nations ancestry, Cathy proudly shares her status as an eighth generation Canadian of British heritage. She was referred to me by a colleague who studied with her at university and knew of her interest and activities in this area. We had previously communicated by e-mail, sharing lists of audiovisual resources on social justice available to secondary teachers.

Gail has taught in several different schools in rural and smaller urban settings over the past 15 years. She is married to a teacher, has three children, and has taught Social Studies, French Immersion, and English Language Arts at the junior and senior high school levels. Her current interests in dealing with diversity have been shaped by her own itinerant life as a child of a military family, having moved 27 times while growing up, and living in several of the United States and across Canada. As a married adult and parent of two children, she travelled with her family for a few years as part of an international teacher exchange program. Gail describes herself as a “WASP” (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) with a strong interest in promoting the acceptance of differences. She is currently a senior high school teacher at a small urban setting in Central Alberta, where she coordinates a student action group that regularly tackles diversity issues. I had met her socially at teaching meetings, but learned of her interest in social justice education through our involvement with a regional agency that promotes ethnocultural diversity initiatives.

Participating Student Activists

Ramona and Sabrina are sisters in grade ten and 11 who are both active in their high school in a large urban centre. They are both involved in an enriched academic program and
have taken on leadership roles in their school. Of Asian ancestry, they are fluently bilingual and both expect to attend university after graduation from high school. Ramona has coordinated the school's Amnesty International chapter for two years. Sabrina is the student leader of another school club that also addresses social justice concerns. Both have also been actively involved in other local organizations that address poverty, human rights, and other social issues. I had met Ramona at a student human rights conference to which I had accompanied some students to a session we were presenting. She agreed to take part in my research and suggested I also interview her sister while I was there. We met and talked at a common area on the campus at a local university.

Jason is a grade 12 student at a small urban high school. He describes himself as a fairly average, mainstream guy. He and two of his friends, described below, have organized a program to challenge racism and other discrimination. Their group has received some favourable recognition from the adult community and is currently organizing presentations at schools in their city and vicinity.

Steve is also in grade 12 and is the nephew of an acquaintance of mine in Red Deer. I was given his name by his uncle, and told of his organization formed to tackle prejudice. I interviewed him and Jason after an educational conference at which they had presented a session together on taking action against racism with students. Both are white males of Anglo-Saxon origins, 17 years old at the time of the interviews, and both are in an academic program with expectations of university attendance following graduation.

Daria attends grade 12 in a large and diverse high school in a large urban centre, and identifies herself as a Latina of South American origins. She was born outside of Canada and feels her immigrant status has shaped her experiences in the area of addressing diversity issues. Together with Steve and Jason, she helped form the student action group that they
continue to sustain. They meet weekly and organize a variety of activities to educate other young people on the benefits of diversity and the dangers of discrimination. I learned of her involvement in this field through my conversations with Jason and Steve, and I arranged a subsequent interview with her at her high school. We had to meet after school and the only available space was in her principal’s office. She eagerly took his seat and I interviewed her from a small chair in front of the large desk, creating an interesting and symbolic rearrangement of the traditional researcher role.

Lisa is in grade 11 at a large Catholic high school in a smaller urban setting in the province. She is not active with an organized student club, but wishes to form a program to address diversity issues in her school. She learned of our STOP program through media coverage, and approached members of our group for more information. She and other friends even sought permission from their school to attend a meeting of our program, and both schools have cooperated in promoting a community awareness project. Lisa is white, Catholic, and 16 years old at the time of our interview. Lisa has shared that when one of her parents became a paraplegic about five years ago, she became more aware of discrimination in society. We spoke in the centre of a cavernous school cafeteria after school hours.

Sina is a Muslim of Indo-Canadian background who attends grade 12 in a diverse high school in a large urban centre. She shared with me that she often faces discrimination based on religious stereotyping, explaining that “when I tell people that I’m Muslim they automatically think that I’m from Arabia and that I’m a terrorist.” She has been active in the school’s annual participation in a regional student diversity leadership camp, where she met with members of our STOP program. She is President of the school’s Student Council, and also tutors non-English speaking students. Our students keep in regular contact with Sina through e-mail, and when I interviewed her she was organizing a program in her school
modelled after ours.

*Insights from the Interviews on my Role as Researcher/Teacher/Activist*

As I outlined above, my methodology for this study is based on a collaborative engagement with fellow activists. I held no expectations that I could remain a neutral observer or passive participant in the interviews. In fact, I made efforts to include my own experiences in social justice activism wherever it seemed appropriate or was requested by the participants. My experiences while interviewing each activist confirmed for me that my background as a teacher and scholar in this field contributed positively to the conversations on building activist coalitions of teachers and students in public schools.

A strength of my collaborative approach is that this research format works to understand and assist current practitioners with improving their practice. My contributions to the dialogue are based on my experiences, grounded in daily work with the ongoing STOP activist group I continue to advise. My current involvement entails helping to organize weekly meetings, plan events, raise funds, and participate in a variety of projects with related agencies, and our work is regularly featured in local, provincial, and national media.

All of the people I interviewed knew of my work with the STOP program before agreeing to be interviewed, and some had even worked with me on various committees and planning groups in the field. As in many fields, social justice activism is indeed a “small world” in Alberta; in some cases, student members of STOP had been in contact with student members of their activist groups through various youth camps and conferences. During our interviews I never directly asked my participants any pointed questions about my own status as a recognized diversity activist, but from questions and comments they offered, I inferred that my role did not serve as a deterrent to the goals of this research. Rather, I believe that my profile in the field actually helped create a comfortable environment where
participants felt they could explore specific issues with someone who may have insights into or expertise with their own concerns.

Many of the people I interviewed for this project shared that they had found themselves in direct or indirect contact with the STOP program over the years. Lisa, a student at a Catholic high school, had participated in promoting a musical benefit fund-raising event sponsored by STOP, and had seen a variety of media coverage of me and our group's activities over the past several years. Rather than inhibiting their participation in my research, some of the students credit their exposure to students in our program with initiating their desire to become activists in the first place. My role as founder of the group seems to serve as a reminder for them of their positive experiences with STOP.

In addition, some of the teachers with whom I spoke will regularly encourage their students to participate in STOP's annual poster and poetry contest, initiated in 1987. Bonnie shares with me that this annual event helps her and her student activists to feel connected with the broader diversity-promoting community:

A real positive thing, for me, is trying to get kids involved with your poetry and art contest and there seems to be some interest in that. We're part and parcel with this bigger community. To me that's self-reflection, that hearing somebody else and touching it against who you are--and why you're doing what you're doing--those kinds of connections.

Although we have vastly differing backgrounds and personal life experiences, Bonnie and I are able to forge a bond on the basis of our common interest in promoting social justice awareness and encouraging action on the part of our students. My known association with a long-standing student project only enhances this commonality.

Bonnie also brings up the STOP program as a way of initiating a discussion on ownership and coalition building with other groups. She shares that her current student action
group has been feeling some growing pains as it works out its relationship with its community partners. Other participants would also build on an assumption of my tacit understanding of the vicissitudes of social activism—including working through tensions from cooperating with other agencies—and were able to delve more deeply into their own specific situations. Together we were able to share our understandings of effective practice and problem-solving in a common endeavour.

Suggesting to me that she feels at ease with my role as a fellow traveller on this rocky road toward social justice in Alberta, Bonnie shares her frustrations as a long-time activist, and candidly admits to feeling a bit “worn out” on occasion. She admits a “heightened sensitivity” to issues of social justice when they arise in the school, and wonders aloud: “So is that because I’ve been on this [community group on gender issues] for too long?” Bonnie adds that she sometimes feels tired by “having to educate everyone all the time” on these issues, and has often asked herself, “and what difference have you made by taking it on?” Her candor with the discouraging moments in the struggle adds another rich layer to our discussion on the successes with our work.

Ted and I have never worked together on any board or committee at the same time, but our activities with various activist organizations have taken overlapping or parallel paths in several instances. For instance, I have joined boards on which Ted is a well-respected past member, and students of mine have participated in an ongoing multicultural education program that he helped to found over a decade ago. We have each engaged with research that the other has conducted and published. At the school level, he formed an activist group with students just about a year before the STOP group formed. Ted notes this coincidence and expresses admiration at our group’s longevity: “That’s the thing isn’t it, to be able to see it move on. STOP has been going for so many years! We formed [our group] in 1986, so it was
just about the same era—a sister/brother thing.” Our interconnected professional lives provide a strong foundation for exploring issues of relevance to teacher activists working in the same province and with the same level of students.

This common background also establishes a safe context for sharing our perceptions and impressions of our own identities as long-time activists. Both white, married, able-bodied, employed males, Ted and I reflect on the power structures in place and our own positions of relative privilege within this existing system. I mention that I usually feel quite safe in tackling controversial issues surrounding immigration, homophobia, and sexism, due mainly to my perceived identity as a member of any number of dominant sub-groups. Ted goes further to express, perhaps cynically, his own sense of security in this endeavour:

All you and I can be discriminated against is our views, which we can change at a moment’s notice. Maybe not even our views, but what we say. So we watch our tongues and it all goes away. [laughs] Our identities are fairly secure.

We have created together a conversational space where we feel comfortable enough to examine our own problematic roles in maintaining hegemony, even as we struggle to better understand and work against it from within our power positions.

With other participants, I found the traditional role as researcher being turned around as they questioned me on various aspects of my own experiences with STOP and other specific activities. Typically, I would be exploring some aspect of their group’s work in schools with teachers and students collaborating on projects, and the person being interviewed would spontaneously ask how STOP has tackled a specific problem. As I responded, I was careful not to let my own enthusiasm for this work overtake my wish to learn from my participants. Rather, I sought to build on the interaction as fostering a rapport between practitioners caught in a moment of “putting our heads together” on a specific issue.
In some cases, this interplay resulted in the sharing of new resources for an existing project, or opening up new avenues for possible funding of future activism. In one case, Gail, the teacher with an activist group in a rural high school, asked me about a specific guest speaker we had had visit our school a few months earlier. My role in our interview provides Gail with an opportunity to share how our school group's work has an impact on hers, and how our activism on similar themes can develop and grow together even without any planned or formal interaction. This connectivity between social justice activists proved to be a common theme in this project, and is specifically explored in one section of the results chapters.

That the student, Ramona, had met me previously and had interacted with members of our STOP group helps us identify concrete examples of issues that have been of direct concern to her own activism in her school. Her sister, Sabrina, also requests some feedback from me regarding her school group's efforts to link with Amnesty International, and their participation in a national contest to promote diversity. When I tell her that I have adjudicated that particular competition, she enthusiastically asks me specific questions about locating research materials and about the criteria for judging. In this case, my past experiences in this field open up another rich area of discussion for our interview, and we share disappointing stories of each of our group's unsuccessful experiences with entering a recent national antiracism competition. Commiserating in failures can even be a remarkably good way to build solidarity among activists.

Ramona also questions me on my role as a teacher-advisor in the group, and compares my commitment to the staff she has observed in her school, where she finds that no teachers seem to have an interest in human rights or diversity issues. She complains that the nature of a student-driven club means that it inevitably has less continuity:
In a student-run club, usually it passes from one student to another throughout the years, and the students who usually become president are the most active members of that club. But... you don’t really get a lot of preparation for that from the previous president. The teachers are basically the only link from one generation of leaders of clubs to the next. Through the teacher you can grow and expand on what has happened in the past, rather than just forgetting it every three years when students graduate.

More than simply venting a frustration with the teachers in her school, Ramona has opened up an important avenue for our interview. Her observations make a critical point about a distinct advantage to joining activist programs that have a continuing, dedicated staff member involved.

Despite Daria’s apparent disavowal of adult influence in her activist group, she identifies a key commonality that she thinks every successful group possesses:

It definitely takes someone with a vision, seriously, to create success for an organization. That might seem very idealistic, but it does take someone to take initiative and say, “Okay we can do something like this. Why don’t we try it?” So I think you may have been that factor with STOP, but it does take someone to have this vision and to want to carry it out. And it does take an environment where there’s a need for it.

As she pinpoints the need for a person with a “vision,” I reflect that this element transcends the teacher/student division in social justice coalition building. For example, in the case of STOP’s most recent initiative, it was a grade 12 student whose determination initiated the formation of our province’s first ever Gay/Straight Alliance program.

Jason and Steve are also interested in rectifying a problem that they perceive has started to develop in their fledgling group; Steve wishes for their program to be more successful at attracting and retaining new members seeks my guidance: “Maybe you could help us with this.... we have a much lower attendance of new members, perhaps because they didn’t feel like they were part of the group, and we didn’t have enough stuff to do. How do
you deal with that?” My response forces me to reflect on the complex work of building and sustaining a viable school program, and their wish to have input on a problem reminds me of the mutual benefits of this collaborative approach.

With each participant, I find myself seeking and holding the common threads that bind us, and using these to weave together a strong enough material to sustain our honest explorations into this area. That I have been recognized widely for my activism seems to solidify the research relationship with each participant, and establish a common ground on which to build our understandings. As reported in the chapters to follow, we delve into issues of leadership, membership, and continuity, and find our collaborative responses to the questions that arise to be of value. I suppose it is a common conversational skill to build on commonalities and affirm shared experiences, but in this research project it validates emerging insights and fosters the collaboration that we hope to model in our own activism.
Chapter Four

Results: Hypotheses Countered

Engaging in in-depth, reflective interviews with my 11 participants over the course of two years created, what was for me at least, an ongoing conversation with a variety of school activists on the broad topic of social justice. The interviews took place in a variety of settings, including school classrooms, a principal’s office, a school cafeteria, a coffee shop, a university foyer, and a conference planning room at a hotel. Each one was recorded and transcribed by the researcher, with relevant sections of transcripts brought back to the participants for validation of accuracy.

In each interview the semi-structured format of questions and answers proceeded more like a conversation, with interruptions, pauses, diversions, and moments of laughter. We shared our perspectives on a number of issues that had been outlined earlier by a focus group of long-time activists, as outlined in Chapter Three, and also ventured into several related themes that emerged as our discussions evolved. Several participants explored with me specific dimensions of their teaching and learning, curriculum development, tips on specific activism, and their racialized identities as activists, among many other topics. I have tried to weave these spontaneous insights and inquiries into the strands of my hypotheses throughout this section.

Each participant brought a unique perspective and willingly shared their experiences with school-based activism. My goal was not to discover some underlying universal elements of our experiences but to give voice to a multiplicity of perspectives on this challenging work. Even so, similar or overlapping observations about the work may affirm particular common experiences across a variety of settings that can inform other researchers and activists in this
field.

Hypotheses A and B Countered

An assumption by many scholars in the field of education is that practising teachers have little time and even less interest in academic research. Several writers have gone further to characterize teachers as anti-intellectual (e.g., Shor, 1996; Stringer, 1995) and unable to appreciate the complex theoretical conceptions and the often obfuscatory, sesquipedalian prose and nomenclature that typify the genre (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Of course there is merit to the observation that the daily rigour of a full-time teaching load offers precious little leisure time for reading and research outside the curricular demands, especially for activist teachers whose extracurricular commitment to school diversity groups and other community service places tremendous demands on their time.

As a person who has strived to balance scholarly pursuits with my activism and teaching, I suspected I might be an anomaly, and that teacher interest in academic issues was simply not to be expected of my fellow activist teachers. As outlined in Chapter One, I hypothesized that (a) teacher- and student-activists will neither seek nor value academic/research-based sources to inform their activism. My interviews with these few educators showed that to be an unsupported stereotype of teachers. Each of them engaged on a regular basis with academic and other sources to inform their social justice activism. Some addressed the hypothesis directly when asked, and shared specific examples of their use of academic sources, while others offered weaker support for its relevance to their work. None denied the role of academic work as irrelevant to their activism. A few of the student participants showed an interest in scholarly material on racism and diversity, with some already including the regular self-directed study of academic sources as part of their collective efforts to inform themselves on these issues.
This hypothesis is closely linked with the second, in which I posit that (b) the debate between multicultural (MC) and antiracist (AR) education proponents is largely irrelevant to school-based activists. In fact, each of the teachers I interview has reflected in some way on the conceptual and practical distinctions between these two stances in their own work in schools. As I outline in Chapter Two in greater detail, some writers have characterized the MC and AR positions as dichotomous (e.g., Kehoe, 1994; Mansfield & Kehoe, 1993; McGregor & Ungerleider, 1993), while others dismiss the conceptual differences as inconsequential to daily activism (e.g., Fleras & Elliot, 1992; Lyons & Farrell, 1994; Mock, 1996). The teachers interview for this research most often regard the debate as important, and some actively seek to negotiate this contested terrain in very practical ways through their daily grounded practice in school-based activist groups.

In their extra-curricular activism and daily teaching alike, these activists work their way through what I believe are nuanced theoretical positions that span across and between the two stances. Most of the students have little awareness of the dichotomy between AR and MC camps in theoretical sources, but all express an interest in further exploring this body of literature. Some ask me for specific articles and many share their views based on the information I provided, but none dismisses the debates in the academic literature as entirely irrelevant to their work.

The most “seasoned” veteran of school-based activism, Bonnie surprises me with her interest in current educational research in the social justice field. Relatively little is known about the number of practitioners who regularly access academic studies and research materials from local university and college libraries and via the Internet. A popular assumption in the literature is that very few teachers take an active interest in the pursuits of academics, but Bonnie’s engagement with this body of work signifies a collaborative potential
that has been untapped until now. For example, as an African-Canadian educator with an extensive background in AR and MC activism, Bonnie pays special attention to the debates currently taking place around proposed models of Afrocentric education. She cites George Sefa Dei’s work supporting Afrocentric schools in the Canadian public system (Dei, 1996b) and, like me (Lund, 1998c) and other critics, opposes his proposal for a number of specific reasons.

Bonnie envisions public schools as having a mandate to foster social cohesion and sees Dei’s model working against that, saying “that solution to me seems flawed; I mean we’ve got to, at some point in time, learn to live in a society that’s whole.” She knows first hand the harmful effects of stereotyping and shares several poignant examples with me from her own life as a teacher in a predominantly Eurocentric system, and having two sons who have faced forms of racism both in and out of school. She has experienced the differential treatment of people along racialized lines even when it involves honouring ethnic diversity, and wonders aloud why her own school’s practices do not consider people with English and German backgrounds as “ethnic.” She asks: “I’m ethnic but they’re not ethnic? I think: ‘Hold it!’”

Despite occasional challenges and setbacks, Bonnie is not willing to give up on the public school system as a site for progressive social change. She considers the practical ramifications and effects of setting up a school system segregated along racialized lines, asking rhetorically, “the flip side is, then, is he saying that I as a Black teacher shouldn’t be teaching in a white school? That all my kids aren’t benefitting from having me as a teacher?” Bonnie concludes that Afrocentric schools represent giving up on pursuing an inclusive public system:

That to me just reinforces that it can’t work, and I don’t think that we need to promote that it can’t work. I refuse to accept it.... It’s such a complex issue that you can’t package it and it’s only [skin colour]. This is just one aspect of our lives. Let’s
not get caught up in these packaged little boxes. I’m trying to get out of a box and he wants to put me back in one!

Other research piques Bonnie’s interest, and she brings up an example of a colleague in graduate studies who mentioned to her a recent study that showed, somewhat ironically, that “when MC or AR programs were run, the post-test showed more animosity than the pretests show.” She shares with me that, rather than accepting the research at face value, she immediately interrogated its validity:

I can see the possibility but I would need to see those studies. Just what was the content in those programs? The studies were brought up after she threw out the whole argument that [AR programming] could lead to more racism. And I said, “Well, that’s sort of like the idea that if you teach sex education, kids will become more promiscuous.” When I heard about these studies, I thought well, I am not aware, I personally haven’t read any of them, so I’d need to read and find out just who did these tests and under what conditions and what groups.

In a subsequent conversation with Bonnie, she had indeed tracked down the study in question and given it further scrutiny.

She also resists simply dismissing researchers whose findings might refute or devalue the impact of her own work in AR education. “I want to make sure,” she says, “that our group is addressing that research, rather than pretending that those studies don’t take place. We need to know what they mean to us here in our school.” For Bonnie, that means spending time at the university library, discussing and debating problems and ideas with her colleagues, and making an effort to incorporate new or contradictory ideas from the literature into their activist group’s plans for initiatives at the school and community levels.

Bonnie sounds especially skeptical of some quantitative methods that try to simplify the measurement of the effectiveness of social justice work to statistical measurements and easily consumable tables of numbers. In contrast, she measures the validity of her work in the
field by recognizing treasured moments of enlightenment with students and by small but
significant breakthroughs in school policies and practices. She candidly admits, “to me those
anecdotes are more important than that magical [statistic] that you can pop into a computer
and have it spill out a numbers game for you.” In my view she shows herself to be, like many
other school-based activists, a thoughtful and critical consumer of academic production.

As a long-time social justice activist, Ted shares with me that he had actively attended
to scholarly literature, and specifically to distinctions in the AR and MC perspectives, while
undertaking a research project for a national race relations organization a few years earlier. He
studied school and district policies in the area of cultural diversity, and “took a look at MC
and AR education in terms of Cultural Retention, AR and non-discriminatory kinds of things
to combat [racism], and Canadian Identity.” Ted adds another dimension for his work that
opens a rich space between curriculum and social policy, or what he calls “a fourth factor--an
educational, a learning and teaching basis for these policies.” Perhaps not surprisingly, his
findings reveal a void in this area:

I found that the majority of jurisdictions focused on the Cultural Retention idea and
the “soft” MC idea that we should all love each other. Those were in every one of
them. In Ontario and to a lesser extent in BC, AR played a much larger role than in the
rest of the country, and all of them had a certain degree of this Canadian Identity bit.
Surprisingly few of them had as a component of it that this would enhance learning.
One of the key recommendations out of this work was that policy makers need to
address that issue.

In Ted’s case, attending to academic theoretical concerns as applied to his in-depth study of
policy, and of educational initiatives addressing a range of MC and AR concerns, enhanced
his understanding of this field.

He explains that a renewed focus on the “student learning” strand might be the key to
the long-term “salvation” of this field:
If this is an educational issue, and we’re not addressing how it enhances student learning then it will have a hey-day and go away, because that’s the essence of what we’re about as educators is learning and teaching. We can definitely talk about it in those terms but we tend not to. We tend to talk about it in terms of social needs that come and go, and political agendas that shift according to the times. As long as it remains a social/political issue it will always stay in the background of educational policy. It has to address: How does this help people learn? If we can say: “this is how” and show it in some results, boom, I think then people have to take notice.

Ted’s academic study and analytical policy research expose a chasm he had thought might exist, but which had not been identified or acknowledged in a decade and a half of activism in this field. His findings point to a pedagogical need that, for him, is paramount in avoiding the problematic “boom and bust” cycle of social justice education.

Later in my interviews with Ted, he articulates his understanding of constructivist approaches to educational research from his readings in the scholarly literature. Here, he weaves them into his rhetorical discussion of ethnocultural accommodation and the realities of crafting AR education in the classroom:

The whole question of diversity and learning from each other, the whole constructivist idea, when we’re in a classroom with all kinds of backgrounds involved when we’re using a constructivist approach to learning and we don’t permit those backgrounds to come out, are we not belying our constructivist approach? Or are we standing and delivering a one-cultural perspective and the rest of those backgrounds be damned?

His questions address an area of the academic literature that has been at the centre of much current social justice discourse around education. Certainly, the benefits of an inclusive curriculum and the damaging effects of Eurocentric education on students from marginalized groups have received a great deal of attention in recent educational theory and research (e.g., Dei, 1996a; Said, 1993; Willinsky, 2000) but which remain invisible issues for many mainstream teachers.

My interviews remind me how some educated and articulate activist teachers such as
Ted are ideally situated to explore analytically how these scholarly subjects can and do play themselves out in contemporary schools and classrooms. Researchers and theorists would be well-advised to consider their work's direct potential relevance to such activist teachers. In the example below, Ted recounts a recent academic grade 11 English literature lesson with students of diverse cultural backgrounds. Suddenly the issue of the lack of ethnoculturally inclusive curricula in the course bubbled to the surface:

What I find myself doing more now is applying [attention to the increased student learning potential of an inclusive curriculum] to my own teaching circumstances and situations. I had a student the other day say, “This is IB and we’re looking at World Literature but what about Chinese literature?” and so we were able to have quite a good discussion. But he quickly back-tracked, he didn’t want to push it. I said “Great, let’s talk about it” [but he said], “Oh I know you can’t do that,” and he was delegitimizing his own comment almost immediately. I had to underline that it was really a legitimate question, and why don’t we [explore it], and what are the barriers to that? Because he would have something to contribute in a way that others wouldn’t. And there were five or six of them from that particular [Chinese] background, and a kid from a Russian background. Russian literature! Well, we were doing some of that; we were doing Solzhenitsyn, but then there’s also First Nations, we’ve got a couple of Native students. What about Canadian writers of Aboriginal extraction?

Ted’s account shows a specific instance of how our systematic and internalized educational tradition of silencing marginalized voices in the curriculum can find its way into the classroom.

Ted shares that he is frustrated by their immediate devaluation of non-mainstream cultural content, and at the same time excited by the curricular possibilities it opens up. Again he insists that this burning pedagogical need for curricular reform isn’t simply a morally driven imperative:

This is a learning issue, and if we can think of it in those terms then we get at all of these other issues. In the curriculum, we can talk about AR, we can talk about different world perspectives, all of those kinds of things. And what are we learning? What is emerging out of the reality of our classrooms? My belief, and it’s a belief I’m
sure about, is that teachers teach what they value. They’ll give lip service to every decree that might be given, but when they value something they find a way to bring that about. And when they value something that’s supported by the curriculum or by policy, then that gets the front burner all the time.

He continues, now linking his lived experience as a social justice activist with his research on the importance of establishing a pedagogical foundation for any new social justice proposals:

For any of these programs that get teachers to begin to address these AR issues, we have to put it to them in such a way that it becomes something that they see the value in. And at the heart of every teacher’s practice is this sense of wanting to be efficacious. Efficacious about what? Teaching. These students are learning something! And so when they can see how this helps them in that way, then it becomes valuable.

It strikes me that this is a deceptively simple but revelatory insight into a possible future direction of social justice education, informed by an integration of academic and practical knowledge. Without devaluing the moral imperatives of past and present efforts toward social justice reforms, Ted offers here another potential focus for a solid grounding of future efforts toward progressive systemic change, a proposal I revisit in the concluding chapter.

Cathy is the only teacher in this study who had recently taken courses in MC and AR education as part of her teacher education program. She was selected a few years ago by the administration in her school to coordinate the student action group that tackles diversity efforts, and also works on the school’s committee that looks at issues of culture and social climate. She was told at the time it was because she is single and can more easily take the time to attend events and organize activities, but having lived and worked overseas, she regards her involvement as a source of great satisfaction to her.

Cathy shares that she sometimes feels a need to consult academic sources to enhance her efforts at combatting racism in her school. For example, one of her former students is currently at university, and Cathy has had her “phone me up and say ‘Hey, what about this:}
issue’ with ideas of activities for students” informed by her friend’s post-secondary studies in the area. When asked for more specific examples of how she has incorporated academic literature on social justice in her activism, or how it might be taken up by school-based activists, she admits to frustrations.

She cites a difficulty with the typical academic style of writing that she believes is not ideally accessible to most school practitioners. Cathy believes that for students, the more theoretical material in social justice education can be especially daunting, and “a lot of time the written material goes right over everyone’s head because you can interpret it in different ways when you read it.” A solution they came up with recently, involved translating some statistics on racism into a more appealing format. She offers that “students were on the right track when they said we do need multimedia” to present information to students. She doesn’t regard this as “dumbing down” the material or being anti-intellectual, but simply modifying the format for a variety of audiences—something that she says effective communicators do naturally.

Even though Cathy has regular interactions with a teaching colleague at her school who has an interest in these areas, and who is currently on a study leave to complete his Master’s degree in AR education at a nearby university, she complains he hasn’t yet brought back to the school anything specific from the scholarly literature. She says of his graduate studies, “he hasn’t ever really shared anything that he’s doing, so I’m not sure what type of level it’s at,” adding that there is potential for further exploration of developing links there. Her comments tacitly acknowledge that a certain degree of doubt remains among some educators regarding the value of academic research. We agree that it will likely take concerted efforts on the part of individual scholars, and in the structuring of graduate research programs, to generate fruitful interactions between social justice researchers and practitioners, especially
those who work in outlying areas.

Regarding the conceptual distinctions between MC and AR education, Cathy admits that as a student, “for me I had never really thought of them as different things. MC and AR were all, to me, the same idea.” Her further study through university courses in the field and as a teacher-activist helped inform her of important distinctions between the two approaches. In our interview, Cathy articulates the push and pull that exists between them:

But when you do the readings, like even the material I get sent on March 21 [by Canadian Heritage, to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Racism] and do the readings, there is a distinction between what is AR and what is MC. I was just reading this morning, looking at a long description that kept talking about AR, and later on it said that if we could be more MC, so it had a total split there... In terms of everything we do here, it seems to me that if we’re MC then we can challenge the racism, so it’s got that connection in education.

An example of the overlap of the two fields is in her group’s efforts to address discrimination against Aboriginal peoples. Stereotypes abound, and a number of structural barriers prevent their full participation in the benefits of a society, especially one that routinely devalues and marginalizes their culture and racialized background. Cathy affirms that in rural schools this negative attitude toward Aboriginal Canadians is readily apparent on a daily basis, and does not even enjoy the polite expression or even politically correct discourse employed for other groups currently facing discrimination.

It is Cathy’s view that this openly expressed racism toward First Nations students can be tackled by MC awareness programs but is, at the same time, emblematic of more hidden, systemic barriers to their engagement in mainstream Canadian society. She recognizes that it often takes both MC and AR strands of activism happening concurrently in her school, and is currently pursuing funding to bring in a performing group to share positive aspects of First Nations culture that are often under-appreciated by mainstream white
students in her homogeneous school. At the same time she tries to tap into historical and scholarly sources through research activities with her student activists to illuminate for them systemic forms of racism. Cathy’s group recently researched statistics and studies that addressed the plight facing Canada’s Aboriginal population. She says that “when we actually learned the history from a Native perspective, it sure made a difference for me and a bunch of my students.” She believes that the transformative AR education she had offered her students was further enhanced by a week-long cultural diversity leadership camp that included MC education including experiential lessons by First Nations elders. Whether these efforts will culminate in more effective social justice activism is still uncertain, as it is still very much a work-in-progress for Cathy and her students.

Though she admits to facing struggles to incorporate scholarly material in her activism with students, she affirms its potential to inform the work of teachers and students striving to challenge racism. She seems open to considering contemporary debates and issues in the literature, and demonstrates in some of her group’s work how it is possible to use both MC and AR approaches as complementary. In her school, both are employed in strategic initiatives to work simultaneously on changing student attitudes and behaviours, while pursuing with students deeper social goals of progressive structural change.

In Gail’s efforts to infuse social justice principles into her daily teaching practice, she broadly refutes my first hypothesis by incorporating theoretical and research literature in her lessons, though somewhat indirectly. As a Social Studies teacher, Gail encourages her students to consult a variety of academic and professional sources to address multiple levels of oppression in society, and has tried to model this approach by her own example. She explains her motivation, borne out of a realization that came about during her university studies of the ongoing devastating effects of white colonialism:
The more I read and look at the white culture going in and dominating everywhere it goes, and forcing its culture and religion on everybody else, and all the problems that it causes, [I realize that] it's not over. I think, “Can't we learn and see what we're doing to these cultures?” but we don't, especially if there's a buck involved.

Her cynical synopsis of her own studies of a few centuries of imperialism captures her personal basis for including a critical study of history in her attempts to address social justice.

In her daily teaching, Gail tries to foster a critical sensibility in her students, enabling them to make links between contemporary and historical social issues. Though she didn't offer this analysis, I believe her efforts have incorporated both the cultural interaction propounded by MC researchers and a thread of political sensibility more reflective of an AR stance. As an example, her activist group recently hosted a guest speaker to address current issues in Guatemala. Gail intended the experience of watching a Mayan woman speak Spanish through a translator to open the eyes of students in this homogeneous, rural town to a broader realization of diversity, in line with a traditional MC approach. Gail was pleased that the speaker provided an enriching cultural experience for her white students; she says, "just to have these kids listening to her made a big impact I think."

Gail's efforts to extend the lesson show, I believe, a practical case of a teacher striving to supplement this MC awareness with additional research toward an AR sensibility, with the goal of inciting them to politicized social action. Gail elaborates on the difficulty of moving from awareness to action:

They did a bunch of research on Guatemala as well and did some research on the big corporations there. The kids can clearly see there's a problem when there's no land left for agriculture because it's all being used for exportation, plantations and such. So the kids get a little "hot under the collar" and that's really good. I'm now convincing kids that there are things they can do, like not supporting a particular company because you know they exploit their workers, or writing a letter saying this is why
I’m not supporting your company.

Gail is optimistic about the eye-opening impact such lessons can have, but not too idealistic about initiating significant activism on social justice issues associated with globalization. She admits “there’s still lots of education to do. But even if they recognize that they’re making those choices, that’s better than being totally ignorant of the situation.”

She also makes efforts to include AR lessons naturally within the curriculum toward educating students that many popular media stories and historical events can be better viewed through a social justice filter. In a French Language Arts course, for example, Gail teaches a novel that addresses slavery in the United States from the personal perspective of a freed slave. He is befriended by a white man who faces an internal struggle brought on by pressures from the Ku Klux Klan. The character’s plight reveals the overlap that emerges between MC and AR perspectives in lessons and in life; individual attitudes toward accepting differences (MC) are invariably set against a backdrop of systemic discrimination (AR). In addition, Gail weaves into the unit an awareness in the students of their region’s own shameful history of supporting the KKK and other blatantly racist organizations (see Baergen, 2000; Kinsella, 1994). Her opening a dialogue on overt and structural racism is riskier than the more common approach to diversity that entails teachers simply telling their students to accept differences and treat people fairly.

Other literature in her course includes a novel featuring “a person who moves from Morocco to France and encounters all this racism there, so it’s a theme that runs through a lot of my teaching.” In a religious studies unit in Social Studies she has students research a variety of faith groups, an activity that may be considered subversive by many in this predominantly conservative Christian town. The rewards come through students’ forging links between studying religious diversity (MC) and confronting discrimination in specific
historical and contemporary contexts (AR). A proud moment for her happened recently:

I ended my religious studies unit by showing Schindler’s List, and the students who had done their presentation on Judaism had done an excellent job. Everything that was shown on the Jewish culture in that movie, these kids had explained—like breaking the glass, they were breaking a light bulb in the movie because that’s all they could get in the concentration camp. All these little details like that were really cool. So I am a little bit obsessed.

She offers that she also tries to include the Canadian documentary film “Hearts of Hate: The Battle for Young Minds” and at least some literature addressing racism in every single class she teaches. Gail has discovered a dual benefit to this infusion approach; “I’m bringing these issues to be considered by a bigger audience, and I’m also the coordinator of [my school’s action] group. I can tell the students who get hot under the collar, ‘well you know there’s this group you can join,’ so I can recruit that way too. But you just can’t plan for that stuff. It just kind of happens.”

I admire Gail’s enthusiastic efforts to expose and analyze racism in each of her classes across subject areas. She is a professional who sincerely pursues social justice by adapting her pedagogy and the curriculum to address contemporary social issues with students on an ongoing basis. Though she does not regularly access academic sources and is unaware of current issues in the academic literature, she shows an openness to being informed by additional sources. In my view she represents a rich potential audience for engagement with scholarly work. Further, I believe the lessons she shares reveal a natural ability to incorporate MC and AR approaches, through simultaneous efforts to increase her students’ awareness and appreciation for cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, along with a desire for their greater political engagement toward systemic social change. In this sense her work can inform theorists through her valuable grounded experiences with social justice theory coming to life and playing itself out in the classroom.
Most of the students with whom I spoke had never been formally exposed to academic literature in social justice education, but a few surprised me with their interest in scholarly research in this area. Some students I interviewed had even undertaken independent library research that led them into theoretical and research articles published in refereed academic journals, and books by prominent scholars in the fields of MC and AR education.

One such student was Daria, whose AR group formed with members from a few different high schools in a large urban centre. She has served as coordinator since its inception, and has set a broad goal to understand issues around racism and discrimination in society, and share ideas with others. They hold their weekly meetings at a public library where they have direct access to a variety of literature in the field and they build that research time into their meetings. I ask if this seems unusual to her, that a group of self-directed young people will be assigning themselves background reading and library research to prepare for presentations.

Daria admits that it isn’t always easy to motivate the group’s members to conduct the necessary research, but they are committed to this in order to maintain credibility as reliable sources of information in this field. Daria confesses, “when we have to just plough through a program or do a lot of research, because there are meetings where we just sit together and do research on racism, and that can be tiresome sometimes, but we find that it’s necessary.” Here she outlines her group’s active stance toward their social justice work, showing how activists can become educational researchers.

Under Daria’s direction, the group strives to keep current with scholarly literature and contemporary news sources as well. Daria explains their reasons for keeping up this aspect of their activism:

One important thing within our group is that we have to educate ourselves, constantly educate ourselves on the issue. We have--this is my idea; I have to lay claim to it--we have this “current events” aspect of our meetings where each week someone is
assigned to bring in an article that we’ve found related to racism, whether it be in Canada or the world or in [our city], and we educate ourselves about it. We’ll look at the issue, we’ll try to pinpoint its origins. It’s hard to do when you have an article that can be written by a biased journalist but we do try to constantly educate ourselves so that if someone asks us “How do you know that racism is such a big problem in the world?” we can [offer specific examples].

She models a critical sensibility toward media sources specifically, and extends that to their other readings as well. She also encourages group members to engage with a variety of sources and bring them back to the group for discussion and analysis. Relevant information informs their planning of activities, and many of the pieces end up on the reading lists her group compiles to hand out during presentations to students, teachers, and community groups.

Daria describes the collective nature of their organization’s process of reading and selecting material for presentations, using as an example a recent session Jason presented at a “Safe and Caring Schools” conference:

We usually divide the tasks quite evenly. The presentation that Jason gave, a lot of the research that Jason had was research that the group did as a whole and Jason, with his brilliance, came up with the organizing of the presentation. I mean, everyone does some work for any presentation that Jason does, and we don’t have a problem with an individual in the group going out there and being interviewed and everything put under a certain name, because we all think of it as [our group’s] work and it’s a collective effort.

She is attuned to the distinctions in the literature between MC and AR approaches, but sees her own work as including a mix of elements of the two. For example, at one point in our interview she somewhat idealistically asserts that “racism is a product of fear and ignorance. So when you try to develop understanding and compassion towards a certain group then you begin to eliminate fear and ignorance,” reflecting the conceptual core of many MC models of combatting racism.

Yet when I explore this view with her more deeply, Daria reveals a more textured
understanding of the variety of forms of racism, and the need to address political and social structures that invariably undergird inequity. Her own experiences having lived in a country ruled by a dictatorship have reinforced for her the need to be vigilant about human rights protection, and to recognize that racism often underlies incidents of discrimination. She offers that, “with me, I was living in [a South American country] and you know about the political situation there--the oppression, the disappearances--so coming to Canada and having all these freedoms and rights and opportunities” reinforced for her the need to address the issues more systemically. Her awareness reminds her “to give something back, and not even that it’s obligation, just that sense that it’s the right thing to do. That definitely is something that keeps me going for sure.”

When students in her school produced a publication that ridiculed South Asians, Daria spoke against it with her peers. She was motivated, she says, to model for others a sense of respect for other cultures that could be considered a reflection of traditional MC values:

I’ve learned to pick up on those things and say well, “I’m not laughing at that.” It may well be a disadvantage for me to say that. Maybe people will say “Oh she’s so uptight” but as long as I’m comfortable with it, and as long as I know that I’m doing the right thing, or I’m not being a part of the problem, that’s also a big personal satisfaction. If I could teach that to somebody else, why not?

When I ask her if there are other reasons for considering racist humour as dangerous, she reveals a deeper insight into the dehumanizing aspect of racist practices:

It’s not okay to laugh about them because it creates an environment where using racial slang [causes] a chain effect. Picking up on these tiny things desensitizes people. It’s saying “it’s all in fun so I’m not going to take it personally” but then it starts to grow, and then there’s a motive behind it. It can all be hidden, and that develops into more gross forms of racism.

To me, her analysis of racism in this instance blurs the distinct line drawn by MC and AR proponents and reveals her activist work as reflecting a stance that pays little attention to
this dichotomy. She may also be seen as affirming my first hypothesis in the sense that her interest in attending to academic (and other) sources in informing her group’s activism reflects a desire to assume the role of researcher rather than privilege academic research over other sources. This self-initiated educational inquiry, based on her group’s broad goals of striving toward social justice in schools and society, shines light on the potential of young people to forge their own research agendas and pedagogies of social action in innovative models that may contrast with more formal academic efforts.

Likewise, Jason talks about planning his AR presentations to elementary school students and comes across sounding as if he simply wants them to get along better. He wants to give students “a sense of hope” and is comforted by the “possibility that you could change just one person.” He offers that “addressing racial differences with grades one and two is difficult. So you have to show them things, focus not on just racial acceptance but just on accepting differences between each other and communicating with other students, and also not to put them down.” Besides Jason’s unproblematized use of the term “racial” to describe racialized differences between people, he shows little apparent awareness of other forms or sources of racism. Indeed, at first glance, some might dismiss his views as reflecting the kind of “soft MC” that inhibits efforts by AR activists to address systemic issues.

However, when he is asked to elaborate on his efforts with young people, he doesn’t see himself as simply wanting to change students’ attitudes around acceptance of differences:

I try not to focus on telling people what to think. You don’t want people to say “you must accept everyone else”; it’s just another form of internalizing something someone else tells you to do. What we want to encourage is students to be able to think for themselves, and teach them how to think critically, not to judge people on external characteristics, to be more open minded about things so students can learn the value of acceptance more independently and not just because someone else told you to be accepting. They own their attitude.
His desire to foster critical thinking in young people shows some sensibility on his part towards more substantive AR education than by simply offering platitudes about acceptance and hoping cultural celebration alone will reduce discrimination.

When I ask him to elaborate about his wish to change just one attitude at a time, he offers that he sees this as being just one part of a larger struggle to effect broader social change toward social justice. He admits that in Canada, students have had a difficult time learning about systemic racism because past racist situations are glossed over in favour of aspects of our history that might promote students' pride in citizenship. Jason hopes his work in this group can help to counter this educational gap, and believes that “it's really important to understand the historical context to realize the way things were and why they were that way, and also to realize that it doesn’t need to be that way in the future.”

Jason’s colleague in their activist collective, Steve, also shows critical analytical skills in his treatment of information sources around social justice issues. For example, Steve also concurs that in Canadian social studies classes “we all have whitewashed our racist past. History is written by the winners, essentially, and the winners always want to have a positive outlook on their past.” He cites the example of the interment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. His advice for educators and policy makers:

I think we should look back on our past with a sense of shame, not with ultimate pride, but just with the idea that we’re looking at our past and analyzing it to see what we can do better. We shouldn’t look at it like we’re the best country in the world. We should look at it logically and from enough of a distance to say, “we could do better in all ways.” It enables us to understand the kind of atmosphere that created those kinds of [racist] events, and avoid that occurrence again. Once you understand the mentality and what was going on, like why we accepted it, and when we’re so disgusted by it now, we can avoid that in the future.

Here he seems to effortlessly link systemic change—namely, a desire to include a more critical
perspective on Canadian history in current curriculum—with the acknowledgement of the individual racist attitudes that shaped the policies supporting such racist situations.

I asked Steve if he thought the media was a valuable tool in the struggle to better understand racism in our society. His reply reveals a skepticism of reporters and the media’s complicity in promoting ethnic stereotypes:

They can be used as an effective tool, but it’s been shown that the media isn’t in the business of reporting news. They’re in the business of selling news. It’s not unbiased because they do seem to want to push forward issues like Native violence or Islamic violence, gangs, or whatever; they’re in the business of selling newspapers.

His cynical perspective on the biases inherent in all news reporting points to an ability to scrutinize possible underlying motives and values of the authors of written material on this often contentious topic.

Steve focuses much of his activist work on collecting and sharing contemporary news sources, and talks about doing “a lot of research in the local paper,” including bringing relevant editorials to group meetings for discussion. He says his critical awareness also seems to be serving him well in his initial efforts at interpreting the academic sources that members of his group have begun collecting. But he admits that, “we’re still very young and we’re trying to to find our way.”

My interviews with Daria, Jason, and Steve each affirm for me that young people are under-appreciated consumers of academic sources of social justice education. These students show a critical appreciation of the missing pieces and biases inherent within a wide variety of sources of information, from academic studies to the mainstream print media to curricular content. While I cannot presume they will wholeheartedly embrace academic theory and research as immediately relevant to their own practical pursuits, they show a willingness and ability to engage meaningfully with specific concepts and issues arising from that body of
They may often express themselves most readily in language that seems to reflect a superficial view of accepting cultural differences on the basis of "being nice to others." However, when given an opportunity to elaborate, these young people can share more complex understandings of various forms of discrimination and oppression. These moments evince my view that young people can be encouraged to engage more often with academic literature on social justice pedagogy. Their teachers and adult mentors in this field could facilitate the study of specific articles and research studies of relevance to their activism. Further, when engaged as participants in respectful research coalitions, young activists can inform current scholarly efforts in theory and research toward mutually beneficial understandings, and more relevant pedagogical outcomes.

These interviews with students and teachers revealed a range of levels of support for entwining academic work with activism. They each offered broad support for the possibility of educational research and theory to inform their daily school concerns, and all showed willingness to engage in further study of a variety of sources. Though many were not directly aware of the nuances of specific theoretical positions, there was general acceptance that the core issues of these debates may be relevant to their own work. These data speak to the undervalued role of practitioners in taking up their work, and as I will address in my concluding chapter, might serve as incentive for engaging them more directly in future research.

It is not possible to know every factor that may inhibit those whose activist work has not been as strongly influenced by academic literature. Still, these participants show tremendous promise as critical consumers of—and contributors to--this material. Finally, the moments of reflective analysis that regularly emerge from interviews with the participants in
this research, grounded as they are in the understandings of daily teaching and activism, offer solid evidence of the possible mutual benefits of respectful collaborations to both reveal and share the wisdom of practitioners as theorists.

**Hypothesis C Countered**

A third hypothesis that framed my interviews was an assumption that (c) administrative support from the school and district is necessary for effective social justice activism. This met with a variety of supportive and refuting views across the group of research participants. There appears to be a distinct split in the responses of student and teacher participants. Where they express an opinion on this issue, the teachers most often offer solid support for this hypothesis including both positive and negative examples from their own experience. Some students, on the other hand, question the need for administrative support of their activist work both within and outside the school. As I elaborate below, this apparent dichotomy seems to reveal a great deal about how these activists view the independence of their work from structural constraints, and how willing they are to resist institutionally imposed barriers to their desired activities and outcomes.

A common sense view would naturally affirm that a supportive administration would facilitate activism within any institutional setting, and conversely, that a lack of support would thwart any social justice efforts of a school-based group. In some very practical ways, a supportive principal or superintendent who wants to encourage an activist group to challenge racism and other forms of discrimination within the school and community can readily free up resources to assist these efforts. All four of the teachers I interviewed affirm this basic fact of life in a school setting where resources are limited.

One way teacher activists welcome their principal’s support is through direct financial support. As Bonnie points out, “finding the time to do the work is important, but
[just as important are] the resources that go with it.” She cites several examples of her own purchasing of posters and supplies for various projects, and noticing how much they add up. “Lately I’ve decided,” she tells me, “to start keeping track of the dollars for this and that, and I realize that I’ve already spent over 70 dollars. That’s out of my pocket personally. I mean, it shouldn’t be important to me, but there’s something wrong if I’m sustaining this school-based program.” There exists, for Bonnie, an important symbolic value in the financial support of social action groups by an administrator.

Other teachers enthusiastically shared examples of principals who embraced their efforts. For example, Gail praised her principal’s support of her work on cultural diversity in a mainly homogeneous white school population. She offers some examples of his apparent endorsement of her efforts:

My principal has been wonderful too, like when we applied for that grant we had our project all in mind and set it all up and then we were trying to get these African drummers to come during the Diversity Week and they weren’t available until the end of May. They were way more expensive that we thought it would be to bring a group in, but our principal said “You’ve done all the legwork, and it’s going to be an awesome experience for our kids. I’ll find the bucks for you.” So he’s really supportive that way.

In other, smaller ways, Gail has enjoyed the benefits of a supportive principal regarding her own professional development in the area of challenging discrimination. As an example, she shares: “Last year I wanted to go to a ‘Safe and Caring Schools’ conference but I’d already done my PD [professional development] thing. [My principal] said, ‘That’s really good for our school. Go.’ And that really makes a difference.” She appreciates her principal’s respect for her group’s goal to improve the social climate of the school. Gail says that in their school they work at social change as a means of preventing incidents of discrimination and acts of violence. Gail was especially impressed with his support when, “after the shooting in Taber,
on his weekly memo thing [my principal] was saying how he really values things like this Diversity Week and in retrospect, it's even more important than you might think when you look at people being marginalized.”

A cynical perspective on her experiencing unbridled, positive administrative approval might include noting that the most public efforts of Gail’s group in the school have fallen along the lines of traditional MC education, namely promoting the acceptance of differences and the celebration of cultural diversity. Her efforts toward AR-oriented approaches toward challenging racism, sexism, and homophobia are reserved for more subtle lessons within her classroom and with smaller activities that enjoy less public scrutiny than the group’s school-wide Diversity Week activities. It is also noteworthy that, so far at least, their group has made no significant efforts toward modifying systemic or structural issues around social justice issues within the school and district.

Gail has witnessed a direct personal benefit to the students who are involved in an activist group in a school with a supportive administrator. When I affirm that her principal really seems to be “tuned in” to what’s going on in the school, she says: “He’s that kind of an administrator anyway; he tries to have his finger on the pulse of everything that’s going on and kind of celebrate that. It’s good for the kids. He’ll see one of the kids involved and kind of pat them on the back, and that means a lot to them too. The principal knows who they are and what they’re doing, so that’s good.” External moments of praise may not seem much like a significant factor in social justice activism, but on some level, these actions may signal to students that their daily efforts and their often controversial support of diversity issues are actually valued by some of the other adult leaders in their community. This message seems especially important in a province where so many of our political leaders regularly score easy points with a certain portion of the electorate by taking narrow stands on hot-button issues
such as immigration and multiculturalism.

Likewise, Cathy praises her principal for endorsing the work that she and her students do to reduce racism and discrimination in her school. Like Gail, she has only been at this type of work for a few years, but finds the administrative support very comforting. She tells me simply that her “admin is great. They encourage our work.” Each year she is invited to take a full week from teaching to take students to attend an annual cultural diversity leadership camp in a nearby city. Cathy is also encouraged by her administration to “do presentations over the announcements—we have video announcements here—where we talk about what we learned, and what we did while we were there, to increase the awareness of these issues. The last three years we’ve done a major assembly for anti-racism day, and we’re approved to have a big MC fair type of thing.” Clearly, Cathy does not see her administration as setting up any barriers to her group’s efforts within the school.

In fact, Cathy also serves on a faculty committee addressing school climate and culture issues, headed by one of the Vice- Principals. The school as a whole has also attempted to celebrate its growing diversity, even within the setting of a rural, homogeneous, and predominantly white town. A central area in the school has been decorated by the hanging of a flag from the countries where each student was born, and from all the countries of their exchange students. Cathy says excitedly, “You should see how many we have! The kids really like that; they can say ‘That’s where I came from’ and so that’s one of the things that our group does is to make sure that’s kept current. It’s amazing how many people move here. That’s always my question when I find out someone’s moved halfway around the world to this town—Why? It’s not even on most maps!”

Like Gail, Cathy acknowledges that her group’s efforts at tackling racism most often include “safe” activities that address individual attitudes and intercultural sharing. Obviously,
no administrators would come out publicly against fostering a harmonious school atmosphere. In situations where teacher and student activists take on more controversial issues, or name racist policies and practices more directly, their administrators are faced with a much more difficult task in supporting them.

As a veteran AR activist teacher, Bonnie acknowledges the difficult role that principals must play in their dealings with social action groups within their schools:

We've been really positive here at [our school] in that [our principal] is very supportive of this whole area. She walks a tightrope. Like, for example, she is one who has said way back when, “Do we really have to put racism in the name? Don’t you think you’ll turn people off?” And I think in a way she was also worried about the community and its response, and all the other things, like how it might make the school look. So there were those natural administrative kinds of reactions.

But Bonnie shares that, after her initial reservations, the principal was eventually won over:

She heard our rationale and left it as it is, so I see that as being very positive. And I know that at the Curriculum Leader meeting when I asked to do the Black History Month presentation, one of the other curriculum leaders raised the concern about the number of instructional minutes, and [she] said, “No, as far as I’m concerned that’s worthwhile curriculum.” So the support has definitely been there in that respect.

This welcome show of support from the principal had other benefits to the group as well, including drawing the backing of other staff members, even if for mainly political reasons.

As Bonnie explains it, there were certain staff members who were concerned that they would be missing out on instructional time when each teacher was asked to discuss issues of racism and discrimination with each of their classes. Another concern was raised about using school time that would normally have been taken up by a regular school meeting to address social justice concerns with colleagues. In both cases, the principal’s obvious support gave Bonnie’s group confidence to proceed, as Bonnie explains:

We know that’s a-okay and we won’t have to be hesitant about it; that is very positive from an administrative point of view. And then you have some, too, who get
aboard for no other reason than they know [the principal] has given it her stamp of approval [laughs]. So you get those positive spin-offs, and if you can use them to work with the person, and have the person buy into it, for the so-called right reason, to me the door’s open. And I have no difficulty working with doors that are slightly ajar! [laughs]

Another more subtle means of showing support for a school-based group is through administrative decisions including setting policy and opening up school systems and procedures for review and possible modification. This has proven to be a much more challenging area for groups hoping to effect progressive changes. One reason is the extracurricular nature of school-based social action groups. Bonnie laments that “in every school that I’ve worked in I must admit that it’s been on the periphery. It’s never been a core committee. Other things will make our group take a back seat because it’s always been an add-on.” My own experience with our school’s STOP program affirms this frustration, as we have watched our AR efforts publicly praised and encouraged by our local school officials. These same district administrators, however, remain hesitant to implement any form of diversity-affirming hiring and promotion policies within the school district, as just one example.

Any time that accusations of racism or racist school policies emerge in a school or school district, the repercussions inevitably cause a great deal of volatility in the community. A decisive administrative response at the school level can go a long way toward ameliorating such situations, but, as Ted points out, there are many risks involved for principals who take strong positions by naming and challenging racism. Ted, a veteran activist and AR educator, observes that even to be able to ask the necessary questions really depends on “who the administrators are, how confident they are about these issues, how willing they are to ask tough questions about schooling and the way it’s being delivered in their school.” The
reactions from critics can be swift and spirited, as “people tend to get very emotional about it in a very short time, and I think that many administrators don’t want to, and for all kinds of understandable reasons, they don’t want to stir up a hornet’s nest. And they know that one can exist there.”

Ted believes that the school district administration must lead the way in addressing social justice issues in order to create an atmosphere that encourages the efforts of individual school principals and groups. He insists that “school administrators need to know that the system administrators—the people who are going to move them along in their career--value that kind of risk-taking. If they don’t, who’s going to take that kind of risk? And risk having the parents all up in arms? Because it often does create dissonance.” Only under relatively safe conditions will it be likely or sensible for principals to take bold stands against racism in their schools, or to support the sometimes controversial actions of teacher-student coalitions that may form. The key question that emerges, according to Ted, becomes “at what point does activism become something that actually goes beyond the values of the administration of the school?” He concludes:

It takes a tremendous amount of courage, and a tremendous amount of inner conviction that this is right. Without that, if [principals] get their lead from other people and what’s socially acceptable, they’re not going to be able to go very far to address these issues. So this conviction and this confidence is essential, and at a school level that takes a special type of administrator.

Some pivotal institutional developments in this area typically involve the establishment and funding of particular programs within a school district to meet the needs of a diverse population. Ted teaches in a large urban centre, and relates to me his observations and questions about how administrative decisions can reflect and influence how a school system deals with diversity issues:
English as a Second Language (ESL) is an example. Who makes the decisions about staffing for ESL? Should that be at a system level? Should it be at a school level? How is that money that is allocated for ESL actually spent when it comes to the school, and to what degree is that very much up to the administrators of the school? And is that good?

In most school districts, he points out, some key programming and funding decisions that pertain to social justice education are made “from above” in the central office, often without adequate consultation from affected teachers and activists in the field. This top-down model often leaves school-based practitioners frustrated, and wondering if their employers are addressing these issues most appropriately.

Ted zeroes in on a hypothetical example of an administrative decision to amalgamate programming for a specific marginalized population, thereby removing it from the list of ongoing concerns of the remainder of the schools:

With these systemic things, we can end up in some cases having situations where the problem really isn’t being addressed because of the way the system is set up. If there’s a particular school that’s designed to deal with Native Education and that becomes the flagship for a system, then other elements of Native Education within a school district may just be left alone.

In this case, an apparently proactive approach to dealing with issues faced by Aboriginal staff and students may actually create a situation where these issues are seen as already having been dealt with, and therefore, are rarely addressed on an ongoing basis by the majority of mainstream teachers and administrators within the system.

As Ted observes, all our talk of administration and organization “goes to how our system is set up, who makes decisions, based on what criteria are those decisions made. Throughout all of this there is this balance between people gaining ownership for the issue, and something on an external level pushing them to take action in some way or another.” In the case of AR initiatives in schools, even the implementation of a rigorous set of policies and
procedures without consultations can often elicit a negative response from others within the system, particularly among teachers who react negatively to a top-down model of change. Ted offers that some progressive AR efforts can sometimes fail because, in his view, “the policy can tend sometimes to work against the ownership being taken. You can get a [negative] reaction to it all the time, or it can be seen as something from those guys somewhere else.”

In addition to formal district policy concerns, there are often traditions or situations in place that perpetuate racist beliefs and attitudes, but which school administrators may be hesitant to implement change. They may simply be unaware of the offending image or practice, or they fear parental or community backlash and potential media fire-storms. Ted shares with me a poignant example from a nearby school in his community who has a logo for their sports teams that many people feel is racist towards Aboriginal people. He asks rhetorically, “what does that say? And to what degree can you get at that? Trying to change decades of school tradition and pride—if you’re going to do that, the media’s going to be there like that [snaps fingers] and why are you doing it?”

We talk about the various motives of people who may seek to implement or resist such changes in a school, and how those most offended may not be in a position of power or safety to complain. I observe that in some urban schools there may be a relatively small population of First Nations students, to which Ted replies, “Exactly, or they’re there and they’re quietly offended and no trouble is being made. And yet it may be offending more people than that; there may be a certain population of this school that sees [racist logos] and are offended in the same way that you and I are offended.” Again, he acknowledges the difficulties faced by a principal wishing to instigate such a controversial change if the senior administrators in the district are not known to be sensitive to, or vocally supportive of
diversity issues:

So these are the systemic things that, again, what administrator is going to evoke that without a tremendous amount of courage and conviction? But if the [a leader in the] system says, “Wait a second, we need to take a look at things” and is able to back that and questions that, and says “Okay, you’ve got the backing from here” that gives a lot more legs if you’ve got an administrator who’s thinking “Gosh that bugs me” and is legitimizing it, then something can happen perhaps. But otherwise the status quo reigns supreme with these things.

Like the other teachers with whom I spoke about social justice activism, Ted shares a conviction that administrative support is essential for the lasting success of these efforts. Each shares examples of principals whose personal and official blessings of action groups had opened doors for further efforts at promoting the acceptance of differences within specific school settings. All express some version of the view that, from the district administration down, the official endorsement of AR policies and procedures would likely enhance progressive social changes within schools in that district.

For the students I interviewed, however, a more varied response emerges to the question of the importance of administrative support of school-based activism. Those students who are newest to the field typically affirm without hesitation that a supportive principal would be vital to the success of any school program. For example, Sina, who is working to establish a student action group in her large urban high school, seems grateful for the assistance of her school principal, who offered her idea “a good response. The principal is really behind us on this.” In her view, the leadership of the school sets the tone for the acceptance of differences:

If they’re not on board, then students won’t be on board. If some students feel that their teachers are being sort of discriminatory towards them, and if the principals come and they get on board [with our group], and they try to stop discrimination, then students will be more likely to speak out.
Her principal also referred Sina to the school’s resource officer, a member of the police service who has offered his help in organizing and promoting events that foster an acceptance of diversity. Sina describes her school as “one of the more diverse high schools in the city, so we see everything when we’re there, but in our school, instead of people accepting each other, they’re more tolerating. We want to make them more accepting of each other.” With this somewhat modest and altruistic goal, Sina found a great deal of support from her school’s administration.

As president of her students’ council, Sina had approached her principal late in the previous school year with the idea of forming an activist group the following fall, and he encouraged her to address the entire staff about it. She explains that she and a few friends presented her plan at “staff meetings, and we did it at the big ‘cabinet meeting’ with the principal and all the Curriculum Leaders. We did it there and we did it everywhere we could think of. And on the first day of school I got to speak at the assemblies for each grade so I mentioned [our group] in it. I talked to the students but I don’t know who was listening.” She was excited that several teachers seemed to be taking an interest:

If students see their favourite teacher doing it then they might just join [the group] too. And all the teachers who have asked us so far, they’re all open-minded and kids love them, so they’ve been coming, and they’ve been getting more of their own students out. They talk about it in class, and they’ve been giving us names of their students that are going to be coming out.

The apparent buy-in from enthusiastic teachers seemed to me a good sign that her group would find success in the coming year, and seemed to follow naturally from the blessing of her school’s administration. However, the administrative and staff support in this case did not translate into a viable student action program.

Sina’s AR group was planning some drama presentations and a motivational speaker
on the topic of diversity, and a rock concert against racism. In subsequent contacts with Sina, she told me that she found it very difficult to get enough students out to meetings to plan the events. Her conclusion was that not enough students found discrimination to be a problem in her school to want to take action. I imagine there were any number of other factors that worked against its formation as well. From this distance it is difficult to draw definite conclusions, but I speculate that, in some cases, initial strong administrative and staff support can actually reduce the likelihood of success at recruiting activist students to a progressive social action group. The movement may be seen by some potential members as too mainstream, too adult-centred, or too school-driven to address systemic concerns effectively.

Other students support my hypothesis by sharing experiences of school administrators who are, for various reasons, unsupportive of their efforts at addressing social justice issues in their schools. When Lisa approached the principal or her Catholic high school, located in a smaller urban centre, to support a local awareness raising event, he was reluctant to allow students from his school to get officially involved. Lisa had offered to sell tickets to a concert sponsored by another community youth group to raise funds and awareness for international development and the elimination of violence and discrimination, “but even for that, there wasn’t much of a response to that. I went to go talk to the principal and he wouldn’t let me put up the poster. He was hesitant on that. I had a big stack and he said, ‘Well you can put up about 10,’ so I put them up all over the place.”

Lisa speculates that the religious nature of her school inhibits her efforts to form a school-based group to take action around diversity issues, especially considering the particular group whose concert event she was promoting has often taken controversial stands in their community supporting equality based on sexual orientation as well. She shares some issues her proposed action group might tackle, and offers that, “I think that if we did it,
they’d want to incorporate a Catholic ideal with it. I think so, and that’s fine but it’s just, we probably have different goals for doing good works in the community.” We also explore other factors, such as homophobia, that present obstacles to the formation of a social justice group in her school; more discussion on these issues appears in the section below that addresses my hypothesis on the influence of a conservative social climate.

Ramona and her sister Sabrina have formed a group to challenge racism in their small urban high school. They attend youth leadership conferences and meetings, and regularly plan events open to the school such as guest speakers on Amnesty International and other global issues, and organize dramatic role plays. Sabrina describes as their broad goal to “get people involved in something and let them see outside of their normal world, and we want to help out other people.” Again their relatively benign sounding goals reflect a traditional MC sentiment to have a diversity of people learn more about each other to get along better. They add, “the good thing about our school is that it’s so small you can go class to class and talk to the classes. Even at the lunch hour you can go out and approach students and say, ‘Hey do you want to go to a meeting?’” Nonetheless, they have found that the administrative and staff support for their efforts at their school has been very minimal.

Ramona tells me that her principal almost never addresses directly any issues of human rights or diversity, and that even their group’s teacher advisor is not very enthusiastic about their activism. She concedes that “mostly what he does is signs things, like we have a bulletin at the beginning of each school day, and when we want to put something in the bulletin we need a teacher to sign it, and he also lets us use his rooms for meetings.” They meet about once every two weeks, and try to organize at least one event per month. Their school administration provides each school club with 25 dollars per year, and “then we want to do our own fundraising from there.” Obviously, this modest financial incentive would not
go very far in aiding the planning of ambitious projects that may require additional resources.

Another significant barrier to their work in this particular school, Ramona believes, is the proliferation of similar clubs whose members may not be passionate about the social activism they purport to espouse. She explains their unique situation:

There are clubs that are started because, okay, it's an academic school so everyone wants to do really well. Everyone wants to go to university, so it looks really good on your resume if you're president of this human rights club. In order to start a club you need ten people to sign a sheet of paper, which you can get all your friends to do, so there are a bunch of organizations based on human rights which just start up and die.

Although they do not enjoy an enthusiastic level of support from their school principal, or from the mainstream school population, Sabrina and Ramona continue their modest efforts toward raising awareness of social justice issues within a relatively apathetic school environment. In a sense they face a situation not unlike other activists in community groups who continue their efforts toward fairness and equality in the face of widespread resistance or apathy toward these issues from many people. In their case, administrative support would be welcomed, but is not vital to their ongoing activism.

Three of the other students I interviewed strongly refuted my hypothesis about the importance of administrative support. Daria and her fellow student activists, for example, have made a concerted effort to avoid the constraints of a school’s administrative structure in their activism. She and her friends actively recruited other students from various high schools in their large urban centre using traditional methods such as passing out literature on their group: “We made a brochure, a very simple brochure outlining our goals, our history, what [our group] does, and we just distributed it at schools, and if there is anyone who is interested after we give our speech for example, then hopefully we’ll be able to recruit that member. But that’s basically how we do it, we just put up announcements in our schools,
and distribute our flyers.” So far the group has attracted about 20 committed members who meet weekly to plan ongoing events.

Daria believes that having an adult organizer would detract from their student-run organization. She explains, “we haven’t pursued that. We want to maintain this organization as a youth led organization for youth. We don’t want the influence of adults. A big reason for that is we do want to prove that youth can do it.” Later she asserts that “youth don’t want to be under the wing of these adult administrators.” Their group seem to have been highly successful to date, winning a national AR contest, speaking at numerous schools and teachers’ conventions, and at other meetings, establishing a web site, and along the way have attracted a fair amount of positive media exposure.

Their activist AR group meets weekly at the public library but are “thinking strongly now about having a registered organization because that would allow us to have a permanent room in city hall where we could meet on a regular basis in a nice, closed off area.” Still, the added layers of bureaucracy and formal governance seem unfavourable to Daria, who would like the group to maintain its spontaneous and unofficial atmosphere. She and the other executive members have also resisted offers to become part of larger organizations; she says “actually we have had proposals by other organizations that have said ‘come and join us--be a youth aspect of this huge organization’ and we’ve turned that down.” Their desire is to keep the size and administrative structure more manageable, in order to remain flexible for taking action on projects as they emerge without having to “wait for approval from above.” Even so, she admits that a school affiliation and formal club status would offer the group “more access to funding and networks,” and to greater efficiency.

At one point Daria explains her ambivalent views on adult leadership of student groups:
I don't know if I’m stereotyping teachers or adults—but I find that it's easier [for them] to be organized. I know with clubs in our school, when there’s a teacher supervisor the clubs are very organized, notes are kept, and it’s that figurehead aspect of it, [suggesting that] ‘oh yes, we are under control, we are an orderly group.’ Whereas with youth heading this whole group, I mean we do have our positions, but it’s a little more relaxed and we’re more down-to-earth, so to speak.

While not afraid of sharing their activities with an adult mentor, Daria expresses what seems to me a reasonable fear of having the group’s goals and efforts significantly influenced by a more experienced teacher activist.

I ask Daria about her group’s official policies and procedures, and she admits that they have some guiding principles they follow but do not feel as if they are bound to the same restrictions that would inevitably govern a school-based group. She elaborates, addressing a number of considerations on both sides:

We do break quite a bit of rules. We’ve done presentations where we’ve videotaped the presentation, whereas if we were with a teacher, that would be an automatic “No. You need permission slips. You need this,” but we just go out there and gather our material. There are no ties to the rules that we have to abide by, and that’s good because we don’t have to worry about the group doing something as a whole and having it backfire and fall on the shoulders of this adult. But you can take a look at it differently too. To have a teacher organize this, you also have that experience and perhaps that wisdom of being older and more experienced with setting up groups. Not only that, but a teacher or school could serve as guidance, whereas with our group, we’ve done some things that we shouldn’t have done, or we’ve taken routes that were a detour to what we were really wanting to do, and I think when you have a school or a teacher backing you up it’s not as easy for a group to fall into those distractions.

Daria shares a thoughtful perspective on their activism that clearly acknowledges the many potential benefits of having an adult-led, school-sponsored initiative to promote social justice.

Like other students I interviewed, she seems well aware of the advantages of having a school’s administrative and financial support, but consciously eschews such an arrangement to retain the original spirit of the student-led aspect of the group. She justifies their retaining a
youth-centred organizational structure based primarily on issues of administrative expediency, their sense of ownership, and their personal satisfaction. As she puts it, making their many errors due to inexperience "slows down the progress of the group but I think it makes it more worthwhile because we have to work harder for it, and when we have that finished product we can say we did it."

In a separate interview about the same activist organization, Jason and Steve offer confirmation of Daria’s views on adult supervision and school administrative support. Jason addresses the financial benefits that could accompany being housed in a specific school setting, but reminds me, “our focus is presentations and really to do stuff like that we don’t need anything. Two bucks for the bus and some photocopying and that’s it!” Steve adds, “It should be the desire drives the need for funds, not the funds driving the project. You shouldn’t initiate a project just because you can.” They seem proud of their frugal operation, and of their independence from funding sources that could withdraw them at any time and from a potentially inhibitory school administration that might wish to interfere with their various plans for social justice activism.

They were among the first members of the founding group, and Steve explains their motivation for forming outside of a school:

We realized that there are many other groups doing this—you know antiracism, cultural education groups—and what we wanted to do, we wanted to find a niche that our group, which is unregistered, relatively small and lacking resources could fill. We didn’t want to go back home and just repeat what’s already been done.

Part of the innovative nature of their program is that it does not rely on a single school to provide a continually supportive environment. Meeting outside a school setting gives them a flexibility that they value. Steve explains that “we’re a small group so we’re dynamic. We can move easily and quickly and get things done.” When I asked them, “What’s the advantage of
not having [your group] associated with your school and having a teacher on board?” Steve replies quickly:

Freedom. We have a lot more freedom. The school has to have everything regimented. With our school you have to have X number of members, you have to have a school supervisor to be a registered school club. I think we could even get credits through the school but I wouldn’t be interested because it’s such a rigid environment; we’re much more flexible.

Jason affirms, “it’s not really worth it; there’s no benefit we could get by going through the school system. Right now we have a lot of contacts with people who are more than willing to give us resources.” They seem quite certain of their decision to have their activism remain independent of adult authority.

Both Jason and Steve admit that their group struggles with issues that more established school groups with continuity in administrative and staff supervision might avoid. They continue to overcome what Steve calls “bureaucratic roadblocks” including a hierarchy that can sometimes develop despite the best efforts to remain focused on consensus-building. He cites as a recent example, “just the communication, like we’ve started using the Internet, but even so there’s sort of like a hoarding of information. Like information is power, essentially.” Jason maintains that for him, the student-driven aspect of the group is central to his continued work with it, explaining that “we like that ‘round table’ thing where we’re working not as a hierarchy of individuals but we’re more like a directory. Everyone has their own talent, and if we all work together then we can do it.” Their somewhat naive construction of an ideally egalitarian model of cooperation is emblematic of a newly emerging breed of highly articulate and reflective student activists who strive to model the cooperativeness and fairness they promote in their activism.

Steve concludes: “We’re a group of highly motivated people, and if we can all put a
hand in each project instead of dividing into groups and reporting to a central body then everything’s going to be our product, and it feels good that way.” Like Daria, he has highlighted the potency that a sense of ownership can imbue in a group’s committed members. It emerges here as a definitive factor in their desire to maintain independence from external administration.

I do not believe that these students represent some new kind of rebel youth movement that seeks to undermine existing educational frameworks for challenging racism and other discrimination. More likely, they are acting out of a genuine desire for social change toward broad social justice ideals, and are justifiably frustrated with some of the drawbacks of operating within a school system, even as an extra-curricular program. Their desire to cooperate with adults in a variety of projects and across several contexts evinces their willingness to seek strategic compromises with older participants in the struggle for social justice, but on their own terms.

Their candid views on this tension between desiring some aspects of institutional support while valuing the freedom to plan and undertake unfettered activism can inform those teachers interested in being staff facilitators with student initiatives inside or outside of schools. Maintaining the complex relationship as a teacher sponsor of such a coalition inevitably means finding an appropriate balance of guidance and support along with flexibility and freedom required to foster student leadership and ownership of their activism. Their insights on this tension add an important voice to the collective body of wisdom on this under-analyzed educational relationship.

Hypotheses D and E Countered

My next hypothesis acknowledges the rampant conservatism that often dominates the public discourse on diversity education in our province and proposes that this situation
could negatively affect the efforts of school-based activists. I hypothesized that (d) the conservative political climate and anti-diversity backlash inhibits activism in school settings. My interviews reveal a widespread awareness of this political milieu but an almost unanimous rejection of the idea that it works to curtail their specific activities.

Below, I address it along with a related hypothesis that is also countered by my research participants, namely, that (e) current negative attitudes toward young people will limit the efficacy of school-based action groups. The conservative political landscape and media coverage of current events often entails sensationalistic and negative coverage of issues regarding young people. Youth crime, violent behaviour, and anti-social incidents are typically provided front-page treatment, even though all reliable statistical indicators show that the youth crime rate has actually been declining each year for over a decade now. However, the unfortunately misleading reporting, and the false perception the public may have about our dangerous youth have not, among my research participants anyway, prevented their successful activism in the face of this negativity. In some cases, their pro-social behaviours in this field have actually seemed all the more altruistic and remarkable in contrast to public expectations for young people.

Alberta’s infamous conservative mentality does create some obstacles for activism on issues of social justice and diversity. Students forming AR groups to tackle racism and other forms of discrimination will find in this province a number of sources of resistance to their efforts. The government’s adamant refusal until just a few years ago to include sexual orientation among the grounds for discrimination in our human rights protection act is just one example, but is emblematic of a narrow mindset among members of the general public.

When I interview Lisa, she has been struggling unsuccessfully to set up a social action movement in her large Catholic high school and expresses to me a distinct pressure to avoid
certain issues. She says she feels resistance, especially against addressing "the one issue, homosexuality. Alberta is passing laws to make sure that they're not able to marry and things like that. Of course we have the stereotype that we're all red-necks but in a way it's sort of true. The public seems to support the politicians on this issue." She adds that in her particular school, the religious focus exacerbates this anti-gay climate, speculating that "even most Catholics think homosexuality is bad." She admits that it can be discouraging when the political and administrative leadership in our province are always opposing fairness along certain controversial issues, saying "you're always just resisting something. You've got to wonder about that."

Even so, Lisa relishes the thought of confronting these very leaders about their narrow views. On the prospect of inviting in a notoriously outspoken anti-gay politician from Alberta to debate his views with students, Lisa guesses: "It would be quite a challenge. That would actually be fun. I'd really like for us to do that." Her genuine enthusiasm for taking on a seemingly impossible challenge reminds me that, even in the face of daunting conservatism, young activists are poised to rise to the challenge of fighting for social justice. I remember our own STOP members gleefully inviting our local MLA, Stockwell Day, to one of our weekly meetings where they attempted to convince him to stop blocking Alberta’s ratification of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. Their solid research and debating skills shone through during the event, covered by CBC radio, but more impressive to me was how undaunted these young people appeared in their verbal wrangling with an especially confident and single-minded politician.

Lisa says she feels frustrated by the apparent apathy of her adult counterparts when issues of inequity arise. A recent example indicated to Lisa that her parents’ generation often seems not to care about the injustices faced by others in their struggle for equity or fair
There was this one article in *Chatelaine* magazine about honour killings and women in a country in the East, and I was just appalled by this article and I showed my parents and they were like, “Oh that’s terrible, I can’t believe it, but oh well, that’s life.” And with TV, people just don’t realize, like they see it and it’s just not believable because you just haven’t experienced it yourself I guess. They’re not exposed to it. I think people just don’t know what to do. It’s just like a mind-set or attitude of people. And how do you change that?

She sees her own activism as having the potential to educate a new generation to reject the rampant apathy of the contemporary adult world and take on difficult challenges toward progressive social change. In this way the political and social conservatism is treated as simply another obstacle like racism or sexism. Her view of the advantage of her youth is that older people may “look around but most don’t care” about social justice issues, whereas many young people like her express a more passionate interest in creating a just society for their own future.

In another city and a very different demographic setting, Sabrina also admits to feeling frustration with the widespread apathy among adults on social justice issues. She shares that “we’ve had some experience trying to organize something and seen the apathy out there. For instance when our sister went to the Amnesty university meeting, there were just seven people there from the entire university.” For Sabrina and Ramona, their personal commitment to their activism emerges out of their growing awareness of the life and death struggles for social justice faced by political prisoners. She says: “Once you see this sort of thing happening you can’t really stop and close your eyes and say ‘I don’t know about that sort of thing’ anymore.” It makes her angry that clear violations of people’s basic human rights do not get more coverage by mainstream media, even within our own country. Her efforts with organizing an AR club at her high school seek to remedy that by raising awareness, at least
among her same-age peers.

Her sister Ramona agrees that social justice issues enjoy very little exposure in their community, and even within their school. She finds that teachers teach their classes as if the current curriculum completely ignores human rights issues. Ramona wishes for more discussion of issues that have meaning for her:

It would be nice if we could have some more discussion about human rights within our school. Because all of our teachers are so academic, like in English we don’t really have time to read anything about prejudice or human rights. It’s all the stuff on the curriculum, and we barely have enough time to finish that. And the same with social studies. All we’re doing is all this past stuff that’s happened and we don’t even get a chance to talk about what’s happening right now, and any of the issues we should be discussing right now, because there just isn’t time. We could do a little bit of that in grade 10, like we had a big discussion on the death penalty, but that was like once.

From her perspective, many teachers may simply find it more comfortable to avoid potentially contentious issues.

The topic of homophobia is especially taboo in mainstream classes, and she mentions amusedly that “one of the most interesting conversations we’ve had about this sort of thing was with this janitor. We were staying after school and we were just sitting around talking and we just had this good conversation.” In her quest for raising awareness around social justice issues, Ramona finds it disappointing that young people have to lead the way, and most often without the support of many adults around them.

Sabrina notes that, in our present society, there is an increasing emphasis on competitiveness and seeking personal gain and not much on accepting responsibility for others. For so many of the adults she sees, inaction is the anticipated response to any revelations of social injustice. She explains the commonplace nature of apathy embedded in this mind-set:
It’s so easy just not to do anything. It doesn’t really feel like a decision. Like when you don’t do anything it should feel like you’re totally bad to ignore people on the street. But it is actually a normal life; most people don’t care. Well, they do, but they don’t do anything about it, maybe because we’re so segregated from so much of the world. And it’s not even that these people are bad or anything, they just don’t know.

Along with her sister, Sabrina hopes that her efforts might aid in changing this norm, might encourage more young Albertans to recognize--and take an active role in addressing--the rampant poverty, racism, and other manifestations of social inequity that currently exist in our world.

From a young person’s perspective in another high school in a different city, Sina shares with me that one specific issue that has not received much attention from the adults in her community is cultural diversity. She says that she’s “always been interested in it, just because I’ve always seen the variety and diversity around me, but I’ve never seen anybody do anything to make it more peaceful. Instead, in the news I’d hear about high schools having their ‘ethnic conflicts’ and stuff, but nobody would really try to stop it.” So along with a small group of friends on her school’s Student Council, she undertook to learn more about the forms and causes of racism. Their decision to attend a leadership camp on cultural diversity was an important catalyst for her group, in that it provided them with basic education on this issue:

When we went to camp last year... we all learned about it, and at the camp it was also integrated with prejudice and discrimination in society, so we learned more about that. Then we decided that we would try to bring [an AR program] to our school and raise awareness about it.

They were not successful at maintaining an ongoing AR program in their school, but their efforts at raising awareness and their goals for the group reflect a sense of responsibility for shaping a model society that I believe to be admirable for any engaged citizen in a democracy.
Sina’s altruism and idealistic desire for social harmony in her school and community counter the popular media stereotypes of narcissistic and violent youth as a threat to communities.

Sina believes that social justice efforts aimed at young people are far more successful when other young people organize them. She says: “If kids target kids then they’ll listen. If you have an adult talking down to them they might just tune it out.” However, she admits that young people face serious credibility problems when trying to create AR programming on their own. Her own initial efforts illustrate the challenge of being taken seriously by adults: “We didn’t have a teacher [advisor] when school started, so then I had to take care of all of that and I didn’t know how to do it. So I’d be in talking to the principal and asking him to do it, and he’s like, ‘Let’s find this girl a teacher!’” She admits that the prospect of organizing large events to raise awareness on social justice issues can be daunting for many young people, noting that “a lot of kids get shy on the phone because they don’t know what to talk about or they think that the person’s not going to respect them because they’re a kid.” Let’s face it, she adds, “the teacher has bigger words.”

For Daria, the very existence of her AR action group sends an important message to adults in her community; she explains that their diverse composition is part of modeling the cooperativeness they promote:

It just shows that there are a lot of youth who are concerned about the issue. It’s not just me; it’s 20 other youth within the organization, and I’m sure there are many others throughout [our city] that are concerned about the issue. Second, our group is very multicultural; we have students who are from Africa, Iran, Iraq, Chile, so we work from all over the place and it shows that we are creating this united front against racism. And we have a lot of individuals who are maybe third generation Canadian and that in itself proves that it’s an issue, that racism is an issue for all Canadians. Just because you may not have experienced it personally it doesn’t mean that you can turn your head and walk away. It means that youth of all ethnic origins are confronting the issue, they’re being united, and they’re trying to make a difference.
She and her group have enjoyed some financial and moral support from specific designated government agencies, but find the rest of their community more likely to ignore issues of racism, or to attribute relevant incidents to other factors. This implicit denial of racism is addressed in more detail in a section below related to my hypothesis about the denial of racism as an inhibitory factor to social justice activism.

Daria also emphasizes the importance of the fact that her group is made up entirely of persons under the age of 18 years. For her it signals a new empowerment among young activists, that they are able to take on an issue of limited interest to the adults around them, and work together effectively to improve the political climate in their own society. At the same time they have ably provided themselves with a self-directed education on relevant diversity issues. She asserts boldly:

The work that our group does is very valuable, because it not only educates others, it helps us educate ourselves. It helps us to become empowered within our communities which is a really big thing now with youth. We’re finally being able to be taken seriously by politicians or people organizing workshops. I would have never imagined being invited to a national educators’ conference. I think the work that we’ve done and the recognition has helped us further our goals of educating more and more people.

While the conservative tendency of the adults and institutions around them have tended either to ignore or resist contentious discourse around social justice issues, particularly with young people, Daria and her colleagues have opted to open and inform the dialogue themselves. Their efforts have met with mostly positive results from their peers, and some significant recognition by human rights agencies. For Daria, these small successes show their group “is beating the stereotypes that society has against youth. It proves to us that we are succeeding, that we are on the right track.”

Steve and Jason observe that many adults in our province, including political leaders, target young people as scapegoats for many social ills. This situation often reveals itself, they
suggest, in limited attention paid to educational initiatives to address social justice issues that may highlight embarrassing inadequacies in existing institutions. Therefore, they see their AR activism as fulfilling a serious educational need for students who may have not been encouraged to confront racism in their regular classes. As Steve points out, young AR educators may be more successful than some adults in planning effective activities in this area:

We try to proactively educate them against racism by getting them thinking open-mindedly, mainly through games, because we work with younger kids, elementary school. Certainly, when you have interaction between the students, that’s where the real AR education occurs. Lecturing is good and it’s educational, but essentially when you’re lecturing there’s a hierarchy involved there, but when you’re having games and interaction there’s no hierarchy at all between peers, and that’s how it works best for us.

Jason emphasizes that, in their interactive presentations, they like “to get the students to think for themselves, not just listen to someone else’s thought, because the point of our presentation is to try to encourage a more broad pattern of thought and critical thinking.”

These student activists also emphasize that their educational activities include references to the provincial curriculum. As current high school students, they recognize that they are ideally equipped to fill what they identify as gaps in their own learning. Jason explains that, “because we’re younger, we also have a more clear memory of the types of stuff that kids in school experience because we’re not that much past it. We’re able to identify lacking areas, and we can see in such a way that we can identify with them because we were there not so long ago.” Steve concurs with an example from the Alberta social studies curriculum: “Like when you learn the Plains Indians thing, we remember that exactly. We can tell where it was lacking in the schools.” They include specific curricular references in their presentations to ensure their immediate relevance to the specific age and grade level of their
Of course, there are several supportive community organizations that deal specifically with diversity and human rights issues, and many wish to include school-aged children in their target groups. Thereby, groups like theirs that already address young people "from the inside" enjoy some additional benefits. Steve and Jason both observe that adult AR agencies are especially enthusiastic about working cooperatively with young people. Jason says that, "right now we have a lot of contacts with people who are more than willing to give us resources," and feels that the adult diversity-serving community is "very supportive." Still, they remain frustrated by the difficult of establishing "one reliable contact. You leave messages with everyone and you talk to them. You call back people several times and they don't call back." Ironically, the supposedly irresponsible youth are finding their adult counterparts to lack the reliability that could enhance their cooperative efforts to plan and undertake more social justice education in their community.

Regarding dealing with a conservative provincial government that has, in recent years, eliminated cultural programming funding and disbanded its Multiculturalism Commission, Jason and Steve seem nonchalant. Their goal has not been to win over reluctant adult leaders but to find pockets of support within the system that may assist them in achieving their own goals. In fact, Jason tells me that they specifically "want to stay away from any political affiliation or alliance," but that they have nonetheless "received a lot of support from the federal government." Steve insists that a strength of their group is their relative frugality with their educational efforts, and asserts: "If we don't need money, we're not going to go out and seek it. So I think that's what we're proud of; we've done a lot with very little, and continue to have good support and good solidarity without needing to have funds." They cite specific grants and awards they have won in the past, and a list of other sources of funding and
support they may seek in the near future.

However, even with all of the backing from external sources, they remain hesitant to rely too heavily on their adult sponsors. Jason explains their reticence more directly:

We want to keep our project at an essentially community oriented level, so that if the government for some reason no longer wants to support us it doesn’t really matter. Their money is not in charge of us, and we’re not dependent on the government. So while the current government happens to be willing to help, we’ll certainly accept that, but we don’t want to be dependent on it. We want independence so that it’s not seen as a government tie. We’re doing something at a community level as community partners in this.

Steve adds: “We’re still very young and we’re still trying to find our way, and this whole government funding thing--you know--we’re cautious.” Developing a healthy cynicism towards strategic partnerships with ever-changing government and community agencies seems to me a shrewd tactical survival method. It reveals these young activists to be savvy consumers of programming and financial resources that can assist them in reaching their goals, while avoiding the pitfall of becoming too reliant on what can often prove to be unreliable sources.

Each of these young activists is keenly aware of the current negative attitudes some people hold against them as young people. They also show varying degrees of awareness of the often stultifying conservative mindset that currently fuels extreme backlashes against some specific issues they may tackle in the field of social justice education. Even with these barriers to their success, none of the young people I interviewed cite them as insurmountable, but rather, seem to view them as an exciting challenge. Some even relish the thought of countering the pervasive stereotypes of misguided youth, in part through joining diverse coalitions to raise awareness on controversial issues involving racism, sexism, and homophobia, among others. The conservative political climate and devaluation of youth that I
hypothesized would inhibit their activism actually provides an additional incentive for some to step up their efforts and confront narrow views wherever they arise, including, most poignantly, a closer scrutiny of politicians, curriculum, and government and school policies.

Their adult counterparts confirm these perceptions, with several addressing the current political climate as downright hostile to AR work, and citing diminishing government and administrative support for social justice initiatives. They often criticize the media for fostering negative stereotypes about marginalized groups, including young people, and for failing to present a balanced picture of the positive initiatives going on in schools.

Gail is especially pleased to see students at her school who had previously been social outcasts taking on leadership roles in her student action project. She says that it feels gratifying knowing that “you’re taking a group of kids who don’t get a chance to showcase their talent and aren’t appreciated for their brand of talent and letting them be appreciated and showcased, and it’s a completely different thing. It’s cool.” Our student members of STOP have found success in a similar situation where they have solicited talented but marginalized students from our school and community to perform in a popular annual punk music concert to raise awareness and funds for various social justice causes. The resulting goodwill and media exposure generated by such events goes a long way in countering the deluge of negative coverage of young people’s errors.

Sometimes simple efforts on the part of student activists can help to turn around community perceptions about young people. Cathy shares that her students wanted to tackle their town’s negative views toward students directly, and have undertaken a weekly activity that has little to do with social justice, but that has started to reverse sentiments:

They do a weekly cleanup of the parking lot, but it makes such a difference... For a while that was all that was in the newspapers, just how filthy the high school was--nothing to do with their getting a good education--but the fact that when we first got
McDonald's, I mean our parking lot looked like McDonald's garbage can, just absolutely covered. That's a big issue and we kind of turned that around with: "Well look at what's happening inside the school. Let's not worry about the garbage; that will get picked up."

The idea that some relatively modest good works by young people in the school and community can help change public perceptions was shared by all the teachers with whom I spoke. None sees the widespread current anti-youth sentiment as an impossible barrier to the ultimate success of their work in coalitions with students.

In fact, most are highly enthusiastic of the potential of young leaders to bring about positive social change in their schools, communities, and beyond. Gail, for example, cites some specific examples in her junior high school of students who are rising to the challenge of planning and implementing social justice education with their peers. She enthusiastically shares an example:

We've had one young man who's really taken it on and who's really blossoming and turning quite strong. He was always a leader in this building; it's a name that I knew even before I met him and he's partly connected with [our group] and that same sort of leadership is coming forth. He has chaired the last two meetings and is doing a beautiful job of it, you know. He's grade eight. We're really hoping—and I'm not sure whether we consciously did it or not—but with the eights, for that sense of blazing next year and the continuation of it.

Besides inviting and nurturing her school's natural student leaders, Bonnie explains that her AR group has also intentionally built links with the existing organized student leadership in the school:

We've also, consciously in this case, worked at connecting with Student Council so you find that a good 25% of the population in [our group] also belong to student council. So you've got that connection there, which, in other schools I haven't seen it as intensely as the possibility here. We see that as a strength to build upon and to continue with.

The youth component of their school-based AR program was integral to each of the teachers
I interviewed. Their daily contact with a diverse sample of students in their school was ample evidence for them that a number of young people have tremendous potential as social justice leaders and simply need an appropriate vehicle for their aspirations.

Likewise, none of the teacher activists who participated in this research viewed the regrettable conservative political situation as hopeless. In fact, all felt a strong sense of need to offer a voice to counter the increasingly alarmist right-wing political discourse. I found that the long-time AR activists felt especially frustrated with the current state of affairs for social justice work in schools, particularly when compared to past levels of support for this field.

One such teacher is Ted, who looks back fondly on the 1980s in particular as a "hey-day" for MC education and the movement to promote the acceptance of differences. He reflects on possible explanations of greater past financial support for cultural programming:

I think there were two things that contributed to its hey-day-ishness, if that's a word. One was that the political will was much stronger at that point, and the economics were different. So I think that we were a society then that was much more concerned with egalitarian things, and less with fiscal restraint. I think we were also more concerned with social issues, and our concerns now are much more individual issues. Even the issues surrounding equity now are not based in terms of group rights but in terms of individual rights.

He sees the current individualistic Western mentality as an inhibitory factor for social justice activism generally. Ted says that people today are simply not encouraged to place the injustices faced by others above their own wants and needs. Even a few decades ago, he argues, the market capitalism-driven mentality was less cut-throat.

Ted proposed that our earlier sense of collectivism, added to a growing cultural diversity among our population in traditionally white Alberta in the 1970s and 1980s, created a situation that was ripe for a boom in MC programs:

A concern for tolerance and understanding--that's the words of the mid 1980s. We
had a number of factors: the Keegstra situation and just a whole lot of things in AB at that time that caused Albertans to be concerned about how we treated other people and how we taught in our classrooms about other various groups. Plus, I think that at that time immigration was new, at least in a way that diversified the visual look of our society, and so it was something that we needed to talk about. Now it’s been around for a while and the desire to talk about it is not nearly so great.

It follows for Ted that the teachers who currently do choose to address diversity issues directly may find themselves in a tenuous position if controversial subjects arise. According to Ted, a professional existence on the margins of the contemporary educational milieu provides even white mainstream teacher activists such as him and me with a taste of the marginalization we rally against:

This goes back to what I was saying before; without the authority, without the legitimizing, we who like to work in this area are very much put into the same sort of thing— and I don’t want to compare in any way our experiences on a real base level—but we get a glimpse I guess of what it’s like to be the recipient of racism in our society.

Far from causing such activists to cease their efforts, this constant “going against the grain” of the more conservative mainstream seems to further reinforce the imperative nature of our continued activism.

Current AR efforts do not usually enjoy the kind of generous financial support that MC programming enjoyed just a few decades ago, a situation that Ted relates to systemic power issues that are very difficult to expose and counteract:

Economic issues really raise their head, and really cause systemic racism to raise its head. What are you going to cut back? Usually the voiceless. And that tends to be involved with certain cultural groups. Those people who are in power are going to be the last ones to have [programs cut]; it’s the same thing as the rule of the majority, the tyranny of the majority. So I think systemic issues take a tremendous amount of will, and are done more in economically flush times, or in times that are perceived to be economically flush. That’s why I think in the 1980s we got to some of those issues, just on the edge of systemic stuff.
His awareness of systemic issues underlying racism has not dampened his quest for social justice, but reminds him of how pervasive and embedded this has become in our society. Ted asserts that any activists that hope to be successful at combatting racism will somehow have to address these underlying factors in their work.

Our brainstorming on possible directions for future school-based activist coalitions sees Ted incorporating his growing awareness of shifting trends in our political and social climate with his desire to strive collectively for social justice. He asks rhetorically:

What this begs is, how does it get reinvented? The reality of diversity exists. The reality of marginalization still exists, perhaps even more than ever. So how does it get reinvented within the present climate, but also within the social milieu which is emerging? You know this isn’t just Alberta. How does the question of the value of diversity, how does the question of the right of the individual for self-determination and dignity and all of those kinds of things come forward in this social structure?

As mentioned above, Ted has identified a perceptible shift in our collective mentality from group rights in the 1970s and 1980s to a question of individual entitlement. He would like to see this move further toward the issue of personal responsibility:

To me, at the bottom of every AR policy is the question, not: “How can I get more from these people?” but: “How can I contribute more completely into this society?” So the entitlement isn’t the entitlement to take, but the entitlement to give. And so that, I think, fits in with the agenda of personal responsibility. How can I take responsibility for my school if I’m not allowed to take responsibility for it, if there are blocks that don’t allow me to? So I have an entitlement to participate, to contribute.

His suggestion to change the discourse to fit the new conservative political climate seems promising, and reveals another example of how activists can take a situation that seems to thwart social justice, and reinterpret or reposition it to open a window of hope for progressive social change.

Ted critiques the past “glory days” of MC programming as focusing on the subjects
of the programs as passive, or worse, as greedy recipients of government handouts. This led to its inevitable downfall, he thinks, but the current backlash can be reframed as an opportunity to introduce these concepts with a different emphasis:

The image of the whole thing that was the undoing of it was: “These people are on the take” and I think that’s absolutely backwards. These people are wanting in. They want to be able to give, because that’s where dignity comes from. Dignity doesn’t come from a handout; it comes from contributing. So that’s the message that should come out, that we need all the pistons firing in our society, so let’s find out how these people can contribute.

Other teacher activists who are not members of mainstream groups seem to experience a different perspective on the current role of a conservative political climate on their activism in schools. For Bonnie, her daily experiences as a Black teacher in an urban school reminds her of the pervasive nature of narrow-mindedness in her community. She shares that people regularly make assumptions about her based on commonly stereotyped notions, and describes a typical scenario:

I’ve had at least six experiences since I’ve been in this building, and unfortunately it’s all been white parents. A person walks in and says to me “Do you know where I could find a teacher?” [she laughs] Sometimes I play the game too, and go into the office, and the secretary who kind of knows my background and such, she’ll get all red because she knows that I’m playing a game. And I think that’s not fair to her. But I get peeved at situations like those when they happen too frequently. To me one time is too frequently. But the scary part was when I shared that story, and the come back at me was, why did I think the person was implying I wasn’t a teacher? I’m thinking, of the staff member: “Where are you coming from?” So you get that ripple effect and you think, where are people coming from?

These reminders cause Bonnie to question both the behaviour and underlying values of many of those around her. As a long-time AR activist, she typically brushes off the conservatism she sees and continues her work with students.

Occasionally, however, she admits that she gets “worn down” by the mainstream
white mentality that seems to foster denigrating her based on her skin colour. She concedes:

This is where I’m coming from, this is where some of that tiredness is coming from and I need [others] to understand how wearing it can be when you’re feeling that you’re giving it your all concentration and you turn around and here we go again. It could have been your best morning and something like that just shot it to hell, depending on the space you’re in. Like I said, most times I can just chuckle at it and make some fast comeback and life continues. But there are those times. For me that usually signals I’ve been too entrenched. Where I just say, whoops, that just hit me much harder that it has hit me for the last six months.

Her solution is to retreat from the daily activism, the daily struggles with combatting racist views and behaviours, and to rebuild her own vitality. Perhaps playfully, she tells herself, “I need to just go to a dance, and that’s what I mean by re-energizing me.”

Undefeated by a conservative climate that often devalues those outside the mainstream, Bonnie and the others represent the resilient and persistent activists who struggle on their uphill climb. The heavy load can be tiring at times, but the journey is made more bearable with the assistance of others on the same path, and the guiding vision of the summit fuels the passion to continue. Like the others with whom I spoke, Bonnie recognizes the limitations and barriers imposed by the current political context, with diminishing resources for MC and AR programming, negative portrayals of marginalized groups including young people, and an individualistic ethos that permeates contemporary society. However, each of them remains hopeful that their ongoing activism is meeting a crucial need to keep addressing social justice issues through their school-based coalitions.
Chapter 5
Hypotheses Confirmed

Hypothesis F Confirmed

Further to addressing the social climate in which educational activists operate, I hypothesized that (f) a general denial of racism and other forms of discrimination in their communities and in Canada as a whole by the majority of students and teachers presents a barrier to social justice activism in those communities. As I outline in earlier chapters, the literature on diversity and education has often been characterized by some debates and dichotomies between AR and MC proponents. On the issue of racism, most AR supporters decry the lack of candid discourse on racism in Canada, and the invisibility of the various forms of discrimination faced by marginalized groups (e.g., Bannerji, 1995; Dei, 1996a; Lee, 1994). The MC faction, on the other hand, generally complains that the AR camp focuses too much of their time on negative things such as racism—which they feel puts people off—and not enough time on building harmony (e.g., Friesen, 1991; McLeod, 1992).

During our interviews, the participants in this research project more often than not fall on the AR side of this issue. Though much of their activism involves promoting the acceptance of differences, they express their frustration at the pervasive and subtle nature of racism and other discrimination in their schools and the community at large. In many cases, they share examples and situations that illustrate the difficulties of planning and implementing social justice action in their groups in the face of a denial of a problem with racism in the first place.

In Cathy’s rural high school, for example, she admits that she and her colleagues didn’t believe that their homogeneous and mostly white school could possibly have any
concerns about racism: “A lot of people don’t really think that racism is a problem at all at [our school].” However, when they conducted a large survey, one question was included about students’ personal experiences with racism. The results came as a shock to Cathy and her principal:

We actually just did a [student] survey and got our results back the other day, and we don’t have a large population but the results of the survey show that they do think we have some racism problems. The item reads: “I have personally experienced racial harassment.” We had 8% of grade nines, 4% of grade tens, 6% of grade 11s, and 7% of grade 12s [saying yes] and I was shocked at that, because I would say that we have less than 5% of the school who are not white. That was something that we’re definitely going to bring up. Because we’ve never thought of having a racism problem because we’re basically all white!

Cathy shares that she expects her principal to have the school’s AR group try to deal proactively with this concern, but concedes that there is little likelihood of the system undergoing significant changes in any short period of time. Her comments here suggest that she holds the belief that increased diversity based on physical racialized characteristics will most likely lead to more problems in the school, reflecting concerns raised by several AR researchers about the problematic discourse around difference in education.

Cathy thinks any efforts to expose and eliminate racism may face internal obstacles in light of their school’s demographics. She sees the rural students they serve as being “very set in their ways” and says that “with them I find that I don’t see any blatant racism throughout the school, but when we try to do diversity events, there are some who seem like they could care less.” Later she says that dealing with the predominant attitudes of one large group in her school presents its own set of challenges in this field:

Addressing issues such as homosexual rights just wouldn’t fly here. Not with the cowboys. When we start talking problems at [this school] it’s between the social groups, because the cowboys are here with their big hats and their big trucks. One of the comments on the survey was “I’m glad to see that everyone at [this school]
knows their pecking order.” We knew right away that it had to have come from one of the cowboys because that’s their attitude; they walk around the school like they’re on top.

It would take a great deal of determination on the part of a school administrator to deal with deeply entrenched social hierarchies and norms.

Cathy also admits that her own relatively limited experience with diversity has also affected her ability to identify or fully understand potentially racist situations. She reflects that she is just beginning to analyze some of the entrenched racism that undergirds our contemporary society, especially in her home community in rural Alberta. A recent development in their community has brought the issue of racism to the surface for her:

I actually think that having [a meat processing] plant has brought more of the, I don’t know what word to use, but they basically degrade the people because it’s the worst job you could ever have. It’s a slaughterhouse, it reeks, there’s people out there who have lost limbs, who have died because they got caught in the shredding machines and stuff. I mean these are designed to crush cows, and you get your hand caught in that. And they hire people who are visible minorities because that’s all they can get. Some of these people drive for hours because that’s the only job they can get. I mean I wouldn’t work at [that plant] if I were starving.

I ask her, “So do you think the [meat-processing] plant is sort of symbolic, that it sort of reminds people or brings that issue out a little bit more?” to which she replies:

Yes, because you’ll hear comments. Like there was a man who was drunk and froze to death after being at a [plant] party, and he was not white. The whole thing was [the name of the plant repeated], and you just automatically know: low paying, non-English speaking, non-white, and even, not anything in terms of race, I’ve thought about it before and it wasn’t really a good thing to say, but I won’t drive [that road] anytime near a shift change because you have the people that are new to driving in Canada.

She stops suddenly and seems embarrassed. I suggest that perhaps this plant also serves an important purpose for newly enlightened white activists; it catches you with your own stereotypes. She reflects: “Yes, that shouldn’t have come out of my mouth, but I at least feel
guilty about it. A lot of people don’t so I figure that part is good. Guilt: I guess that’s a big step for some white people [laughs].”

Her own internal struggle to overcome a resistance to identifying racist tendencies might very well signal a corresponding renewal in her school group’s efforts to do the same in a challenging environment. In the face of the narrow views among such a large portion of the school’s population on diversity issues, and the relative difficulty of their administration to deal with racism issues head-on, Cathy and her AR group are finding the soil for their work in rural Alberta to be rocky indeed.

In her small Albertan town, Gail also finds it difficult to address racism in her classes and in her activist student group. They typically choose MC activities designed to build an awareness of the growing diversity, even in their community. But still, she finds a reluctance by her students to address racialized differences. She shares an example from a few years ago:

During the first year I taught, my students had to write all these statements about themselves, and I had this one student who said “I’m the one who’s chocolate” and I thought wow, that’s really cool. And every time I see her I think, she’s the colour of my favourite kind of chocolate! And she calls attention to it herself, almost because, people will see she’s black but they don’t want to say Black. Or if a kid is Chinese they don’t want to say Chinese because they think it’s politically incorrect.

Gail sees a peculiar situation developing in her fairly homogeneous white rural school that she suspects is happening elsewhere. On the one hand, mainstream media sources have created a heightened state of racialized awareness among students with highly publicized news coverage of everything from accusations of racist police, to equity legislation, to racism in the music business, to immigration debates, to racism in the army. Yet somehow, the discourse in our public schools has become stultified, partly over students’ fears of stirring up controversy by frankly addressing issues of difference.

Even in urban settings, teachers and students find their work is inhibited by the view
that racism, if it even exists, should not be mentioned directly in the struggle for fairness in schools. Sina tells me that at her large and diverse urban high school, no one really talks about racism, and she herself downplays any conflicts there: “It’s just little comments, stereotyping mostly,” she says about her own school’s current climate around racism. “We have so many different kinds of people and we all get along. We don’t really have that many fights.”

Later I ask Sina if she has personally experienced racism as an Indo-Canadian and she reports that yes, she has, but that the discrimination she notices the most typically stems from her religion:

When I tell people that I’m Muslim they automatically think that I’m from Arabia and that I’m a terrorist. But me, because I look more Indian than Arabian, people are more accepting of me than others even though we’re the same faith. So I’ve experienced that. A friend of mine who used to work with me, people thought he was a terrorist because he’s Muslim. He actually went to pick up a package that was delivered to him and people thought it was a bomb. He was just carrying it home and people thought it was a bomb! That’s all you hear is Islamic terrorists.

She eventually draws a connection between her status as a member of a “visible minority” group and the very real potential for facing racist discrimination in hiring practices in the workplace:

Because everyone still, in their mind, they have an idea of what the ideal world is to them. So when we go for a job and go for that interview and we fit their ideal, then we’ll get hired, but if we don’t and somebody else does, then they’ll get hired. I think in that sort of way [racism exists] because in society right now, nobody really speaks out what they’re thinking. So if someone is secretly thinking: “I really don’t want to hire that person because I think that there’d be conflicts at my job” you wouldn’t say that, you’d just make up some excuse and be like, “I can’t hire you because of this.”

Although she sees her racialized identity possibly limiting her employment opportunities due to hidden forms of racism, she seems at first oblivious to more systemic forms existing in her
school and society.

When I ask Sina about the possibility of there being built-in barriers to people based on their racialized identities, she immediately responds with generalized comments about Canadian society becoming "more accepting. Everywhere you look you see somebody who's different, so I think that we've become more accepting of it as a society. But of course there are still lots of problems with Native people." Even as she speaks of our accepting society, she is reminded of lessons on systemic racism from First Nations elders from a recent cultural leadership camp she attended: "They told us their side of the story, because we just hear what the government's saying, so in a way, we sort of form a judgement on them before we've actually understood their side." She seems able to scratch the surface of these underlying issues, but as it turns out, finds little success in maintaining an active AR group in her school.

Some teachers and students I interviewed questioned the sincere commitment of their administrators or other school personnel to even want to expose serious underlying concerns related to diversity that may already exist in their schools and school districts. It seems clear that many within the public school system are hesitant to concede that racism or other discrimination exists at all in their schools. Perhaps they fear repercussions to such exposure, including negative media coverage and emotionally charged parental responses. Examples abound of inflammatory stories documenting alleged "racial tensions" or "ethnic violence" at particular schools (including, perhaps not inconsequentially, the very school at which Sina tries in vain to get an activist student group established.) Administrators and other staff at affected schools may suddenly find themselves engaged in politicized "spin control" efforts that consume valuable resources, and may shy away from activist movements that promise to shed more light on these very issues.
With these and other concerns in mind, some principals and district administrators are justifiably cautious in addressing contentious issues. The staff and students who wish to expose and explore diversity issues within their schools and communities are left frustrated by the resulting inaction. Unknowingly mirroring the situation faced by Cathy’s principal in the wake of survey results of his own, Ted paints a similar scenario from the perspective of a hypothetical administrator who may fear the results of a student survey that asks about racism:

If you’re doing a survey of students in the school, you want to find out where your school is at for school development, let’s say. And as one of your sources of data for creating a school improvement plan, maybe you want to ask students questions. Well, are you willing to ask the question: “Do you feel that racism is at work in some way or another?” There may be better wording to a question than that, but that gets at the issue. Many administrators simply don’t want to ask that question because, well, what if they answer yes? What are the implications to that?

Granted, sometimes principals and others may simply be unaware of problems existing in their schools. As a student, Sabrina, stated earlier, “it’s not that these people are bad or anything. They just don’t know.” But in Ted’s experience, the denial of racism by school administrators is “a huge barrier” to AR work in schools.

Likewise, Bonnie describes the difficulty faced by some students and staff when her AR group first formed, admitting that, “initially, there was that reaction: ‘Do I want to participate? It’s bad enough as it is. I don’t want to put lights up out there.’ So that was difficult for a number of students, that whole risk around making a pronouncement about racism.” This evident reluctance to embrace an activist group that used terminology such as racism also appeared among some staff members:

We had some difficulty around the [group] and talking about racism in school. Questions from teachers like, “Well, couldn’t that just be Safe and Caring Schools?” and you need to deal with these teachers, but most of us felt strongly that we wanted
racism on the table. We needed it for it to be dealt with, and not to talk about harmony in general. So that has been a struggle, which I know will never, well I shouldn’t say never go away; we know it’s part and parcel of the kind of work we do, but to me it reinforces why it needs to be done.

For Bonnie, the serious barrier presented by the desire of many educators and students to deny or avoid frank discussions of racism has become yet another incentive to continue her activism in this area.

Although her views confirm my hypothesis, I am a bit surprised that, in a culturally pluralistic urban setting, this resistance might be felt just as strongly as in rural schools. When I mention this to Bonnie, she speculates on one possible reason for this mind-set: “I experience [the denial of racism] even here, where we’re a very diverse, multi-ethnic community. People show resistance and fear that putting it on the table will let more surface. Well, that’s sort of like the idea that if you teach sex education, kids will become more promiscuous.” Her goal is to put the issues “on the table” for a frank exploration:

I would like to believe that if [our group] takes on and does a good job, what we should hopefully see is not confrontation, but that whole notion of students being able to say to one another, “Where is that statement coming from?” And to me that’s not more of it, that’s dealing with it. And rather than just slithering it away or it’s hidden under the table, our kids knowing, okay, name-calling takes place, that there are strategies in place. That you don’t need to suffer by yourself with whatever it is that’s going on. If that means that more of it surfaces, I think it’s like spousal abuse or any of those issues: you let it be known that there are steps in place and therefore the reporting occurs much more. That’s good! At least for me, that’s how I see it.

Bonnie sees her efforts to expose the hidden racism in her school as being inextricably linked to confronting the resistance that surrounds mentioning racism by name. Confronting the fear that this may expose even more racism, she decides that this could actually become a worthy goal for any school activist to pursue.

In her pursuit of a more open dialogue on racism, Bonnie often faces direct resistance
to her work, including being dismissed as speaking “on her soap box again.” As a Black female activist, she makes a deep personal connection with herself and her work in schools: “I live and breathe it every day of my life. It’s always in my face. And I say that in the sense of, because I’m a visible minority I can’t get away from it.” She shares that this focus on racism comes with a constant inner tension based on the external opposition to her AR efforts:

There is that division between where it’s seen as a self interest and where it’s seen as the good work that needs to be done, and you do see that dichotomy. For the staff involved it’s that rocking the boat. Racism is not an easy topic to raise even in a staff room. It’s run from, and I’ve seen that in every school I’ve been to. We’ll talk about kids being so cruel to each other but we rarely say, and the basis is racism. And then we have the challenge: is it or isn’t it? But at least throw it out there, as this is a possibility, a strong, strong one. What else could it be? But there’s the defensiveness that surfaces, and on both sides. So there’s that leeriness about this whole issue and how do we talk about it? How do we get to the point where we’re not afraid to say, “Okay I’m considering that it might be racism”?

Bonnie leaves the question as rhetorical and unanswered, but her continued efforts in organizing AR activism in her school and with other community groups--her fervent desire to keep educating others--seems to be the best answer for now.

Also prevalent in urban Alberta is the widely accepted view that racism is now becoming a thing of the past in our progressive multicultural mosaic. Bonnie, who considers herself as up-to-date on her readings in AR literature, has found that unsavoury events involving racism in Canadian history are often hidden. She shares a recent example: “There was a book that talked about segregated schools out East, and something about 1968, and I said ‘I was a teenager then! You folks had segregated schools?’”

That this national propensity for denying Canada as a site of racism, as opposed to the United States, for example, presents a barrier to the work being done by AR activists is expressed directly by several of the students I interviewed. Steve reflects this naive view in
his description of his own metamorphosis from sheltered mainstream student into AR activist:

Naturally I assumed that Canada was a very culturally accepting country, but upon becoming part of this group and looking more into the subject I found a lot of instances of discrimination and racism that I never thought were there. That upset me very much, because I feel that racism and animosity and clashes over differences, they don’t work in a country like Canada.

His comments also subtly reveal the strength of our national desire to think of ourselves as a welcoming country that stands for the accepting of differences.

Later in our interview, Steve declares that “racism has a hand in every aspect of our society,” and that “we all have whitewashed our racist past. History is written by the winners, essentially, and the winners always want to have a positive outlook on their past.”

He suggests that his group’s activism focuses on education because Canadian students need more opportunities to learn more about both the good and bad in their national history:

I think we should look back on our past with a sense of shame, not with ultimate pride, but just with the idea that we’re looking at our past and analyzing it to see what we can do better. We shouldn’t look at it like we’re the best country in the world. We should look at it logically and from enough of a distance to say: “We could do better in all ways.”

He cites the example of the interment of Japanese Canadians during World War II as an event where the candid exploration of racism would help students to better understand contemporary manifestations of hatred:

[Confronting racism] enables us to understand the kind of atmosphere that created that kind of event and emotion, and you can avoid that occurrence again. Once you understand the mentality and what was going on, like why did we accept it when we’re so disgusted by it now, we can avoid that in the future.

Steve concludes that developing a critical sensibility among young people is a vital first step for groups like his toward eliminating racism in Canada. His ultimate goal is to have each of us
become more skeptical and analytical of everything from a social justice perspective:

It comes down to ultimately questioning our beliefs. When you don’t look at our immigration policy and say it’s fine because everything else is fine. It still carries traces of a racist past. You don’t look at science, and the system as it is today and just say it’s fine now. You always have to question, question, question. Never to be content really.

According to Steve, not enough of us are able to look critically at our own complicity in perpetuating a system that routinely masks its racist underpinnings. For white students this is especially difficult, even among those working to expose and eliminate racism. Steve admits:

It’s difficult. For me, I’m basically a protected guy. I haven’t experienced, I mean, I’ve seen racism but I haven’t experienced racism first hand. So if people say “You must be doing it out of the goodness of your heart” it sounds like you’re doing it for yourself, and I don’t want to be doing it for myself. I don’t know. I’ve always wanted to—I honestly don’t know, it’s very hard to evaluate why you’re doing it. It makes me feel good, so maybe I am being a bit selfish in that sense.

His inherent inability to experience racism directly only adds to the already difficult task of confronting and discussing existing sources of oppression. These barriers to exposing racist issues among his fellow students remind Steve of the importance of continuing with his own education, and with his group’s focus on educating other young people.

One of his partners in activism, Daria, agrees in a separate interview that Canadians have an uncanny ability to bury existing racism, often by expressing feel-good sentiments about our diversity:

It’s a reality. We all know that there is racism in our community, but I find that a lot of people are in denial of it, especially here in Canada where we like to say “Oh yes, we’re this wonderful, peaceful, multicultural society,” or “My best friend is an African-American,” and that’s I guess what Dr. Hedy Fry would call “sugar-coating” the issue. I get really frustrated when that happens.

In fact, Daria claims, Canadians’ view of ourselves presents a particularly difficult obstacle to
her group when addressing AR issues:

It’s a little harder to pinpoint because what I find, I mean, Canada is great when it comes to dealing with racial tensions; I think that we’ve done a lot in terms of our laws and in terms of the government funding that anti-racist programs receive. We can’t be complacent though, and we have to realize that there is that hidden, systemic racism, almost to the extent where you see it as being an aspect of everyday life rather than seeing it as something that’s abnormal, something that is racist or hurtful to others.

When I press her for a specific example, Daria cites the reluctance by some members of marginalized communities to name racism. In her recent personal experience, a conversation with an active member of a diversity-serving community revealed a tendency that is, for her, emblematic of this problem:

People have a hard time using the word “racism” or referring to a certain action that a government organization or business organization does as “racist” and that in itself is a hindering force for us to try to open up this systemic racism. I was talking to a man who is the director of Aboriginal Services at [a local university] and he was talking about how his program has been underfunded for, I think 20 years he said, and how other programs are being funded and funds are being increased for other programs but not for the Aboriginal. We were talking about certain incidents that individuals have to go through at [this university]--for example, essays that professors have given a bad grade to because an Aboriginal student chose to develop the essay according to their beliefs of their way of thinking--and I asked him, “Do you think that in itself is racism?” and he said: “I wouldn’t say racism; racism is a harsh word to use,” and so just that!

People who have experienced racism or who see it, and they don’t use the term when it should be used so as to bring attention to it, I think that in itself is stopping people from digging into the racist incident and trying to make sense of it and trying to find the origins of it to come to a solution, or confront it at least, because a barrier is already being created [by saying]: “Oh, it’s not exactly racism.”

For Daria and her AR group, the best way to deal with such denial and avoidance of racism is to step up their efforts to educate themselves to better educate others that it exists. Only in this way are people able to work cooperatively to analyze the event and work toward its prevention. She explains how, as a group, they have incorporated a “current events”
component into each meeting:

Each week someone is assigned to bring in an article that we’ve found related to racism, whether it be in Canada or the world or in [our city], and we educate ourselves about it. We’ll look at the issue, we’ll try to pinpoint its origins. It’s hard to do when you have an article that can be written by a biased journalist but we do try to constantly educate ourselves so that if someone asks us “How do you know that racism is such a big problem in the world?” we can say, “Well, we have 57 cases that we can list to you” because I do find that in [our city] especially we’ll have people tell us, “Racism isn’t such a big issue here. Why are you so concerned with it?” and this constant education that we have within our group helps us to beat that misconception.

Daria and her youthful colleagues have identified the denial of racism as a significant barrier to their work, but have redoubled their efforts to deal with it decisively. They have created and moulded a student-led AR organization that continues to take concrete steps toward deconstructing media biases, explore current news events for racist underpinnings, and share insights with others in the community.

Returning to Ted’s interview, he makes the suggestion that we need to confront directly the oft-heard exculpation by white educators who claim they would never knowingly be racist, and therefore, there is actually no racism. This sentiment relates directly to the public declarations by the mostly white administrative population in Alberta that their schools could not possibly be racist places. Ted insists:

I think what needs to occur is [for educators to address] the fact that we say we’re not racist. We have to ask ourselves what we mean by that. In what ways are we not? And if we’re not racist, what is it then that’s causing these people to say “I’ve experienced racism”? In what way did they experience it? Maybe they experienced it in a way that we don’t perceive. In other words, we perceive racism to be one thing but their experience of racism is a different thing. So somehow or other, that experience of racism, and therefore, the definition of racism, have to be made clearer. Then people can say “Well, yes, I am that, but that’s not racism.”

Reframing this apparent denial as a misinterpretation of the values and actions between
marginalized and dominant group members seems to Ted a good first step in addressing this barrier to AR activism.

But, Ted continues, it must be followed by a serious questioning that explores the point of conflict more deeply:

Okay, whatever we call it, then, what is it that doesn’t allow people to be full participants. What is it that we need to be able to address? What do we do well that does allow people to participate? Yes, those things are non-racist, and maybe even inclusive, but how do we exclude people? So I think it’s a redefinition that might have to take place.

This redefinition will also require a decentering by members of historically privileged groups to expose their own ethnocentricity and ignorance to the experiences of others. To Ted, goodwill and the desire to be a good person and to accept differences in one’s interactions with people is simply not enough to bring about systemic change:

It’s very easy, as a WASP, to have the view that “My intentions are good and I don’t harbour any ill-feelings in my heart towards anybody.” That makes me ask, okay, what is racism for that person? Racism has got everything to do with intent, and there is a lack of understanding of the experience of being racist, of being a recipient of racism. So then I think the only way you can do that is through our bringing people into some kind of experience where the light would go on. This goes back to what we were doing many years ago: attempting to provide an experience that causes the person to see how systems and attitudes and assumptions and so on can marginalize people without ever any kind of intent.

Again the conversation returns to the primacy and potential of effective educational programming to help ameliorate the suffocating effects of our failure in education to address racism directly. Efforts continue in this regard, and great strides have admittedly been made in the day-to-day treatment of diversity in staff rooms for example.

It was considered widely acceptable, even within the last decade or so, for teachers or administrators to tell blatantly racist jokes under certain conditions (i.e., no members of the
group being targeted were present, or if they were, they offered their implicit “consent” to the telling of the offensive joke, and the person expressed the proviso that he or she did not really mean anything serious by the telling of it). Ted reflects that “now, you just don’t get that. It’s just not part of the ethos of the school. There have been changes that have been made, no question about it. We are a more open society in that way. But not the systemic stuff. That hasn’t changed a bit!”

Perhaps we have not even changed our own belief systems, though people understand the socially acceptable ways to deal with diversity issues in “mixed company.” Ted suggests that one problem with changing systemic biases is that it is very difficult to change individuals’ deeply held beliefs around difference. He offers a reflective rumination on the need for a link between our study of social systems and our understanding of individuals’ thinking around difference:

I don’t know that there’s any way to answer this question, but there are many people who harbour secrets about how they view, they know what is socially acceptable and politically correct. But if you were to scratch them, or hit them in a particular time and frame, they might say some things where they would reveal some deep-seated belief system about people of colour, about the primitivism..... that there’s something about the Orientalism that’s unfathomable and all of that sort of thing that’s in our psychology but not necessarily understood. When you get to that point, and I don’t know what in schools we can do in that way, but I think when we begin to take a look at some of the deep rooted stuff around racism, we can’t help but come to not only social issues but psychological issues.

With this aside, he has opened up our discussion to another vast domain of academic study I am not going to enter for the purposes of this dissertation. However, his thoughts on the transdisciplinary intersections between various fields of educational research related to racism seem to me intriguing and provocative, and worthy of further exploration.

The endeavour to make our schools and communities less racist is obviously not a
simple matter, and Ted and the others remind us that there are so many facets of these issues, even for each of us to confront personally, in order to chip away at inequity and unfairness. My research participants confirm that there are indeed barriers to our work in schools brought about by the hidden nature of racism, whether these be imposed by individual choices by people in decision making positions, by unchallenged structural limitations, or by the deliberate avoidance of possible topics of contention. This situation may emerge partly from our Canadian politeness to shy away from controversy and conflict, and partly from a subconscious desire to deny the racism that perpetuates an inequitable playing field that benefits only certain players.

But my participants’ incisive personal reflections on the subject of denial are illuminating—including their sharing insights addressing specific blind spots in facing racist beliefs, dealing with administrators who may fear repercussions and backlash, identifying the need for concrete sources of data showing evidence of a problem, and addressing systemic barriers that remain below the surface for most of us, among other issues. Their candor in sharing concrete instances in their own struggle reconfirms for me the personal strength and stamina of committed activists working in diverse coalitions of like-minded colleagues with their eyes wide open to this inhibiting condition. Their creative approaches to the denial of racism and other growing hurdles in the struggle for social justice seem to encourage them somehow to jump ever higher.

Hypothesis G Confirmed

It seemed apparent to me from the outset that my own activism with the STOP program was encouraged by the outpouring of recognition and accolades we received early on after our initial formation in the mid-1980s in Central Alberta. Assuming this situation would work in a similar way for others, I therefore hypothesized that (g) external recognition and
acceptance by the broader community is important in validating and encouraging further activism by individuals and groups. For the most part, my participants validated this assumption, and shared with me several anecdotes about the values of positive publicity for their activist efforts in their schools and communities. However, we also acknowledged some of the dangers and drawbacks inherent in media exposure.

One teacher whose early efforts were spurred by media exposure is Ted, who helped organize a massive public show of support for diversity in the face of negative media coverage of a racialized violent incident at the large urban high school where he was teaching:

The first thing we did was had this sort of demonstration on the school grounds that involved the whole school demonstrating that they weren’t a bunch of racists in our school. That was also the time of “We are the World” so that got played on the loudspeakers, and the whole school made a circle on the field and then ran into a great big group hug [laughs]. There were probably, of the 1500 students, at least 1000 of them there.

Ted sees that as an important first step for engaging students directly in a collective response to racism, and for creating greater public awareness of the pro-diversity sentiments in the community. The positive media exposure that resulted helped to draw together a “certain little club of students at [our school] that formed to look at AR, although we didn’t call it that then; we called it MC, or interculturalism, something like that.” Just as with our own STOP program, the seed for Ted’s AR group had germinated under the bright glare of the media spotlight.

But as I have shared in previous sections above regarding administrative support and the denial of racism, there are distinct limitations on any individual teacher’s desire for greater media exposure. To repeat a few of Ted’s prior observations, there are tremendous risks for teachers and their principals when they tackle diversity issues in a public way:

People tend to get very emotional about in a very short time, and I think that many
administrators don’t want to, and for all kinds of understandable reasons, they don’t want to stir up a hornet’s nest. And they know that one can exist there. School administrators need to know that the system administrators—the people who are going to move them along in their career--value that kind of risk-taking. If they don’t, who’s going to take that kind of risk? And risk having the parents all up in arms? Because it often does create dissonance.

As Ted and others have found, a key question that activists need to keep in mind is, “at what point does activism become something that actually goes beyond the values of the administration of the school?” He correctly notes that, to support the activist group or individual in the face of community or parental backlash, “it takes a tremendous amount of courage, and a tremendous amount of inner conviction that this is right.” Not all teachers feel this level of security in their current positions.

When a principal does support more publicized activism, teachers can feel more confident in trying to give it a higher profile in the school and community; this, in turn, can help to attract more students and staff to become involved. For Gail, who teaches in a small town, a supportive principal has offered his own “pat on the back” to the students involved in the activist program, something she sees “means a lot to them too. The principal knows who they are and what they’re doing, so that’s good.” It also means the freedom to fund-raise, from which the organization has been able to purchase attractive t-shirts identifying them as members of the group. Gail sees this as providing these students with a higher profile as members of a popular movement in the school.

Cathy, who also teaches high school in a smaller rural Alberta town, has found a fairly welcoming environment despite the conservative mind-set that can limit the issues her club deals with in the school. She feels that her town “is really good about promoting” the work she does with her students in celebrating cultural differences and speaking out against racism. In fact, she shares that the local print media has been especially supportive:
Our local newspaper is in here all the time trying to find out what the kids are doing and we get a lot of coverage. We as a school take all that coverage and post it up, so everyone knows this is what was in the newspaper. We do get a lot of that coverage.

She has proactively sought positive media attention for young people, not only for their AR and MC activities, but to other initiatives such as the litter clean-up mentioned earlier. It is Cathy’s belief that all of this deliberate exposure has resulted in some tangible spin-off benefits:

I think because it gets other people involved as well. We have had community members who have called to say, “I read about this in the paper. Is there anything that I can do to help out with that?” Like the [community group] have brought people in for us so we could do something like that, because they realize that we wouldn’t normally have the money to bring in the dancers that we had, so they did that for us, and that makes a big difference, because we do have that community support to do that. And it’s good to get that attitude out.

Cathy has found that seeking positive exposure for their group’s social justice work has brought about building valued connections between the community and the school, securing additional financial support, and promoting positive values in the community about diversity.

The risks associated with seeking greater media exposure have been experienced by Bonnie, who has been a teacher activist for many years. She finds that the media has often sought her out for comments on current social justice issues. This can be beneficial to bring a higher profile to her work, but as she shares in a recent example, can also have negative repercussions when statements from her past come back to haunt her:

I get this phone call that I got quoted in the paper again. Quoted about what? I haven’t said anything! [laughs] But you get to the point where about three or four [reporters] get to know you and somehow they dig into something you said ten years ago to them in passing, and it’s refurbished. Especially if you’ve grown and you never would say that again. That’s one of those things I’d never say again, right, but it comes out as though you’ve just said it. So in those respects it has its negative ramifications at times.
Having outdated quotations used against her is a frustrating part of maintaining a high profile in this area, but Bonnie does not believe it to be a deterrent to continuing her public activism. In fact, Bonnie sees the public exposure in the school and community for her activist group as a positive element of their efforts. To her, it causes “a ripple effect” in the community:

To me, if it’s only [our group] that’s feeling good about themselves then something’s wrong. That ripple effect.... just walking down the corridor after the Black History month, and we had done a major thing--I should give you a copy of it--and having one of my kids saying to the other one, “I didn’t know there were so many smart black people!” [laughs] That’s a measurement of success! One kid finally found that out, and we had totally avoided the sports figures. So to me that’s a measure, to me that’s powerful stuff.

Her appreciation for the increased pride felt by students is an indicator that Bonnie values her group’s more high-profile activities, and the apparently significant benefits they bring to various members of her school’s community.

Some of the student activists found it frustrating to make serious efforts at raising public awareness through their social justice activities, only to have a sense that the public apathy is sometimes too great to overcome. For this reason, Ramona was attracted to Amnesty International, because their statistics “show that all your letter writing and stuff actually does something, which in other projects is not really all that obvious.” She confesses that she and her sister Sabrina cannot always see a positive result to their efforts in their school:

When we try to raise awareness in the school, like with the newsletter, I know a lot of people took it because it was gone after a while, but you can’t really see anything changing. I mean it’s just a newsletter, right? It’s not like it’s going to radically change your opinion. But when you hear about someone who was in prison who got a letter from Amnesty and kept on going, then you know that something that we’re doing is making a difference.
Feeling that her efforts are having a positive result is important to Ramona, and her activities to raise awareness have not seemed to reap any results so far. She has brainstormed ways to reach more students with her message, and tells me “we’re thinking of having a speaker come in for one of our school-wide assemblies, so that would be toward the entire school and they would have to listen. And we could lock the door! [laughs]” Her work in organizing social justice events has revealed to her the difficulty of gaining a higher profile for issues that many people either choose to ignore or avoid.

Both Lisa and Sina are students who have not yet found success at bringing their message of acceptance of differences very far, even within the walls of their own high schools. Lisa told me that she values positive media attention, and we discussed writing press releases and other ways to garner this attention for her planned activist group. When I contacted Lisa the following school year, she expressed frustration with her principal’s refusal to allow her AR group to address certain topics:

People weren’t sure what our prerogatives were although we were all pretty upset that we weren’t allowed to support homosexuals. Two friends of mine who are gay went around and got a petition signed this year, but the administration refused. It’s really been a disappointment.

Sina and her fledgling group did not wish to seek media attention, but sounded willing to wait for the group to grow:

We don’t want to go big, like into the community yet, because we still have problems in our own school, and we haven’t had any fights in a lot of years so we know we’re not as bad as other schools. So we want to start with [our school’s] population first and just sort of work on them being more aware of each other and more accepting, and then if that works then we’ll continue it and go bigger.

As I pointed out earlier, their groups did not come together as they had planned, and the gradual building of momentum idea failed in this case. It is difficult to pinpoint specific
reasons in retrospect, and when I contacted her some months after our interview, Sina suggested there was not sufficient interest in the AR program "mainly because our school is already so diverse, so everyone has already accepted the differences we see around us everyday." Despite its idealistic tone, perhaps this explanation holds some weight in light of their heterogeneous school population. However, I believe that if Lisa or Sina had created a higher profile of their early activities, and maintained a student-driven identity apart from their respective administrations, they may well have generated the additional student interest sufficient to have sustained their organizations.

This was the positive experience for some other student activists, whose coalition capitalized on some intense early media exposure to attract wider attention to social justice issues and serve as a spring-board for further activities. Their group had won a high profile federally organized AR competition that involved going on a tour to share their ideas for fighting racism. Steve remembers returning from that adventure as a pivotal point for their group: "After this tour was done we kept together as a group whereas many other groups that we toured with kind of dispersed and stopped doing these things. We moved more to school presentations and that's what we do right now."

His colleague and friend, Jason, also remembers their group's collective decision to continue their activism in the wake of significant national attention. I ask if they have continued to seek that level of recognition for their work. "Not really, no," Jason answers, "we're sort of lackadaisical. If we happen to get media attention it's okay, but we're not actively pursuing being in the public spotlight." He and Steve both agree that the media attention can become a double-edged sword. Steve says, somewhat cynically,

They can be used as an effective tool, but it's been shown that the media isn't in the business of reporting news. They're in the business of selling news. It's not entirely unbiased because they do want to push forward issues like Native violence or Islamic
violence, gangs, or whatever; they’re in the business of selling newspapers.

In spite of his healthy caution when dealing with reporters, Steve concedes: “I guess we’re lucky enough to be recognized anyway.” But they are both aware of the possible dangers of having news coverage of their events.

Jason notes that their group’s extensive media coverage has included “a few really bad misquotes.” He recalls a specific piece on one of their founders, Daria, and shares the frustration with inaccurate reporting of a seemingly minor statement:

The very last sentence happened to be a complete misquote. I forget exactly what she was talking about but they misplaced the context of the quote. She said something like, “We don’t expect changes to take place immediately,” and they quoted her as saying “We expect to change the world right now.” Something like that. The rest of the article was all right but that was the very last sentence, so it’s the last impression. So you forget all the rest of the article when you read it and say, “What? That’s screwed up!”

Besides their concerns with inaccuracy, Steve also cites an example of a news reporter’s focus on one individual rather than on their group’s collective efforts: “It wasn’t so much about our group but more on her status as an immigrant. It sort of led you to believe they were going to talk about what we were doing, but it really focused on her.” He feels that “it’s always good to get the word out and let people know who you are, but our focus is on what we are doing, and the media tends to focus only on one aspect of the group, on the human angle.”

Another student activist with the same group, Daria, shares her perspective of the critical decision the group had to make after the initial media frenzy, on whether or not to continue the project:

The real creation of [our group] was when we came back from being winners of this challenge and we had to choose whether we were going to continue with the initiative on our own, without incentive, through our own sense of wanting to do something, to give back to the community, or whether we were just going to put it away and say, “Okay we’ve done our part.” So we decided from then that we would maintain it as
an organization and try to build on the influence we had on our community and try to build connections with other community groups in [our city] and hopefully expand. And we have; we started out as a five member organization and now we're at 20.

In Daria’s view, the initial public exposure did not cause their group members to become activists, but certainly provided an external incentive to organize something more formally than they might have if left on their own. The publicity also encouraged them to decide to continue their activism.

Daria also believes that the external recognition from the media, government, and various diversity serving agencies served to validate the importance of what they were doing as young activists:

Before [our group] began I really didn’t think that it was possible for youth to get together and come up with an organization. I thought, well, only the rich kids can do that, or only the kids who have parents that are lawyers or doctors and can afford to have the financial support from people whom they know could do a project like ours. So the fact that the Canadian government was there to help fund us and also to motivate us and kind of to say, “You know, it can be done; you can make a difference even if it is in a small way,” that was a big motivational force for us I guess—the fact that it was youth and it was an opportunity for us to empower ourselves and to be directly involved with the community.

This adult reinforcement of the importance of their work seems to have solidified their resolve to succeed. Indeed, it has become one important measure of their success.

I ask Daria for some specific examples of their media coverage and she readily lists them: “We’ve been in the [local newspaper], the National Post, the Globe and Mail, [two other local papers], we’ve been on television--on Global, and national television--and we’ve been on the radio.” As I note in the section above on countering stereotypes about young people, Daria values all of this external recognition:

It helps us to become empowered within our communities which is a really big thing now with youth. We’re finally being able to be taken seriously by politicians or
people organizing workshops. I would have never imagined being invited to a national conference. I think the work that we’ve done and the recognition has helped us further our goals of educating more and more people.

Her acknowledgement of the positive role played by their group’s extensive publicity builds directly on her comments regarding their confronting negative attitudes toward young people:

The fact that we do have a lot of recognition in the community--and it’s positive--we get a lot of personal satisfaction from doing the work too. Not just because my name happens to be in the newspaper, but because it’s beating stereotypes that society has against youth. It’s because it proves to us that we are succeeding, that we are on the right track.

Like many others, Daria and her peers measure their success to a large degree by their ability to project a positive image to the community at large through their activist work.

Far from coming across as self-centred media personalities, Daria and her fellow activists wish to highlight the collaborative nature of their work and the goals of their AR program, in spite of others who would rather focus on the accomplishments or traits of individual members. Each of the student participants in this research recognizes value in some level of media attention, as it can provide fuel for their quest to empower themselves as student activists, and for their desire to promote more widely their messages about the benefits of diversity and the dangers of discrimination. For students and teachers alike, the extra attention to their group is often cited as a useful way to attract more supporters within the school and from the surrounding community.

For some activists with whom I spoke, the desired media attention inevitably entails some drawbacks, including presenting an inaccurate portrayal of their group, or of their individual views, exposing their activities to additional criticism, and increasing the political risks associated with tackling controversial topics within a school setting. They each seem to value the recognition bestowed upon their group from administrative, governmental, and
community groups, and certainly welcome the additional financial support that can accompany such applause. Still, the driving force for each of these activists seems to be a commitment to a core value of social justice, and any external attention is framed as another potential tool in this ongoing struggle.

*Hypothesis H Confirmed*

Finally, I hypothesized that (h) activism in school-based coalitions will lead many participants to further activism and political engagement in their lives outside the school, and they will extend their sharing and network-building through involvement in this research. Many of the activists I interviewed had already been involved in social issues in their communities for some time before they took on the work of coalition-building in their school settings. It would seem self-evident that their activist efforts in schools would further encourage their own life-long commitments to social justice. In my interviews with them, we explore how these veteran activists perceive their groups’ possible impact on participating neophyte colleagues and students.

Bonnie says that, as a veteran teacher activist, she has already worked for several years with a variety of local and regional groups that tackled gender and racism, and that, “my involvement has been through the community and has sort of dropped into the school as a result.” Before forming an activist group with students, her AR efforts in the school had been much more intermittent and project based: “Prior to this it’s been an occasion that’s coming up like December 10 [United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racism] and you get together those students who you know have a passion in that area and you just put a message on the p.a. system or posters if students would like to do something special for that day.” Having the formalized student group has provided a much more coordinated effort that requires greater ongoing commitment on the part of the students as well.
Bonnie says that the existence of her AR group in their school offers specific benefits to particular students, including the boy (cited in more detail in a section above) who is now chairing meetings himself and "blossoming" into a capable student leader. For other students, being a member of both the activist group and student council is giving them tremendous leadership experience while infusing the school with social justice ideals. Bonnie sees the group's mandate as permeating the entire school community:

Sure there's this formalized [group] now but to me that's just a piece of it; if you know about something somewhere else there's that need to get in there and work with it, even if it's just to get that understanding as to why it is the way it is. It's not only [our group] doing their little projects. Every so often there's something else, things could be falling down around us, and hold on, there's something wrong with that photograph.

Their group's very existence, Bonnie believes, heightens the entire school population's awareness of issues of fairness, and provides each student involved with a more critical sensibility for identifying and tackling racism.

There are some complexities of working alongside other groups outside the school that may have different agendas or alternative ways of doing things. Recently, Bonnie has been striving to find a more efficient procedure for planning activities with the input from another community partner that is helping fund her student action group:

We will be talking through a plan, all of a sudden that's on hold, because you've got to phone to [the other group] and see if so-and-so is there. So I find that that sometimes that slows down the process, and you don't want anyone to feel you've stepped on toes. That is just the reality of our worlds, and I find that that has potential for creating some problems.

Bonnie also finds that there is a continual struggle for her group to maintain ownership of its plans and actions with an external agency that is constantly advising them and suggesting changes. In a recent event that they had planned about encouraging parental involvement of
culturally diverse families, this issue of ownership arose:

    It was a struggle as to, is this now [our group’s initiative]? I’ve got no problem with whose it is, right? At the same time, I don’t want it to change too radically from where our initial idea was coming from, so we’re still working through that, right? What now comes under [our group’s] umbrella, and what is just a darn good thing for this school, and let’s not slow it down with bureaucracy. So there’s those kinds of dilemmas.

Despite the existence of these give-and-take type of tensions between groups planning events cooperatively, Bonnie insists that the deliberate sharing of jobs with others can actually strengthen the social justice culture of a school. With everyone working together, these ideals can permeate an institution rather than be seen as being an add-on program on the periphery.

    Bonnie also tells me that she is careful to plan events with her student activist group that fit into the larger context of her current school setting:

    It depends on what else is going on. We’ll consciously not conflict with what else is going on in the school. We will also lend our support to the building by cheering on the basketball tournament. So that consciously looking at how we can be supportive of each other and modeling that for others. I think I want my agenda to not ever lose its focus on racism and its damage but focus it on those things that you can do as just a human being.

She strives for cooperation with other groups on various projects, but is always conscious of the potential for conflict and plans proactively to avoid it in the first place. Her practical concerns for the needs and wishes of others seems to me to model the respectful sensitivity toward those around her that she seeks to nurture in her own students.

    Ted’s activism began spontaneously at a high school where diversity issues came to the fore through negative media coverage, and were countered by a coalition Ted formed to promote harmony. This involvement drew him into research into various forms of racism and approaches to education for social justice. He tells me that his involvement on a variety of MC education committees, and with research into AR and MC policy, have, in turn,
contributed to the effectiveness of subsequent school-based activism he has organized. Ted currently sees significant social changes affecting current planning for diversity issues in schools:

The world is a different place, and we have to take a different view of it.... part of this postmodernism is the reality of diversity, the idea that there is more than one world view out there to accept, and that we build an understanding of ourselves through a variety of world views. We can’t just stay within the framework of our heritage. We have to be solid in our heritage so we can move out from that and greet the new world that’s upon us, that we can’t turn back from.

His vision of the future of AR education is that we all must take an active part in preparing ourselves for an increasingly diverse population in which our identities and engagement will not be determined by out-dated conventions. The current climate for activism, according to Ted, is ripe for new and innovative approaches to challenge racism and other discrimination. His own past leadership roles in MC and AR committees and activist groups have contributed much to his evolving view of the direction of social justice education.

Both Ted and I have a similar status within our field as pioneers of successful programs, and this discussion leads Ted to share a related idea he has been considering for a long time: “We [AR activists] need a network, something that adds legitimacy and support, and that doesn’t say ‘you’re all alone in this.'” Toward this end, Ted begins to articulate his plan for a new program, based on an earlier thought that has now solidified during our current interview:

I would love to see, and I’ve wanted to see this for years, and I don’t know how to bring it about, but it would be great to have a network of school-based people that are doing programs like STOP, that can all come to [a cultural leadership camp he helped establish]. It could be both their annual meeting and their induction into it. As I say, I don’t know whether it’s possible, but for you to get involved in helping to provide some sort of training program for teachers who are involved in [the camp’s] program as to your approaches that have allowed students to take ownership, where have students gone with it, what’s the formula. There may be some guidelines, there may
be some tips.

His idea to have both groups working together to help train other teachers and students seems like an ambitious but potentially fruitful venture. This new possible development can extend the cooperative work that our collective past activism has helped to establish.

For the others who were relatively new to activism, participation in school-based social action is gradually becoming an important part of their lives. Lisa tells me that she was initially drawn into social justice activism by the experience of a close family member who became paraplegic in recent years. Watching her father face a number of physical and attitudinal barriers in society helped to strengthen Lisa’s resolve to assist in the struggle for social justice by disadvantaged or marginalized groups. “That happened about five years ago,” she says, “and it probably did have something to do with [my interest in this area], because I can see how people treat disabled people differently.” She has become sensitized to seeing the world through the eyes of another person who faces serious challenges on a regular basis, and believes this to be a catalyst in her wishing to form a group to fight discrimination of various types.

Lisa’s desire to act on her sense of justice began with a strong role model; she admires that, “everywhere we would go, if it isn’t wheelchair accessible or there aren’t parking spots, my father will go in and just ask all these questions and often ask, ‘Don’t you people know anything?’ and it’s just pretty funny. Like we’ve even gone to the police station and got people ticketed for parking in handicapped spots!” Her admiration of the fighting spirit of her parent has inspired her own wish to take on issues that others in her school might simply ignore.

Even while in junior high school, Lisa had been involved in a “Justice and Peace” group sponsored by one of her teachers, but she expresses disappointment that “we didn’t
do a lot globally. It was more making breakfasts for the kids—that kind of thing.” Her wish to help others was fuelled when she learned of AR activism taking place in her community that had been organized by some other young people, and she wanted to “kick-start” something similar at her school. So far the only thing her school has done officially in the area of social justice is “when Craig Keilburger came, about five students shaved their heads and raised money.” The young Canadian activist had been promoting his “Free the Children” movement to liberate young people around the world from sweat shops and other exploitation.

But Lisa is frustrated that more momentum failed to build after his visit: “I thought there might have been a little bit more inspiration after the kids shaved their heads.” She speculates that “maybe if we kind of related that [awareness] into other issues it might raise some awareness.” But her efforts to do so have not resulted in the successful formation of a lasting group at her school so far. Still, she remains interested in social justice issues, and in working collectively with others to confront injustice. She says that, “for myself, a lot of the women’s rights issues interest me, like what’s currently going on in Afghanistan and Indonesia. I’m very interested in that personally, but we could probably build up to tackling things like that in our group.” Lisa acknowledges another hurdle, namely that her fellow student activists first need to be educated on international issues of gender discrimination that may not be in everyone’s awareness, “because everyone has to know what they’re supporting.”

I ask if her experiences trying to organize a school-based coalition might lead her to further engagement in the field outside her school. Lisa tells me that her wish to form a student coalition to challenge racism and sexism is fuelled by a desire to “promote societal change” and that she expects to become a teacher after graduating from high school. She plans to keep these issues in the forefront of her own teaching, and is inspired by a woman she
knows who “has taught in Africa; I’m interested in doing that.” She anticipates being involved in social justice work somehow as an adult, but admits that, as a member of the white mainstream culture, “it’s really hard to stay motivated. And then something will set you off, you’ll see something on the news or you’ll read something and you’ll be like, ‘Oh, I’ve got to get back to doing that.’”

One such situation that infuriates Lisa, and makes her want to keep speaking out in the face of peer pressure, is the prevalence of racist humour among some of her peers, and her perceived inability to counter it effectively:

It’s just like a mind-set or attitude of people. It’s pretty sad though, that racist jokes are just a part of society, like everyday life. It really is. You don’t even notice it. You hear jokes like that all the time. Some people look around first but most people don’t care. If you’re alone, just driving somewhere they might start making jokes about anything. Like the other day I was in my friend’s car and they just started making jokes about “Oriental” people and how they drive. [They say:] “All of them, they all do this.” You just sit there, you don’t want to laugh along. It’s hard to say something, because then they say, “We’re only joking.” They only feel bad if the person they’re mocking finds out about it. It’s so funny. I’ll say something like, “You guys, this thing really upset me,” and they’ll say: “Oh go write a letter.”

Unfortunately, Lisa is already learning hard lessons about the risks associated with standing up for one’s convictions. She has shown courage to take difficult stands to promote her AR values among her peers, and is finding her past record of social activism is now a target of further joking.

Lisa values cooperation in her activism, and wants to communicate directly with other students already in activist school groups; she speculates, “I was thinking if we did a joint thing with STOP or one of the other groups, our students would get an idea of what it’s all about, and then we could try to start something here.” She values the potential for peer influence and the benefits of having young people share ideas together, rather than hearing
from teachers how their students organize activities. Her goal is to begin with small initiatives in her school, and then “do a little bit of work with students in other schools.” Lisa has heard of our STOP group’s annual Holocaust Awareness Symposium and says, “I want to be a part of that; I think that’s really important.”

Building on the successes of other programs seems a sensible way to start with a greater chance of achieving results in the early stages of a group’s formation. This interview allows her to explore some of these partnership ideas out loud, and start to plan efforts to have interested activist students learning directly from each other. I am not sure whether Lisa is more motivated by a personal desire to seek justice for oppressed people, or a sense that some disturbing international examples she sees from a distance remind her of the narrow-mindedness she witnesses taking place in her own school and community. Regardless, she is encouraged by her modest initial efforts and sounds genuinely committed to continue her activism beyond school.

Sina has already been in contact with student members of STOP through an organized cultural diversity leadership camp they attended together during the previous year. Using the Internet, she and her schoolmates maintain a personal connection with other student activists hundreds of kilometers away: “We’ve been talking to them. We all chat on-line so we often talk about the stuff we’re doing in our schools. The two of us who are in charge talk to them all the time and we get suggestions and stuff.”

I have observed that several of the current student members of STOP have a high degree of computer literacy, and regularly design and modify their own web sites, take part in chat groups, and search the Internet for social action information and related contacts. STOP’s recent appearance on an internationally known rock group’s web site (www.ratm.com) has brought communication from dozens of young people from around the
world who have sought further information and collaboration with our students. These young activists seem very comfortable with computers and with the medium of cyberspace as additional tools in their collective struggle for social justice.

Students working in activist groups in this area also show themselves through this research to be interested in developing in-school partnerships to help them achieve their goals to promote diversity and challenge racism. Sina talks about some possible links for her new group to explore within her school:

In our school we have a drama club and the choral people. We’ve also talked to them and they’re interested in talking about STOP and stuff and doing little skits about issues that we would like. Because we don’t have any money in [our program] either, we thought maybe we’d charge a dollar and the drama people could do a little skit about it. Then we’d make money and we could give the drama department some and then everyone would be happy.

I share with her that this idea sounds very promising, and that our own STOP group has worked with a local drama group to produce a presentation that students have taken out to dozens of schools over several years. As Sina and I explore here, these kinds of collaborations can forge important links within the school community and build on the strengths of others toward common or overlapping goals.

Sina seems inspired by her activist work in school and plans on going to university after high school and continuing her work in intercultural understanding:

I was thinking I’d go overseas and just help people there, but I don’t know exactly how. Maybe I’d teach them English or something, like with the Aga Khan Foundation. I want to join that, and go overseas and help all those people who don’t have the opportunities we do. I was thinking of doing that for a couple of years and then coming back and then doing something else, like international development. I’m not sure yet though.

Though her notions of working somehow in less developed nations are still somewhat broad, she seems realistic in her choice of opportunities, and has a specific organization in mind that
has had success in setting up educational institutions in a variety of developing nations. Her interest and experience in her diverse high school will undoubtedly aid her progress toward this goal.

Likewise, Sabrina tells me: “I’d just really like to still be involved with Amnesty International in the future. They are effective in what they can do, they have a lot of money, and are involved in so many things.” Her involvement as a student with the well-organized international human rights group has been brought about because of the activist group she and her sister formed in their high school. I find it interesting that she believes her rocky experiences with fund-raising for Amnesty International, and planning AR events that have been less than successful, have helped her develop a greater empathy for social causes.

Sabrina explains that, “we’ve had some experience trying to organize something and seen the apathy out there, so we’re not likely to turn down another organization that may need our support.” As she and her sister, Ramona, have found with their own activist work, “once you see this sort of thing happening you can’t really stop and close your eyes and say ‘I don’t know about that sort of thing’ anymore.” And, as others in this field have observed, Ramona notes cynically that, “80% of the volunteering is done by the same people. There are some people who volunteer a whole lot, some just a little, and a whole bunch who don’t.”

The cooperation that comes from joining others in the same cause can be very rewarding, especially in this field where the issues that arise can be very sensitive and painful at times. Working with like-minded peers can remind activists that they are not alone in the struggle for fairness, and that, sometimes, voices can be better heard when they join together in a chorus. As Ramona expresses her feelings about the other activist students she has found in her school, “it’s nice to be in a group of people who are all active, who all believe the same things, and who are all working toward the same goals. It’s very positive.”
I was also interested in how the rural teachers perceive their experiences with activism as stimulating further engagement by themselves and their students with social justice issues. Gail explains that she has always had an interest in diversity, perhaps stimulated by her having to move numerous times as the child of a person in the military. In fact, one of her strongest memories as a child is from the southern U.S. during a time of intense debate around racialized issues:

I was in a school just at the time when they were integrating the Black kids into the white schools. I was in a little rural town in Virginia, it was an all white school, and they brought in Black kids. I was in grade four and I remember it really well, and I remember just the news and the scuttlebutt and the two sides of parents: Half the group really wanted to support this wonderful initiative and half didn’t want it at all. Then there was the actual way that it worked. They were trying to integrate these Black kids into the white school but what they did was put Black kids into a white building but they didn’t do anything in their teaching. There were no activities so these kids are together. So on the playground, there’s the black kids and there’s the white kids. It was still segregation—it just wasn’t official any more. I guess it has been around me enough that it created an interest for me at an early age.

With her passion for fairness and acceptance of differences, Gail has tried to incorporate lessons against racism and promoting diversity in all of her classes, as well as in the extracurricular club. Her formation of an activist group was simply another step along the way in her desire to eliminate the racism she has seen around her.

Gail characterizes herself as a teacher who is obsessed with challenging racism and working toward the acceptance of differences, and she welcomes a chance to discuss what she has done so far in her few years as a teacher-coordinator of a high school action group. She admits to being independent in her work, and says, “part of that is my personality; I kind of like to do my own thing.” Gail does express interest, however, in collaborating when appropriate with other like-minded teachers doing similar work with students: “I would like to get together with other teachers, and get more ideas. As I say, with the curriculum content...
I'm okay. But I might go to the MC education council conference this year instead of the French one.” These small steps seem appropriate for her at this relatively early stage of mentoring an activist group.

Gail considers the traits of each of the students who has been attracted to their social action group, and notes that some seem to be natural leaders from the outset, finding a vehicle for their skills and interests. She describes one such student:

The girl who got the award at our school for “the most dedicated” to our club has been with us for two years, and she has taken a few things and just run with them totally herself. She’ll come to me and ask, “Can you put an announcement in?” so other than the stuff that I have to do because she doesn’t have access to e-mail, she’s done it. And I said to her that she’s set a precedent for how a student can organize stuff herself.

Other ambitious students have taken the initiative to plan and implement other awareness-raising events in the school. For example, two girls started a chapter of Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD) at the school, meeting on alternate weekdays to Gail’s activist group. Gail says, “I had nothing to do with it, and all of a sudden there’s this SADD event going on, with people signing these pledges and posting them on the wall.” I strongly suspect she had much to do with it, perhaps indirectly, by providing a catalyst in their school to enable students to gain the confidence and skills to plan effective activism on an important current issue.

Some of her activist students, on the other hand, seem to possess few natural leadership skills, and in fact, have had negative personal experiences with fairness issues that may have drawn them into activism:

Some of the kids that are in my group are kids who have been picked on themselves and it’s their little space to belong. Like, I have one this year who I was just thrilled she joined, because she’d never been in anything in her whole high school career, and she was in grade 12. We clicked in a class I was teaching and she said, “Hey, I’d like
to join your group.” Now she’s got this little niche that she works with, and she has a bit of a profile because people will see her organizing some things or selling these t-shirts that we have for the school or whatever.

For students such as the one Gail describes above, positive involvement with an activist group provides an important outlet to work through their own experiences with discrimination, and builds their skills and self-confidence at the same time.

It is worth noting here that her school was the scene of a violent incident several years ago involving a student who felt picked on lashing out at his perceived oppressors. The preventative potential of her activist group at thwarting such desperate anti-social measures is not lost on Gail or her colleagues:

I’ve got another boy, much the same thing. He’s kind of a bit of a loner, and does the computer thing, and his thing in our group is if we need a pamphlet made he makes it. If we want letterhead he does that, and he’s always at everything we’re selling. Not the kind of rah-rah outgoing type. He’s there, you know? He’s probably still going to be there in grade 12, so in some ways the kids that, not all of them, but a lot of the kids that come to the group are ones who come to have a place to fit in. Maybe they can understand that, and that’s why they get behind the things that we do.

At the end of the year Gail prepares for each student a detailed letter of reference outlining their specific personal contribution to the activist group. She understands the importance this document can have for some students: “For some of the kids that is a really cool thing, like there’s a piece of paper saying I did something good.” With this kind of encouragement and support, Gail hopes that her students will find the value in continued activism after they graduate.

We end the interview with Gail sharing an article about AR in schools she had brought for me to read from a scholarly publication on educational research. When she asks about a fund-raising idea for her group, I offer her a source for obtaining some popular multifaith calendars, and a recent sample. Gail comments, “It’s a great part of this work--getting so
much good stuff,” adding, “You must be on more mailing lists than I am!” Gail’s apparent need to seek and share resources even while I pursue my research objectives suggests to me that this reflects a vital need for many in this field who would welcome any such opportunity. This work can often leave a school-based activist feeling isolated, so allowing the material exchange to happen along with my research seems appropriate--and valuable--in helping to build a community of informed activists.

Cathy finds that her rural activist students have relished the opportunity to explore issues around diversity even in their relatively white mainstream community. Many of them have been stimulated to extend their exposure to the world, and to work toward intercultural understanding beyond high school:

It’s even sparked an interest in checking out other cultures, going on exchanges, or even university other places than around here so they can have more experiences. We went to [a youth issues] conference in [the nearest large city] and they have all these different programs that involve bringing the cultures together, and when we left there, all the way home it was [students asking]: “Can you get me information on that?” so I have been getting them the stuff on it. It’s the first step.

Their involvement in a social action group has led them to open their eyes to other avenues of community service, and even to international possibilities for their future that may have seemed out of reach before their work with Cathy.

One of Cathy’s activist students experienced an additional boost from her activism in an unexpected way, when the student was selected as a finalist in a Rodeo Queen contest. According to Cathy, the student was very pleased to have been selected as “the runner-up and when she talked to them later, they said a lot of her involvement in her MC activities is what got her that far, so we made sure that everyone knew that!” The opportunities for advancement in other fields and endeavours is unlikely to be a primary motivator for most students wishing to work for social justice in a school program, but as Cathy finds, these can
serve as another incentive to encourage the work of students already involved.

Cathy shares that, although her group is relatively new in the school, it tries to make inroads with other existing programs to share its AR message. She also welcomes input from other groups like the STOP program to suggest ways to improve their social justice activism in similar demographic settings:

You should never have to reinvent the wheel, and any ideas that help that we can get is great. That’s a good thing with [an annual cultural program her students attend]; we all stay connected and we e-mail stuff and say, “This worked really well--try this with your group,” and that’s been a help. Even some of the students who have graduated and are now taking [related courses] at university, I’ve had them phone me up and say “Hey what about this?” with ideas of things to do.

As I shared earlier, Cathy has already contacted me for specific video resources and for ideas for their AR activities in the school. Our interview seems a natural extension of our professional sharing as teacher-activists, and though I have my own particular needs for this research, she seems to appreciate an additional opportunity to brainstorm activism ideas while we explore related issues.

Daria exemplifies the student activist who has found her involvement with an educational coalition on AR to be an important part of her identity in many ways. She tells me that she had already experienced racism since immigrating to Canada from a South American country, and was eager to work against it:

I remember at a very young age, I was seven at the time, that we did experience racism. I remember walking with my dad back to the home where we were staying and there were I think a couple of teenagers pointing and laughing and saying “Indian, Indian” and I know that there is quite a lot of discrimination against the Aboriginal people, and so we were mistaken as Aboriginal people with our dark hair. My father is dark-skinned and so are my two brothers and my dad even told us that two blocks from our home there was a man who used to hang a Nazi flag on his window. So growing up in that racist--I’m not going to call the whole community racist--but in a community with people who were racist made it a real personal issue for me.
As an aside, Daria tells me that, in the years since this difficult time, she has not seen racism against her family disappear, even as they learned English and attempted to assimilate into mainstream Canadian society:

Even now, here in [a large city], my mother has a hard time finding a job. She has two degrees in nursing and got one of the highest scores in the TOEFL exam in the year that she wrote it. Yet when she was interviewed for a position in nursing, she was told that she would have to go and take an English course. They said that they felt that her accent would interfere with her ability to perform the job well. And I thought that that in itself was quite racist seeing as how my mom does speak fluent English. She does have an accent as do many other people in the nursing field and that does not disable them from performing their jobs.

It seems a relevant point here, that she names such discrimination against certain people based on their speaking with an accent as being racialized, substantially dependent on the skin colour of the person with the accent. Daria also makes a direct link between her family’s personal experiences with racism and her own enthusiasm for challenging it in an activist coalition with other young people:

Within my family there has been a lot of experience with racism, so it’s a personal issue for me. That’s why I think I’ve been able to stick with it, and to want to keep active. I’m pretty passionate about it, and when I read something in the [newspaper], whether it be anti-Semitism or a racist incident, blatant or even subtle, I take it too hard and I want people to hear about it.

Daria believes that her personal experience with racism both stimulates her interest and provides a distinct advantage to her when speaking to others about the topic:

I think when you experience something and it has degraded you in some way, speaking from experience, that you can relate to victims of racism better than someone who has not experienced racism. It’s easier to connect with the crowd when you share your experiences. I also think that just the fact that you want to prevent another person from going through what you went through, that’s a big driving force.

Her involvement with the activist group has, in turn, encouraged her in many ways to
continue to cooperate with other young people in the struggle to eliminate racism and other forms of discrimination. She has reaped several benefits, including becoming a person who is more likely to challenge her own prejudices:

What I do to try to fight that within myself, especially because I am in an AR organization, is that, in order to be a good example to others in the position I’m in now, in order to fight these prejudices with myself, I try to interact with groups that I feel I may have a prejudice against. Whether it be someone who dresses up as a “goth” or someone who is Lebanese for example, I think that’s a way of fighting these internal feelings of racism or prejudice that we may have. When you try to develop understanding and compassion towards a certain group then you begin to eliminate fear and ignorance.

As she has shown in other parts of our conversation, Daria does not naively believe that her personal attitudes are the only--nor the most damaging--form of racism in Canada, but she targets her own behaviour and values as an important starting point for becoming sensitized and working against all racism.

When asked about the future of her group, Daria is optimistic that its individual members have enough commitment that even if the group comes apart as its members go off to various post-secondary institutions in the coming years, their work will continue. She believes that high school graduation will likely be a “big blow” to the group but by no means the end of it:

The upside is that perhaps we could all go off to different provinces or different countries and start our own [activist group] within that community. Knowing how committed the members are, and how passionate we’ve grown to be towards the issue, I don’t think that it will fall apart. We need to make sure that we have a huge discussion about this and plan.

Not content to leave things to chance, Daria and her colleagues will be taking proactive steps to ensure that they each continue the work they have begun in their voluntary coalition.

Setting a strong example for her peers, Daria is already planning to pursue a medical
career and joining Doctors Without Borders, to “incorporate medicine with social activism.” She brings it back to her high school activist work once again: “Just being involved with [our activist group] and doing the humanitarian work has inspired me to pursue that for a job.” Her certainty in her continued desire to struggle for social justice is admirable, and seems yet another advantage of possessing youthful optimism to keep finding the energy to sustain this endeavour.

In the past 15 years, I have encouraged numerous outstanding students to highlight their experiences through STOP in their employment and post-secondary applications. Several of them have won recognition and even awards for their exemplary community service and citizenship while working on AR projects for STOP. Yet others have gone on to accept positions in international service agencies such as the UN and the Red Cross, with many former activists who have kept in touch with me continuing their work with human rights and AR agencies as adults. In the past year I have had contact with former STOP student activists who are currently in fields that include teaching elementary school, nursing, social work, musical benefit concert promotion, and graduate studies in gender issues.

As one student I interviewed reminded me, however, not every student thinks of their activist experience while in high school as a spring-board for future careers and advantages. Steve explains that, “for a lot of us it’s something we want to do because we want to do it now. It’s not something that we want to use as a jumping point to any other fields.” In fact, admits Jason, after graduating high school, “if I had absolutely no ties to bind me, I’d go to the coast and jump on an oil ship and go wherever the winds take me!” Nonetheless, they admit that several of their current group members are interested in careers in politics, with at least one wanting to be an international ambassador, and that their involvement with the group will inevitably provide them with some advantages in pursuing these goals.
Steve and Jason share with me that they are often approached by community groups to collaborate on projects, but they are reluctant to be "taken under the wing" of a larger organization, preferring instead to be members of an independent, student-led group. Jason says that, "right now we have lots of contacts with people who are more than willing to give us resources." When I ask for an example, Jason shares that a new AR group in their city "has just offered our group some money" but that their student group will need more information about how it fits with their own goals before accepting it. Steve concedes that their group is "still very young and we're still trying to find our way, and this whole government funding thing, you know, we're cautious."

Of course, not every student or teacher who engages in social justice activism at their school will necessarily continue with these pursuits in their future. But as I have experienced, and my respondents have corroborated, they seem far more likely to extend their engagement with social justice issues beyond their school's walls. Their development of crucial cooperative and planning skills, their learning more about complex diversity issues, and their experience of organizing a range of activities to promote social justice all seem to serve a vital role in fostering further activism.

Perhaps the activist coalitions that form in schools are simply a vehicle for some students and teachers already committed to these issues, but for many others, they provide a valuable springboard to a lifelong commitment to fairness and equity. We educators need to consider, as part of our sustaining within schools these kinds of activist opportunities for ourselves and our students, specific ways of extending it outside of a unique club activity. In the concluding chapter I outline some lessons to be drawn from this research toward engendering a life-long commitment to social justice concerns.
Chapter Six
Conclusion and Promising Directions

Starting out on my doctoral program in 1996, I was already fairly certain of the specific focus for my studies and research. During the years since then, I have kept my strong interest in school-based activism while my research program has taken on a life of its own, often drawing my attention to related areas and issues I had not previously considered. The data gathering phase of this project proved illuminating and highly fulfilling for me, and I hope for my participants as well. In contrast to more quantitative studies that might have required their answering standardized questions or completing an evaluation instrument, this research project is based on a collaborative model of inquiry using open-ended interviews.

Each participant I approached expressed a strong interest in discussing with me their role in social activism in schools. Their familiarity with me and the STOP program my students and I founded seemed to aid in creating a respectful collaboration toward greater understanding of our work. Both student and teacher activists seemed to value this opportunity to reflect on their practice, and all sought further engagement and networking toward our common goals toward social justice.

Personal Connections and Insights

While the participants’ particular school settings, educational backgrounds, ethnicity, and life experiences often varied significantly, the interviews were all enhanced by our forging some common bonds based on our mutual interests in social justice activism. We also often found camaraderie in other elements of our personal and professional lives. I could relate to activists who faced the challenges of negotiating with government and volunteer agencies, parents who shared experiences with raising their children to recognize and challenge
discrimination, to teachers struggling with specific human rights challenges in their classrooms
and schools, to students attempting to make a difference in their communities, and to people
who seek to make this serious work a fun and rewarding experience.

Although I used a small tape recorder during the interviews, each session at times felt
more like a conversation between committed activists, with questions, asides, laughter, and
the occasional interruption. When we found ourselves following a tangential line of
conversation that moved away from our planned areas of focus for the interview, I shared
with Bonnie that I feared I may not be covering all the topics I had intended. She casually
replied, “No problem. We’re just a phone call away, right?” In each case, I left time at the end
for any additional questions or issues they may have wished to raise, and several of them
made positive comments about the interviews themselves. Others made arrangements for the
exchange of materials, or for future communication about specific issues we had brought up
during the interviews. Each person expressed appreciation for this relatively rare opportunity
to have a block of time set aside for a reflective discussion on social justice activism.

What follows are summaries and suggestions garnered from the data, shedding light on
several areas outlined by my guiding hypotheses as they were introduced in the previous
results chapters. With each, I attempt to include the salient points raised by the research
interviews and draw lessons for future research and inquiry in this field.

Conclusions from Hypotheses Countered

Countering my first two hypotheses that teachers and students would not
readily seek or value academic sources to inform their activism, and that the debate between
MC and AR education proponents would be largely irrelevant to them, my interviews with
students and teachers alike revealed a surprising openness to research literature and issues.
They showed a range of levels of support for engaging academic work in their activist work,
with an overall positive response to its potential to inform what goes on in schools while holding out the possibility for greater intellectual engagement. Even among those who had not previously considered some of the specific issues currently being debated among scholars and theorists, there was a broad consensus for relating the substance of these debates to their own school-based social justice activism.

For example, the more veteran teachers with whom I spoke were already regularly consulting academic studies in their work, and during our conversations brought up recent research about which they had read. Bonnie and I engaged in spirited discussions on quantitative studies of MC education programs, and current debates surrounding models of Afrocentric education (i.e., Dei, 1996b; Lund, 1998c). She held strong views on these issues that had been informed by a wide range of readings and experiences. Like me, Ted is a teacher who has himself contributed to the academic literature in both MC and AR domains, as an educational researcher and school policy analyst. We spent some time during our interview sharing our perspectives on our experiences in the schools as seen through the lens of contemporary critical writings around whiteness (e.g., Roman, 1993; Sleeter, 1993), colonialism (e.g., Said, 1993; Willinsky, 1998a), and other areas of academic interest.

Ted’s analysis of the evolution and conflict surrounding AR and MC perspectives in social justice education led him to a practical proposal: Researchers could ensure this movement’s longevity by identifying its pedagogical importance to teachers and students alike, many of whom may not otherwise be supporters of social justice initiatives. Attending to both the cultural inclusion concerns that held prominence in early MC initiatives, and more systemic critiques of existing power relations characteristic of AR approaches, Ted’s suggestion to prioritize an educational focus holds promise to transect the AR/MC dichotomy in the research literature. Scholars of any stripe with an interest in promoting social justice
education might find greater success by exploring this direction further, and by actively structuring additional opportunities to be informed by school-based activists.

Even the less experienced teacher activists showed an openness toward academic work, while stressing that they needed to see a direct relevance to their work before it would likely be incorporated into their daily activism. Of course, the issue of accessibility of language arose, and although we could not possibly reach a tidy conclusion in the context of a single interview, these moments showed the teachers' tremendous promise in illuminating current debates. In one instance, Gail offered me a scholarly article she had read on AR education, and sought additional resources for her work on intercultural studies. Cathy had recently taken university courses on diversity, and remained in touch with students who are currently at university. Both teachers had travelled widely and regularly sought new resource material to inform their practice. Both of these teachers included both MC and AR approaches in their daily activism, seeking to move their rural students gradually from fostering respect for differences, to problematizing the current discourse around diversity, toward more politicized strategies for local and global action.

Likewise, some of the students I interviewed were already taking up academic work on their own initiative. Daria, Steve, and Jason had built in a research component into their group’s activism, and had even compiled a list of resources they share during presentations—a bibliography that contained several academic studies and articles that have become classics in this field. They had also become researchers themselves, collecting and critically evaluating journal articles and media coverage of AR related issues, and developing a bank of evidence to fuel and validate their activism in this area. They also used their presentations to try to develop in younger students a critical consciousness of Canadian governmental and historical issues. These students do not fit the stereotype of violent youth, or of apathetic and
disengaged children pushed to the margins of society (Giroux, 1996), but rather, can serve as role models themselves, with a level of intellectual rigour and enthusiasm in their work that could well put some adult activists to shame.

I believe these examples should provide serious impetus for greater efforts by members of the academic community to demonstrate the relevance of their work to other professionals and students with a common interest in social justice. In the case of these participants, it would seem apparent that the role of research in the educational community has been underestimated, and while not an overwhelming concern of all of them, could well become even more relevant and useful to their activism. Future initiatives for social justice research in education may well benefit from the inclusion of input from current practitioners--both students and teachers alike--as collaborators in this work.

I am convinced that these voices offer ample incentive for the scholarly community to encourage even more practitioners and activists to take up its work--as it proves helpful, informative and inspiring--but not, as it can seem to be for many scholars, as an end in itself. If any one finding in this study points to how we can improve the linkages, if not collaboration, between the scholarly and activist communities, it was the enthusiasm with which these participants attended to concerns I had identified from the academic literature on social justice. A few of the teachers with whom I spoke had already considered the debates between MC and AR proponents, and some of them regularly consulted educational research literature on their own. All of the participants in this research showed an openness that belied previous characterizations of teachers as disinterested in theory or as anti-intellectual. Their desire to educate themselves and others on effective approaches to promoting social justice included the consideration of theoretical perspectives and research findings. Building on this previously undervalued connection is a worthy undertaking by contemporary academics in
Practitioners may also find tremendous value in current Canadian studies of student and teacher resistance to AR and MC initiatives (i.e., Solomon, 1996; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1994); in formulating more effective strategies to address these barriers proactively. My participants were very open to considering and discussing the distinctions between MC and AR approaches as outlined by a number of theorists who have described them as separate camps (e.g., Kehoe, 1994; McGregor & Ungerleider, 1993). Often, research participants would offer up naive sounding statements about accepting differences that, if taken at face value, could readily be critiqued by AR scholars as traditional, uncritical MC sentiments that do more harm than good toward eradicating racism (e.g., Bannerji, 1995; Dei, 1996a; Lee, 1994). However, when pressed to explain their underlying views, these same students and teachers could articulate a much more incisive perspective on white privilege, systemic racism, and cultural hegemony that would make any critical AR theorist proud.

I believe that these and other student and teacher activists are too quickly dismissed by academics as anti-intellectual, yet they could, with modest efforts on the part of contemporary researchers and scholars, benefit from the insights offered by recent academic work that explicates racism. An analysis of conceptual distinctions between MC and AR could readily provide a rich catalyst for the discussion of theoretical and practical implications of the various purposes and goals of school-based initiatives. One important finding of this work is that activists regularly employ a variety of nomenclature, sometimes apparently conceptually conflictual, in a conscious, if unstated, strategic effort to adapt to the political and professional limitations imposed by their specific community contexts. The strands of activism are not easily labelled according to one or the other camp, particularly when local constraints require the reframing of school diversity activities as building
Likewise, the strong conceptual distinctions identified by AR and MC proponents alike with their approaches to difference seemed to be most important to activists while formulating and planning collective responses to racism and other oppression. When it came time to undertake the activism or specific project itself, the activists had no hesitation with calling their club events by one or the other label, depending on which they felt would be most palatable to their intended audience. Among fellow activists at a youth leadership camp, the talk centred on AR and overcoming systemic barriers, but with teaching colleagues and with community groups, the preferred language included promoting acceptance and celebrating differences. The division between the approaches clearly mattered to these activists, but the specific naming of their own work seemed less important.

My next hypothesis that administrative support is necessary for effective activism met with a range of responses, but the most affirmative came from the teachers. Each shared their experiences with specific administrators to back up the common sense view that a supportive principal and school district could facilitate the smooth running of an activist program, and free up valuable resources for its work. They all recognized the value of additional financial support to the various activities that comprise social justice activism in schools. Some shared stories of negative or even neutral administrators whose inaction and apparent lack of interest in diversity issues posed a distinct barrier to their success at organizing efforts on social justice concerns.

As Ted expressed, it takes a great deal of courage on the part of administrators to choose to address fairness and diversity issues in a school system, particularly in light of the risks involved in targeting racism and other discrimination. The sensitive nature of this field, and its potential for opening up heated discourse among parents, the community, teachers,
and senior administration, all work to deter many administrators from wishing to tackle it proactively. As Herr (1999) notes in her own research around social justice issues in schools, "there is something about merely asking certain questions within the context of a school that sends a ripple through it and begins to interrupt the way everyday practices are viewed" (p. 10). Those who support the work of social justice activists within schools are always walking a difficult line, caught between being viewed as fostering fairness in their schools, and being seen as taking too controversial a stand on contentious social issues. Research on school change strongly supports the view that innovative approaches to countering inequity in secondary schools will be more likely to foster the kinds of programs and activism that can bring about lasting and systemic change if they are supported by the administration (i.e., Bohn & Sleeter, 2000; Gaskell, 1995; Herr, 1999; Lightfoot, 1983).

It seems an obvious point, perhaps, but the teachers whose efforts were viewed as being less controversial--including those in rural settings who focused mainly on intercultural understanding--were most likely to find administrative support of their activist efforts with students. If the discourse of the group included traditional MC notions of accepting differences and working toward fairness (i.e., Kehoe, 1984; Young, 1984), the principals found it easy to offer their wholehearted support with very little chance of backlash toward these efforts. An important lesson can be drawn from these findings that supports the strategic positioning of our activist work within specific contexts; if the prevailing atmosphere seems intimidating to undertake progressive work on specific types of discrimination--sexual orientation, as an example--or on systemic racism, then teacher and student activists need to reframe their work in ways that find less resistance. If further studies are to be undertaken on educational administration's role in promoting AR and MC initiatives in school coalitions, they would seem well advised to focus on identifying the
factors that have encouraged those administrators identified by activists as being supportive of their work. A better understanding of the motivators of such enabling administrators would clearly benefit others who would seek to implement similar programs in their own school settings.

Not all of the teachers with whom I spoke enjoyed overwhelming or unconditional positive support from their principals or other administration, but each was successful in incorporating some more critical notions of AR education within their school-based programs. In each case, the teachers carefully integrated their more controversial work into safer sounding programs and initiatives. Not wishing to deceive their supervisors, they were simply doing the work of social justice activists within the constraints posed by their specific school and community environments. Much can be learned by noting how seamlessly they managed to integrate both MC and AR components into their lessons and activism, principally by finding the academic and curricular bases for their efforts to identify and alter inequitable policies and practices, and to challenge racism in their schools and within the community at large. These teachers refused to be bound by the tensions that typically characterize the volleys lobbed between the two camps in the academic literature. When asked, they all recognized the many potential benefits of working with a supportive principal.

In spite of the prevailing wisdom in the academic literature and among many teachers, many students did not place such importance on having supportive administrators to their own activist work. In fact, some students I interviewed enjoyed the relative freedom to plan and undertake activist projects without having to have their work scrutinized and perhaps altered by an adult supervisor. Students such as Steve, Daria and Jason all admitted that there would undoubtedly be numerous advantages to having their activism housed in an existing
school program, including an adult mentor who could foster continuity, take care of administrative details, and advise on efficient procedures. Even so, they relished their autonomy from a formal school club, and took great pride in the student-directed nature of their organization. Their fierce independence can serve as an important lesson to those teachers who wish to work collaboratively with young people: They must not attempt to coopt their activist efforts, or take over a program to fit a predetermined agenda.

Popular media sources and some political leaders often devalue the contributions of young people to contemporary society, but the young activists I interviewed have developed programs that can be exemplary models of independent activism on social justice issues. Eschewing traditional institutional structures for their AR groups, they have scripted their own original blueprints for establishing viable community programs. Their willingness to collaborate with other community groups on projects, their consulting of academic and other sources to educate themselves on relevant issues, and their reluctance to rely too heavily on external funding sources all revealed these young people as critically aware and capable social justice activists.

My final hypotheses that were countered by evidence from my participants asserted that a conservative political climate and anti-diversity backlash would inhibit activism in schools, and that current negative attitudes toward young people will limit the efficacy of their activism. In each instance, the student and teacher activists affirmed that there indeed is a conservatism that permeates our contemporary society in Alberta (see Baergen, 2000; Kinsella, 1994). This entails a public discourse around diversity that often devalues the contributions of non-white people to Canada, and fosters the marginalizing of young people as well. From sensationalistic media coverage of violence among some young people, to the negative and alarmist rhetoric from some conservative politicians, the climate for social justice
activism in this province is less than hospitable to activist student groups. Even so, the activists I interviewed were not daunted, and much to their credit, sought to counter this situation with their ongoing struggles in school-based coalitions.

The students with whom I spoke all noted the barriers faced by young people when trying to organize awareness campaigns, events, and educational initiatives around diversity issues. Their efforts were often devalued or ignored by adults, or they faced resistance when tackling issues that were deemed too controversial for their specific setting. For example, Lisa faced views she believed were homophobic when trying to deal with the discrimination faced by gay and lesbian students within the context of her Catholic high school. Likewise, her experience when addressing sexism in local and global contexts was equally difficult, as she encountered adults in her community who supported traditional “family values,” whether these were school personnel, parents, or political leaders. Her efforts to organize a lasting group in her high school ultimately stalled, but her personal commitment to issues of fairness was not shaken by the conservative mind-set she encountered at every turn.

Students who were already active in human rights organizations such as Amnesty International expressed disappointment at the widespread apathy. Sabrina and her sister Rowena found this mindset among their peers and adults to be discouraging, but reaffirmed for me how rewarding it was to have grouped together with the small number of like-minded activists they identified in their school. They wished that some of the teachers in their school took a greater interest in social justice issues in and out of the classroom, but when none stepped forward to organize a school program on this theme, they undertook the coordination of two different coalitions themselves. Tackling human rights issues, poverty, sexism, racism, and other social issues in their school and community, both sisters worked diligently to overcome the stultifying atmosphere of inaction they saw around them.
Sina also faced a school atmosphere that, while culturally diverse, did not already directly address racism or discrimination in a direct way. Her efforts to organize a student action group modelled after the STOP program were one way to raise the awareness of an issue that was important to her and her peers among people who seemed disinterested. She wanted to work collaboratively with a number of other groups in her school, including the administration, the drama department, and the school's resource officer, but her efforts never culminated in an ongoing activist program. Sina described the reason for this as being because her school had already learned to deal with diversity and did not need a specific program; I expect that with more innovative promotion within the school, the strategic use of other media to share her message, and perhaps with less direct oversight by the formal school administration's anti-violence efforts—including involvement by the school's police resource officer--she and her peers may have had greater success.

Despite this shortcoming, Sina's determination to seek a number of avenues toward her goals to raise awareness on social justice issues stand as a single example of the potential of some talented young people in our schools. They are well-connected to like-minded peers in other schools and communities, and their passion in this area could readily be channelled into progressive social movements with the right activist vehicle, or with appropriate adult mentorship. In terms of tapping into this commitment, what might be helpful is the identification of a positive and cooperative adult mentor within the school to serve as a behind-the-scenes facilitator for the planning of school events. For further details on stimulating school-based activist groups, please see the concluding section below. In many ways, Sina's is a success story on various levels, and she is just one of many students like her who steadfastly continue to work for positive social change in the face of a conservative community mindset that discourages controversy and politicized discussions, particularly
around sensitive issues such as immigration and pluralism.

Daria and her partners in activism, Steve and Jason, showed themselves to be well-aware of the barriers they face as social justice educators, and young ones at that. In fact, part of their pride in organizing their ongoing AR program is that it continues to be planned and undertaken solely by young people. They told me directly that they wished to counter the stereotypes currently held about younger people, as they strived to fulfill their goals to raise the critical awareness of other students on issues of diversity and the acceptance of differences. Daria admitted to feeling frustrated by a community that routinely ignores these issues, and by individuals who fail to name racism, but her own painful experiences push her forward to action. Jason and Steve both admitted to a steep learning curve in organizing events in a community that would rather not talk about negative things such as racism, and expressed frustration at the difficulties of dealing with adults who may not offer them the same respect they would give adult activists.

These young people show how capable and self-directed some students can be at educating themselves on issues, planning effective educational campaigns, and utilizing community resources and partnerships. They also reaffirm that committed activists will face struggles in a relatively conservative social climate--particularly one that devalues the contributions of young people--but that they will not be defeated by these obstacles. Steve, Jason, and Daria all seemed eager to rise to the significant challenges before them, to overcome diminished expectations for their success in this area, and adding to the lessons they are already teaching others. As mentioned earlier, very few accounts exist of the scholarly engagement of students as capable social justice planners and activists (see Roman & Stanley, 1997; SooHoo, 1995). Any efforts by other activists or scholars to include a student component in their own social justice programs must attend to their specific insights on the
need for a respectful mutual engagement that honours their independence as activist leaders in their own right.

The teacher facilitators of student action groups each shared their perspectives on the current climate in Alberta for this work, and some openly expressed their profound disappointment with a recent regression in the support for social justice concerns. The more experienced teachers were especially aware of the clawing back of resources and programs addressing AR issues over the past decade especially. They noted a trend toward more right-wing news coverage by a media that seems ever more willing to exploit hot-button issues around cultural differences and racialized identities (see Puttagunta, 1998). This province has also produced several conservative politicians who have made it their trademark to expound against immigration and to foster fears of violent youth; some of these were mentioned by name during our interviews as contributing to an atmosphere that is often downright hostile to their efforts at challenging racism in our schools and communities.

Yet somehow, each teacher with whom I spoke found sources of strength and determination amidst a community mentality that often denigrates the discussion of social justice issues. Gail focused her attention to the benefits gained by individual students involved in her fledgling activist group in a rural high school. She especially valued the personal growth she witnessed with students who may have been stereotyped as outcasts or misfits, now finding a new esteem as activists working toward equity and fairness. The power of a student-driven coalition cannot be underestimated as a potent vehicle for nurturing—or for simply revealing already existing—leadership skills and citizenship qualities in young people. Among marginalized or unfocused students, their engagement in progressive social action can be nothing short of life-altering. Each teacher with whom I spoke reiterated this point, revealing an often overlooked side-effect of this work, perhaps understandable
considering the importance of maintaining a focus on the movement’s lofty social goals. My own wealth of anecdotal examples of the evident significance of this work to young activists’ future endeavours—from the past student members of just one local program—reaffirms the significance of such opportunities for their early involvement in social justice. This finding is of particular relevance to any cultural and educational researchers with an interest in citizenship education, student empowerment, or the re-engagement of marginalized young people.

Gail also reminded us that the formation of a group honouring difference allowed some students to rediscover cultural pride and a renewed sense of identity in a pluralistic nation. It is not insignificant that their program’s deliberate promotion of the positive aspects of diversity took place within a fairly homogeneous and conservative rural community. My own work within a community better know for its extremist right-wing activities also supports the importance of providing a countervailing voice for acceptance and equity. The impact of a pro-diversity program on the self-esteem of students whose cultural background or racialized physical identity places them outside of the mainstream cannot be overstated. Many activists focus on broader societal changes as a long-term goal, but Gail’s work showed that attending to these individual moments of acceptance, affirmation, and growth can also be highly rewarding.

Cathy directly addressed her community’s negative attitudes toward young people by having her students tackle the fairly simple but emblematic problem of litter around the school. By cleaning up their environment, Cathy was having students learn important lessons about building bridges in a small community, and about countering narrow or misguided perceptions about students. These small steps signal the start of an important connectedness with their adult counterparts, and create goodwill that will likely pave the way to more
productive cooperation with adult community groups in the future. Sometimes social justice work may entail efforts put into areas that are not obviously related to the goals of equity and harmony, but as Cathy showed, can be valuable nonetheless.

Ted saw activist teachers and students as having an important role in contemporary society to give voice to issues that are often marginalized by the dominant mainstream. He viewed narrow-mindedness behind a lot of the current discourse around diversity issues in the public sphere (i.e., Bibby, 1990; Bissoondath, 1994), and hopes that a reframing of AR activist work in schools and communities will work to counter this prevailing mentality. Ted envisioned a reclaiming of terms like “entitlement” for marginalized groups and individuals to be reframed as an “entitlement to contribute.” Such a profound but apparently straightforward proposal represents an exciting new direction for social justice education, and evinces the wealth of potential that can be tapped by researchers who choose to collaborate with informed and experienced professionals in this field. His efforts over the years have been toward building in AR lessons in every class he teaches, and highlighting the educative value of social justice reforms so that AR becomes more than an add-on component that can be dropped in a moment. Maintaining a long-term focus on student learning helps Ted to maintain hope for the future, and to sustain his activist efforts as a teacher. His intriguing renewal of the focus on the “entitlement to contribute” may help to sustain the movement itself.

Having to face racism and stereotyped views on an almost daily basis has helped Bonnie to realize the vital importance of her work, but it also has taken its emotional toll. She admitted to feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the task ahead of her in this field, especially as the political landscape continues to throw up barriers to her work toward social justice. Nonetheless, Bonnie has maintained her enthusiasm in organizing student action
groups by concentrating her efforts on raising student awareness of diversity issues and building their individual leadership skills. She models the cooperativeness she seeks to foster in students, and regularly collaborates with community groups to strengthen the impact and broaden the range of influence of their message of acceptance. Bonnie feels hurt by the narrow views of others, but, like other activists who regularly face racism (e.g., Bannerji, 1995; Dei, 1996a), remains committed to eradicating racism in society; her positive relationships with other staff and students as fellow activists help rejuvenate her in this life-long endeavour.

Conclusions from Hypotheses Confirmed

From my previous activist work and my research in this field, I noted that there exists a culture of denial in Canada around the issue of racism. My hypothesis that this condition would present a barrier to those working in AR coalitions in schools was confirmed by all of my participants in a most convincing manner. Each student and teacher with whom I spoke offered specific instances where they felt that the very real experiences with racism they were pinpointing through their work were being denied by others around them. In each case, these activists expressed profound frustration at this tenacious obstacle to social justice education. I am not suggesting that it is an insurmountable hurdle for them, but that it stands as one of the most inhibitory factors in their perceived progress in this work.

For some, the characteristic politeness of Canadians seems to spill over into our treatment of uncomfortable or embarrassing issues such as racism, sexism and homophobia, as noted in several current AR writings (e.g., Boyko, 1995; Dei, 1996a; Henry, Tator, Mattis & Rees, 1995). The resultant invisibility of these issues stymies the planning and undertaking of strategies for their elimination, when the public consensus seems to promote the view that there is not a problem to begin with. For teachers and students organizing social justice projects in rural settings, this situation can seem especially problematic. Mainstream teachers
in predominantly white schools are more likely to pronounce that, “there is none of that racism trouble here,” driving any existing conditions even further below the radar screen.

During our interview, Cathy also found herself facing up to some of her own previously hidden discriminatory attitudes toward people working at a local factory. Even when student surveys revealed that some individuals were experiencing racism in the school, Cathy’s administrator’s first response was to attribute it to their having misunderstood the question. I am not suggesting that particular principals are trying to hide anything, but that they would not wish to think of their own school as the site of any discriminatory situations or practices. Accepting my earlier views on the pervasive nature of racism in Canada, this is a claim that no principal can realistically make.

In more homogeneous towns and schools, there are likely fewer opportunities for these issues to come to the fore, and therefore they maintain a lower profile in the public’s eye. Still, their survey data served, for Cathy, as a wake-up call that some students were experiencing racism. This points to the value of some timely and concrete research as a tangible means of gathering evidence that might well provide a catalyst for specific action to counter a situation in a school that many would rather deny exists. Of course, as Ted pointed out during another interview, it takes a great deal of courage on the part of an administrator even to ask the question, never mind to deal with the answer that might come back. As confirmed by other teachers I interviewed, Ted believes there are very real dangers to teachers and administrators who court with contentious issues, even when their intentions are for the betterment of their schools as safe learning environments (see Herr, 1999).

Gail also acknowledged the peculiar situation of addressing cultural diversity in a community where there is very little of it. Out of an underlying concern for stirring up controversy, her most public activist projects deal with themes of accepting differences and
valuing diversity in MC terms that would likely be most palatable to her colleagues and parents. Even as students’ awareness is continually being raised on racialized issues through popular media sources and current events, there exists a stultifying silence when these topics arise in formal school contexts. Her more critical approaches to racism and the historical denial of discrimination happen behind closed doors in her classroom or in less publicized activities. For Gail, this strategic positioning of her work has simply become a necessary condition of survival in her specific environment, rather than a shying away from issues that she believes need to be addressed.

Some of the young activists with whom I spoke were very articulate in their expression of the hidden nature of racism in Canadian society. Daria likened the current situation of highlighting our wonderful MC society to “sugar-coating” racism, the pain of which is very real to her and her family. She zeroed in on specific instances of people who seem reluctant to name racism, and therefore, unable to address it directly in their activism. In her student-led coalition, however, they emphasize education, and take specific pains to collect relevant information they can use as evidence of the existence of racism in contemporary society. Her colleagues, Steve and Jason, added to that the exposure of students to previously white-washed historical examples that are most often ignored or downplayed in current Social Studies classrooms. Together, they refuse to be complacent in the face of a public that seems content to maintain the status quo with little critical reflection on the experiences of those whose lives are negatively affected by racism.

On almost a daily basis, Sina has felt the sting of discrimination as people unfairly judge her based on her adherence to the Muslim faith. Her immediate reply when I asked her about it was that Canada is a very accepting place and that her school is a multicultural environment where almost everyone gets along. But when probed, she articulated an
awareness of several sources of racism that are most often hidden and completely explicable as something else. Sina candidly admitted that she is likely to experience racism when applying for a job, and seemed somewhat resigned to living in a system that naturally favours the dominant groups. Her acknowledgement of an undercurrent of racism pervading all aspects of our contemporary society stood in stark contrast to her earlier pronouncements about the harmonious nature of her school and community. This apparent dichotomy seems to be characteristic of many Canadians, but especially diversity activists; while keeping our long-term focus on the more positive end goals, we must remain vigilant of the ugly conditions we seek to eliminate.

For long-time activists, the continual experience of the widespread denial of racism can become especially tiring. Bonnie talked of feeling worn down by the AR work she has done for so many years, and spoke candidly about the various risks and pitfalls. She identified the tendency of administrators to deny the existence of racism in their schools, and shares her successes with a supportive boss and with the political maneuvering necessary to get colleagues on board. Bonnie likened the evolution in our treatment of racism to the steps taken in previous years to break the silence around spousal abuse. Her ongoing struggles to justify her focus on racism in the face of a mainstream that would wish to continue to deny its very existence cannot be minimalized. Speaking out, for her, has meant being blamed for being on a soapbox, and any rebuttals are often taken as defensiveness. This aspect of a social justice activist's work is clearly one that requires a great deal of stamina in the face of an uphill climb. Teachers and students who wish to join in the struggle for social justice must be aware of such significant barriers that can seriously impede one's personal sense of accomplishment in this field.

A second hypothesis that was affirmed by my participants was that external
recognition and acceptance by the broader community is important in validating and encouraging further activism by individuals and groups. Bonnie, for example, saw her group’s AR efforts gaining significant exposure within and beyond the school, and she viewed this as a great accomplishment. When students came forward with positive stories about their learning about Black history, Bonnie viewed that as evidence their activist efforts were helping to educate her colleagues and students outside the program. For her, the public exposure of AR ideals through her group’s activities is part of their educative efforts, and despite her own experiences with instances of inaccurate media coverage, she believes that seeking publicity remains a vital part of her group’s work.

Like my own experience with the initial formation of STOP, Ted faced a media frenzy when he first organized a social justice program with high school students over a decade ago. Their school organized a very large and public display of support for diversity, and Ted found himself at the centre of a great deal of media attention. This spotlight led him to be invited to join a variety of community and professional boards in this area, and encouraged his further graduate study in related fields. The external lauding of his efforts added fuel to his own desire to learn more about educating for diversity, and he and others even established a cultural leadership camp for young people that has grown and remains viable today. While feeling deeply committed to fairness in education independent of any external sources of recognition, Ted doubts his interest and progress in this field would have extended quite this far without the ongoing public acknowledgement of his efforts.

An important part of Ted’s efforts in MC education at the outset was his countering of their school’s unfortunate reputation for racialized tension and violent incidents. Like the media coverage of racist extremists in Red Deer just prior to our launching of the STOP program, the school in which Ted helped students organize to combat discrimination had also
faced negative media publicity. His success at attracting positive media attention served a crucial role in turning around the school’s reputation in the community. Yet we both acknowledged the risks we faced in drawing that kind of attention; I can recall a senior school district administrator taking me aside and warning me when the STOP program first formed, and was receiving overwhelming local and national media fanfare: “This program sounds interesting, but if it blows up in your face, I knew nothing about it.” Even when an activist movement or activity seems to be shining positive light on the school, the volatile nature of social justice issues and the current political climate make these pursuits inherently dangerous for public school teachers and officials.

Ted reiterated for me the limitations of external sources of support and exposure of an activist movement. His recollections of past situations in his career that were ripe with the potential for parental backlash, teacher resistance, and the withdrawal of administrative support, have been noted by other educational researchers in Canadian schools (Berlin & Alladin, 1996; Herr 1999; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1994). My conversation with Ted reminded me that these are potentially dangerous risks, both personally and professionally, and anyone entering this field would be best to contemplate them as they planned any activist projects of a public nature. Most often, however, the possible value of going public with social justice activism will outweigh the dangers.

Cathy used positive media coverage with her student activist group to garner community interest in the school by having students clean up litter around the school property. A seemingly simple task took on a symbolic meaning as the adult community changed its perception of young people and offered greater support of their efforts with other projects within the school. If documented cases of such local efforts exist in the academic literature, they are difficult to find within this diverse area of study, but the anecdotal
accounts are compelling nonetheless (e.g., Berlin & Alladin, 1996; Cogan & Ramsankar, 1994). Sometimes taking a small step toward manipulating the media spin on one's students can be a valuable means of countering stereotypes and opening new avenues for this work.

Likewise, Gail noted how seemingly minor sources of external praise for her students' activist work had significant positive benefits. Even a small pat on the back from a popular principal could let students know that their work to promote diversity in the school was being valued. Their creation of t-shirts to identify themselves as members of their AR group provided important boosts to their self-esteem, especially critical for some previously marginalized members of the school population. Such moments of valuing a student's contribution to the school can bring about significant and life-altering enhancement of their self-perception as efficacious citizens.

Each of the student participants in this research recognized value in some level of media attention, as it provided fuel for their quest to empower themselves as student activists, and for their desire to promote more widely their messages about the benefits of diversity and the dangers of discrimination. For both students and teachers, the extra attention to their group was often cited as a useful way to attract more supporters within the school and from the surrounding community. Such efforts can go a long way to counter the phenomenon of youth culture being portrayed as violent or regarded as a public spectacle (Giroux, 1996; Roman, 1996). For this reason alone, further studies of--or with--young people taking decisive action toward progressive social change will provide a timely infusion into the public discourse of positive exemplars, young role models that will inspire their peers and the adult community alike.

Jason said that his group had not been pursuing media attention but now that it had garnered quite a flurry of attention from reporters, they were remaining wary of over-
exposure. Both he and Steve admitted to being skeptical of the underlying motives of news reporters whose primary goal, they believed, was to sell newspapers, but they hoped to build on the momentum provided by this publicity and exposure. Several feature articles on their AR group, and news pieces on individual members of their group, had provided them with a great deal of free advertising that they felt had drawn more students to their program. Despite their criticism of specific omissions and errors in the coverage, they were optimistic that the media attention had benefited their program.

Their group’s student leader, Daria, was especially encouraged by all of the attention, and believed that the news coverage had stimulated others to join in their struggle. She did not want their group to become too reliant on outside sources, but noted that the public attention had also brought their group financial support from outside agencies and was itself a sign of success. Their group had obviously attracted attention, and therefore, proved itself to be highly successful in raising awareness of diversity issues and racism in their community, one of their initial goals.

For some activists with whom I spoke, the desired media attention inevitably entailed some drawbacks, including presenting an inaccurate portrayal of their group, or of their individual views, exposing their activities to additional criticism, and increasing the political risks associated with tackling controversial topics within a school setting. They each seemed to value the recognition bestowed upon their group from administrative, governmental, and community groups, and certainly welcomed the additional financial support that can accompany such applause. Still, the driving force for each of these activists seemed to be a commitment to a core value of social justice, and any external attention was framed as another potential tool in this ongoing struggle.

A final hypothesis confirmed by my participants was the assertion that activism in
school-based coalitions would lead teachers and students to further engagement in social justice issues, and to seek additional opportunities to build networks with like-minded activists. In each case, the participants in this research offered ample evidence of specific cooperation they had sought or achieved toward fulfilling their organization's goals. Many of them had been activists for some years, but each planned to extend his or her work beyond the current project into other areas of their personal and professional lives.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the people with whom I spoke all enjoy regular interactions with a variety of other individuals, agencies, and organizations that address social justice issues. As fellow teacher-activists, Cathy and I happened to have an acquaintance in common, and our interview built on a personal conversation about foreign travel and cultural differences that melds nicely with my research interests. She and others in this project had already dealt with the STOP program specifically, and they used our interviews to seek my feedback on particular issues and concerns they were facing in their own work with building and maintaining coalitions. Some also sought materials and resources from provincial and national sources about which they knew or suspected I would have more information.

Cathy noted that one of her students had benefited from her involvement with social activism by having it mentioned as a key factor in her being named a finalist in a seemingly unrelated competition. It was gratifying for her to learn that the skills and experiences gained by her student activists are valued by others. Gail had already experienced first-hand the kind of related sets of competencies that are nurtured among student activists in school-based coalitions. Some of her students had taken the initiative in organizing school-wide diversity activities and were applying these organizational skills to other current issues such as preventing drunk driving. Gail ensured that every student left her program with a letter of
support outlining their specific accomplishments and growth over their years of involvement. This was a concrete way to allow students to build on their activism while in school, and open further opportunities for similar endeavours in their future.

I also made a few unexpected discoveries about networking during interviews. An unanticipated benefit of this research project was learning about the ways that our activist work can be attended to and extended by others. In this case it happened as Cathy and I were sharing sources for obtaining good resource material related to AR and MC for our high school students. I had first learned of Cathy’s activist work with her students through a regional funding source that produced a report on the AR projects they had funded. During the last few minutes of our interview, Cathy casually remarked how she first decided to get involved in social justice activism:

Actually the first copy of the March 21 stuff I got from you, and then I got one from Canadian Heritage after that. Like, you’re what kind of got me started in this because I went to your session at teachers’ convention just because it sounded interesting. It was right up my alley. I’d always done these novel studies and whatever form of racism I could find a novel on, and it was just right up my alley. And then when I went to [another high school] and they had a STOP program, I thought, “Well I can do this,” but I was only there six months.

I was very pleased to learn that my own speaking had been part of the catalyst for a fellow activist’s career. I was also gratified to discover that she had actually helped coordinate a STOP chapter in another high school some three years before, without my prior knowledge. It made sense in retrospect; I had been out of province on a study leave from teaching, and the STOP group was taking on a life of its own in various settings across the province. This research model provided an opportunity for genuine interaction between activists who desire additional ways to share resources and develop networks, and can point the way to future collaborations toward common goals in this area.
Sabrina and her sister Ramona both sought the solidarity of their like-minded peers in the face of widespread apathy in their school on issues of human rights. Their establishing of volunteer activist groups provided them with a meaningful way of finding solidarity on issues of social justice, and building on the foundation of other established groups such as Amnesty International. Similarly, Sina found her engagement with fellow high school students at a provincial youth leadership camp to help her establish links among committed AR activists. They used the Internet and other computer pathways with great ease in establishing an informal network of students with an interest in promoting diversity and challenging racism. Young activists have much to contribute to our growing understanding of all the myriad possibilities for networking across diverse groups and communities.

Sina also sought links with established clubs and programs already existing in her school. Like our STOP program and other groups with whom we have worked, this networking with existing school bodies provides important solidarity in the school-wide efforts toward progressive social change. Sina also planned to further her education after high school both through formal post-secondary education and travel, and wished to work toward international development. Likewise, Daria had already planned an ambitious medical career that would combine her interests in social justice and medicine, namely by joining Doctors Without Borders.

Sometimes this building of bridges among activists and activist groups goes beyond the school walls. Seeking to link with community groups in the area, Bonnie actively built common projects with her students and community partners. These coalitions were not without their own set of struggles and frustrations, including financial tensions and issues of ownership, but they opened up the school to greater engagement with its surrounding community. Through preventive planning for the inevitable conflicts, Bonnie was able to
nurture positive relationships between her student action group and community diversity agencies.

Ted proposed a more specific program to be developed on a province-wide basis, namely to train student and teacher activists using the wisdom developed by experienced practitioners who have developed successful programs. His vision included a plan to nurture a network of activists across a variety of school contexts toward an ambitious training program--based on the model of the student leadership camp he helped found--that could extend our AR efforts far beyond our individual classrooms and schools. I found his spontaneous proposal an exciting and potentially fruitful new direction for my own research and activism. Our collegial sharing of ideas on the broad topic of social justice had generated a specific idea for further activism and research in this field, and is emblematic of the rich potential for a collaborative approach for educational research.

Promising Directions for Further Study

I believe the rich offerings from their participation in this research provide another chorus of voices that can complement those heard in academic research and theorizing. The suggestions offered below can serve as signposts on the road to a more equitable education system and a more socially just society. My intention is to clarify the significant role that educational researchers have to play in the ongoing struggle for social justice, particularly as it relates to their more deliberate engagement with those already involved in activist work in secondary schools.

As outlined broadly in the preceding chapters and the sections above, my participants contributed a great richness of understandings of emergent theorizing on social justice work, on promising future research directions, and on the practical planning and daily activities of activists. Their regular flashes of insight offer new evidence for looking at school-based
activists as critical theorists, school change consultants, curriculum planners, community activists, and cultural critics, among other vital roles. I wish to emphasize the significance of their emerging participation as previously undervalued partners in educational research and theorizing.

I strongly recommend that educational researchers engage more actively with practitioners currently based in schools, the sites that occupy the epicenters of meaning for those with a focus on public education. Teachers are ideally positioned within the education system to inform a wide variety of current academic interests surrounding social justice pedagogy. Their under-representation in scholarly work is often explained by their being disinterested in participating in—or simply incapable of offering meaningful input into—contemporary scholarship in this area. Far from being anti-intellectual or non-academic workers as some scholars have portrayed them, the teacher activists who participated in this study showed themselves to be insightful and perspicacious consumers of academic theory, educational research, popular media, and contemporary culture. Their missing voices in contemporary social justice research reveal the existence of a silent void that must be filled with a cacophony of new viewpoints to hearken in future explorations.

One example of a promising direction in their possible future involvement with educational research is as collaborators in designing and implementing school-based research in which their perspectives and participation is sought and incorporated. As one possible focus, I have suggested earlier that further research is needed that documents and analyzes existing successful activist programs in schools; the teachers already engaged in these endeavours would be excellent sources for the formulation of relevant hypotheses, questions, and considerations for such studies. Their lived understandings of the intersections of social justice pedagogy and activism will be invaluable to researchers attending to curricular or
pedagogical aspects of this work as it is brought to life in actual school settings.

As my research has shown, teachers can also inform contemporary debates in the academic literature if they are offered meaningful opportunities to engage with sources they believe are relevant to their practice. My participating teachers had much to say about a variety of ongoing issues, including the notion of Afrocentric education, the apparent AR and MC dichotomy in the literature, the backlash against diversity programs among peers, administration, and media sources, the pervasive denial of racism in our society, negotiating partnerships with community groups, and many other concerns of relevance to those in activist coalitions. I am not suggesting that teachers can--or would desire to--somehow resolve existing debates between opposing viewpoints or between proponents of various approaches, but that their expertise as practitioners can provide meaningful new perspectives for social justice theorists and researchers alike. Admittedly, the various teachers and scholars may have differing purposes and goals for such collaborations, but the rich potential for these linkages makes the negotiation of equitable research partnerships a promising venture indeed.

Likewise, the student activists showed their prowess as informed and critical researchers in their own right, tuned into current educational research and curricular content, and noting the need for specific changes to the offerings in schools and communities toward more effective social justice education. I implore the educational research community to consider their further engagement as leaders in social justice activism and education, not simply as subjects of those studying learning models or youth culture, for example. Their input may be solicited on identifying meaningful new research directions and educational needs. Some of the student activists with whom I spoke were already informed on some of the issues already of concern to social justice theorists, including the resistance to AR education by some teachers, the historical denial of racism in Canada, and the disputes
between some MC and AR proponents. I believe more research is needed that seeks their understandings of specific problematic aspects of social justice pedagogy, such as the diversity backlash emerging during times of economic restraint, the racist undertones in contemporary discourse on immigration, and the anti-youth sentiments in popular media. Seeking their perspectives on other issues of direct relevance to social justice pedagogy only makes sense in light of a public education model that places their learning as its focus.

Including young people as meaningful contributors to the ongoing dialogues in theoretical, research, and professional literature around social justice education is a long-overdue inclusion of voices whose traditional placement at the margins of this discourse seems ironically exclusive. Again, their desires and goals for involvement in academic research pursuits in schools may be divergent from those of the scholarly community. It may not make sense to recruit secondary students as junior researcher partners, but those I interviewed show a remarkable willingness and interest in addressing the very issues that seem to dominate contemporary scholarly debates in this field. Researchers can readily consult students during the planning phases of educational research; they may enlist them to help understand what attracts some students to joining activist coalitions in the first place, what students perceive as pressing issues in this field, and specific ways students might envision such research informing their collective struggle toward social justice. Even if a few more academics invite young people to become respectful partners in collaborative research projects, under the terms and conditions that fulfill their own needs, this will be a significant step toward correcting serious omissions in past studies of schools and students.

Moving toward a fuller understanding of activist groups themselves seems a natural extension of this work. Long-term or in-depth inquiries into the workings of ongoing school-based coalitions would uncover a wealth of further understandings of the complexity and
promise of this challenging work. My interviews offer some new insights into the meanings ascribed to their work by engaged participants, but more research needs to be carried out within the school sites themselves. Through a variety of perspectives and approaches, a more nuanced understanding will emerge of these activist coalitions and their participants, of their potential to bring about progressive social change, and of the specific means they might employ to identify and overcome the barriers to their work.

School administrators also need to be engaged more directly in any research into school change to promote social justice concerns. Soliciting their participation as informants on the contemporary debates in this field is one possible first step. Allowing them to assist in the formulation of relevant research questions about school systems and the roles of students and teachers in accommodating diversity would require deliberate inclusion of administrators in research planning. Rather than being viewed as potential barriers to building inclusive school communities, administrators at the school, district, and provincial levels must be included as contributors to the discourse among committed activists. Researchers might invite their participation in dialogue around resistance, systemic sources of racism, curricular omissions, and other educational concerns. Their unique perspectives and theoretical frameworks must be better understood—and perhaps accommodated—by those who seek progressive school reforms toward honouring diversity and eliminating oppression and racialized barriers to inclusion and school success. Future studies need to identify those overlapping strands of interest that can weave a common thread between administrators and activists toward more equitable schools of engaged and respected teachers and learners.

My research also scratched at the surfaces of a plethora of other promising bodies of knowledge and educational pursuits. Along with my participants, I brushed against immense bodies of educational and cultural studies research, including, for example, the interrogation of
whiteness as a complicating factor in organizing activist social justice coalitions with white student or teacher leaders, in ethnically homogeneous communities, or some other combination of factors. The reflections and glimpses of insight that bubbled up at several points during my data collection and analysis require far more critical scrutiny and interpretation than is offered here. Research that specifically highlights the discrepancies between the perspectives and understandings of white and non-white activists working across a variety of demographic school and community settings will provide a fuller picture of the landscape of this broad field.

A promising direction for further study in social justice activism includes a focus on the racialized and mediated complex identities of individual activists, and in further studies of how this identity is understood and plays a role in their planning and implementing of school-based social justice activism. I feel quite certain that studies by scholars whose identities reflect marginalized subject positions would differ in significant ways from this one. Teachers and students alike raised the issue of racialized identities throughout our conversations of school-based activism. Further research with a sharper focus on this often invisible, but clearly important aspect of the struggle for equitable schools and schooling would allow more voices to be heard. Future studies that highlight a consideration the convoluted social web of meanings surrounding our various racialized positions and privileges would enrich this growing body of educational research.

I also recognize the need for further studies into the formation of collaborations between and among community groups and school coalitions. Even as I promote the networking and linkages between various groups that seek to promote social justice, I concede that much more must be understood about the difficult task of cooperation between disparate groups that may have widely divergent objectives and purposes for their work. I believe that
including members of diversity-serving and AR community groups in the planning and implementation of social justice research in educational settings would be a sensible and timely inclusion; as many of my participants attest, the need has never been greater for more cooperation between schools and their community partners toward common goals.

More research is required on the specific problem, identified by virtually all of my participants, of the Canadian cultural denial of racism. Further studies of educational projects and reform must address this significant barrier more directly, and attempt to account for its impact on social justice initiatives in schools across Canada. The tradition of white-washing unsavoury elements of our collective racist past seems to have left a legacy in the national psyche that clouds all studies in this area. Interrogating its specific impacts more directly seems a judicious first step in learning useful strategies to overcome the various forms of denial in this area.

Another area of concern to activists is the ongoing resistance to anti-youth and anti-diversity rhetoric in the public domain, from right-wing pundits to ultra-conservative politicians to conservative educational writers. While not identified as a factor that completely stultified their diversity activism, its impact and effects on the work being done by school and community activists seems a useful phenomenon to subject to further study. Specific examples and analyses of these divisive viewpoints could be coupled with studies of responses to them by social justice activists. Such research could lead to more effective means of resisting such negative rhetoric, and of formulating appropriate pedagogical and public responses to counter the anti-diversity and anti-youth messages that seem to dominate the public discourse in this field.

Perhaps the most promising direction pointed to by these data is the need to reframe the entire social justice education movement to refocus on its relationship to effective student
learning. Social justice advocates will need to orchestrate its transition from being viewed as a politicized social reform movement, too often dismissed as left-wing extremism, toward highlighting its core pedagogical concern. Such a shift seems to me a vital development in its evolution to ensure the viability of future of educational scholarship and research in this field. Its implementation would definitely require the engagement of a greater number of teachers and students in determining the most effective and realistic means of shifting the focus and perception of social justice pedagogy and activism. I do not believe that this realignment would require any significant alterations in the type, range, or format of existing activism and research. Instead, it would entail a renewed focus on the learner as the centre of concern.

A reformulation that could tie all social justice activism and research somehow to a potential improvement in both teacher and learner performance makes good common sense as well. Specific efforts could be focused on curriculum planning and instructional activities across the breadth of subject areas. Reflecting a systemic infusion of social justice principles across the curriculum, classroom teachers and social justice scholars could cooperatively plan the most appropriate fits for the widespread inclusion of more equitable curricula and approaches. Areas such as social studies, English literature, art, and drama seem the most obvious courses for a starting point in this endeavour, with relatively minimal modifications to curricular content and methodologies toward a more deliberate focus on social justice. Initial frameworks have already been built, and studies of learner needs undertaken, so the tentative blueprints are already in place for this renovation. Pursing this direction will ensure the honouring of a diversity of perspectives in course content, inclusion of voices in classroom interactions, and attention to fairness in content and approaches. This field is ripe for a bountiful harvest by a wide range of educational and social science researchers. I strongly suspect the result could be a rebirth of the social justice movement that would invite
the widest possible range of engagement of educators, scholars, and students.

These are just a few of the most apparent possible indications for directions for fruitful academic pursuits in this field. It is my sincere hope that this research points the way to a large number of other scholarly and activist endeavours toward social justice, no doubt in domains and directions I have not considered directly herein. Future inquiries in this area may lead to new and promising avenues that are only germinal ideas at this time, but whose roots will undoubtedly extend deep into the rich soil of cooperation. Perhaps most importantly, my participants’ contributions here stand as solid evidence of some of the possible mutual benefits of respectful research collaborations to both reveal and share the wisdom of social justice practitioners as theorists.
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Appendix A: Examples of Activities Within Social Justice Activism

Awareness:
- administering surveys, questionnaires
- arranging meetings with parents, school administration, community leaders
- making posters, creating displays in school
- booking guest speakers for individual classes or whole school
- setting up special events, films, concerts, music
- planning experiential events, role plays, cultural celebrations
- producing drama presentations
- coordinating a Holocaust awareness event
- organizing poster/poetry contests
- booking speaking engagements at schools
- undertaking research projects
- purchasing resource materials, videos, posters, books

Advocacy/Support:
- making charitable donations
- sponsoring of local refugees or new immigrants
- sponsoring of an international foster child
- supporting international development agencies
- supporting peace movements, human rights, harmony
- serving as watchdog for school climate issues
- organizing benefit concerts and events

Community Action:
- volunteering in local initiatives, homeless, newcomers, rights
- writing letters to the editor of local newspapers
- writing features for local newspapers
- producing a newsletter
- writing letters to local agencies
- organizing formal declarations of significant days through mayor’s office
- participating on committees
- organizing and attending conferences and public forums
- responding to local issues of discrimination

Political Action:
- writing letters to politicians
- making telephone calls to politicians
- inviting politicians to public debates
- submitting contributions to government review panels on related issues
- writing letters to international government leaders
- membership in Amnesty International and other groups
- organizing peaceful protests
Appendix B: Sample of Interview Questions for Teachers

General Information:
1. How long have you been teaching?
2. In what subject area(s) do you teach?
3. How long have you been in your present assignment? In this community?
4. At which university did you obtain your teaching degree?
5. Have you taken any courses, or had special training in social justice issues?
6. How did you become interested in working with students on these issues?
7. Are you involved in any other social justice activism outside of this group?

General Information Regarding Social Justice Project:
8. What is the organizational structure of the social action project? (i.e., size, demographics, meeting schedule, format, roles, etc.)
9. How would you describe your role within the group/project?
10. How many students and teachers are presently involved?
11. How long has the organization been in existence at this school?
12. On what specific or general areas or topics does the project focus?
13. What are the objectives or goals of the group?
14. To what extent has the group been successful in attaining these goals?
15. To what do you attribute the group’s greatest achievements?
16. What challenges or barriers has the group faced?

Specific Information on the Project’s Efficacy/Challenges:
17. How does the group actively recruit members?
18. Is the group considered part of the school’s regular extra-curricular program?
19. Has the group sought or enjoyed administrative (school, board, district) support? Explain.
20. Has the group sought or enjoyed community involvement? If so, explain.
21. What are the present specific activities or planned activities of the group?
22. What are some past activities of the group?
23. How do you measure or evaluate the success of specific activities?
24. In what ways does the group attempt to effect social change? (i.e., on curricular, school, community, global issues)
25. How could the group improve its efficacy in dealing with social justice issues?
26. Has the group faced any challenges, now or in the past?
27. How has the group addressed these challenges?
28. How could the group better address these challenges?
Appendix C: Sample of Interview Questions for Students

*General Information:*
1. What grade are you in?
2. In what courses or school programs are you presently enrolled?
3. How long have you been at this school? In this community?
4. Have you taken any courses related to the areas of diversity or social justice?
5. Do you have any special training in social justice activism?
6. How did you become interested in working with other students/teachers on these issues?
7. Are you involved in any other social justice activism outside of this group?

*General Information Regarding Social Justice Project:*
8. What is the organizational structure of the social action project? (i.e., size, demographics, meeting schedule, format, roles, etc.)
9. How would you describe your role within the group/project?
10. How many students and teachers are presently involved?
11. How long has the organization been in existence at this school?
12. On what specific or general areas or topics does the project focus?
13. What are the objectives or goals of the group?
14. To what extent has the group been successful in attaining these goals?
15. To what do you attribute the group's greatest achievements?
16. What challenges or barriers has the group faced?

*Specific Information on the Project's Efficacy/Challenges:*
17. How does the group actively recruit members?
18. Is the group considered part of the school's regular extra-curricular program?
19. Does the group seem to have the administration's support? If so, explain.
20. Does the group seek community involvement? If so, explain.
21. What are the present specific activities or planned activities of the group?
22. What are some past activities of the group?
23. How would you measure or evaluate the success of specific activities?
24. In what ways does the group attempt to bring about social change? (i.e., on classroom, school, community, global issues)
25. How could the group improve its success in dealing with social justice issues?
26. Has the group faced any challenges, now or in the past?
27. How has the group addressed these challenges?
28. How could the group better address these challenges?
Appendix D: Ten Ways to Foster Activist Coalitions in Secondary Schools

In each interview, and across the wide variety of topics and issues we discussed, I shared with my participants a common desire to arrive at a fuller understanding of the challenges and opportunities of working for social justice in school-based coalitions. Our reflective discourse regularly yielded moments of wisdom and insight, solidly grounded in the understandings of daily teaching and activism. From these data I have identified some factors that appear critical to sustaining AR and MC efforts in schools.

I hope these factors will offer educators, students and community activists some specific guidance and encouragement to initiate or extend their own activism. Social justice coalitions could be based in a school, across several schools, in a non-governmental agency in the community, under the umbrella of an existing organization, or as part of a college or other institution. My own experience has been in a large public high school of about 1900 students in a small western Canadian city of about 68,000 people, but as my participants have shown, these starting points have relevance across a variety of other settings.

1. Establish a guiding principle for the project.

Like many of the participants I interviewed for this research, our STOP group formulated a vision for our activism at its outset that would let all interested staff and students know what it was about. As an example, a guiding principle could be to promote the belief that people should be judged based on their own merits, rather than on characteristics like age, gender, religion, “race,” ethnic background, physical appearance, sexual orientation, or other factors unrelated to the quality of their character.

In the case of STOP, we state in our brochure and other literature that we stress education over confrontation, but are not afraid of challenging racism, sexism, homophobia, and other various forms of narrow-mindedness and discrimination that exist. Addressing systemic inequities and other hidden barriers can also be stated explicitly in a statement of principles or goals. A solid basis for this principle can be found in the first article of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”
2. Organize and promote an initial meeting.

The lessons from the most successful and longest standing social justice groups—along with those whose efforts did not materialize into a lasting program—point to the importance of early efforts to mobilize like-minded friends and peers to help organize the group. Activists are advised to set a meeting time and place and spread the word any way possible. It is important to establish a meeting spot that is easy to find and accessible to the widest variety of people possible. I would recommend using word-of-mouth, flyers, e-mail, web sites, school bulletins, posters, signs or whatever other ways might be effective to inform and mobilize interested people.

In our school, we usually announce in the printed school bulletin in September: “Are you interested in issues of fairness and social justice? Do you wish to take action and speak out against racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination? If so, check out the award-winning STOP program that meets every Wednesday at lunch in room 820.” This year we attracted about 40 students and some new staff members to the first meeting. Even if only a few people show up, the publicity may have already signalled a new focus on diversity in the school, and besides, it only takes a few committed people to start to make a difference. The group can use its early meetings to brainstorm on new ways to recruit other members, including creating eye-catching posters, using the school’s audio-visual equipment to produce promotional ads, creating a permanent school display, or even handing out flyers. Maintaining a regular meeting time and date helps establish stability in the program through a consistent routine for its members.

3. Become—or find—an enabling adult facilitator.

If you are a teacher or administrator who wishes to start an activist coalition with students in the school, you may wish to offer to serve as the group’s advisor. Achieving a balance of having meaningful input into the group’s direction and sitting back to allow young people to take ownership of the group is a difficult task. Each of the teachers with whom I spoke talked of mediating this constant tension. The student activists were especially aware of the potential value to a group of a respectful adult who can perform the role as liaison with the school’s administration, while allowing enough room for autonomy and the students’ agency in the organization.
Even those students who chose to work in student-only groups admitted how useful it could be to have someone with connections in the system to “go to bat” for the group, offer support and resources, make crucial phone calls that require an adult figure, help coordinate events, and perhaps trouble-shoot possible barriers to success. As some of the student participants in this research pointed out, an added benefit of a continuing adult figure in the group is to provide continuity. Rather than reinventing the wheel each year as students graduate, a committed staff facilitator can offer valuable advice toward short-cuts, pre-established community contacts, existing pitfalls, and good sources of support that may be invisible to neophytes. Of course, activist students are advised to avoid persons with controlling personalities, and those who are inflexible or self-centred, especially if they would prefer to keep their group student-centered and cooperative. There are some significant personal and professional risks to this type of work, so the teacher-advisor or adult contact person should be prepared to handle some resistance, opposition, and even hostility without getting rattled or intimidated.

Early career teachers may be especially vulnerable to these dangers, but as my own experience has revealed, beginners can also find a pivotal space in their career for initiating an exciting focus for the remainder of their professional lives. Working with students in extra-curricular programs is a rewarding way to forge new and healthy relationships with students as capable young adults and fellow activist colleagues. Newer teachers may also be less likely to be aware of—or adhere to—existing administrative restraints, traditional roles and routines of the school, community resistance, and other possible barriers to social justice activism. For the seasoned veteran teacher, such engagement with young people in the struggle for fairness can provide a vital injection of meaning into a teaching career.

4. Find relevant issues on which to focus.

With a guiding principle in mind, activist groups need to sharpen their focus. Finding specific issues to tackle may require some flexibility and negotiation, but this step will provide a useful starting point for possible activities of a fledgling group. Members of activist groups such as STOP and the others whom I interviewed all admit sometimes to wanting to do too much, to spread ourselves a bit thin, but there are endless justice issues out there that seem to need addressing. The prevailing attitude seems to be, “If we don’t address this issue,
who will?” My observations confirm that a group does not fail because it sets its sights too high and misses; more often, it sets its target too low, and hits. The more ambitious and enthusiastic the first meetings are, the more likely a group will garner the kind of momentum to accomplish at least a few of its initial objectives. A good starting point would be to brainstorm a list of “hot issues” surrounding diversity and the acceptance of differences, and try to set priorities for each action based on that particular community’s greatest needs, considered in light of the group’s resources and members’ individual interests.

Based on my interviews and experiences, these are a few of the possible areas of interest for activist groups just starting out: (a) countering organized hate group activity in the school or community; (b) addressing human rights issues on a national or international level (capital punishment, government torture, political prisoners, rights of children, child labour, oppression of women, and the like); (c) dealing with racist or sexist humour in the school; (d) confronting and understanding injustices faced by Aboriginal peoples; (e) addressing the discriminatory treatment of young people by the media or local businesses; (f) exposing and eliminating discrimination based on sexual orientation; (g) critiquing hiring policies of local school districts, city staff, and corporations; (h) examining gaps in local and provincial human rights legislation and enforcement; (i) uncovering historical examples of racism from the local community; (j) exploring cultural or ethnic diversity in the community; (k) examining the divisions between cliques or peer groups in a school; (l) monitoring local news coverage of diversity, immigration, human rights, discrimination; and (m) eradicating sexual harassment, gender inequities, and gender discrimination.

Most activists with whom I spoke showed an openness to taking on projects that may not seem on the surface to be diversity or human rights issues, but which have a fairness component at their core. One example from STOP’s experience is our protesting of Shell Oil’s ongoing mistreatment of the Ogoni people and their land in Nigeria. On the surface it appears to be a situation to be addressed by an environmental issues club, but upon closer examination, is really about what Dr. Owens Wiwa—brother of slain writer-activist Ken Saro Wiwa—calls “environmental racism.” Inviting both Dr. Wiwa and a high-ranking Shell Oil official to our school to speak to hundreds of students, and organizing a well-publicized legal protest of a local Shell gas station, helped expose our members and others in our community to the brutal oppression of a community of people by a multinational corporation that values
its own profits over the health and well-being of those people. In a community where the predominant livelihood is based on the oil business, this was risky activism, but the students insisted on probing the situation further to reveal the social justice concerns at its core, and taking action toward change.

5. **Find reliable sources and do the necessary homework.**

Student and teacher activists alike remind us of the importance of researching one’s topics well. Since each activist group will likely be consulted as a source of reliable information on social justice issues, it seems reasonable to wish to consult as many resources as possible. Those with whom I spoke identified a wealth of relevant information on a wide variety of topics, including reputable web sites, local experts, government and non-government diversity-serving agencies, local and national news media sources, the public library, magazines, newspapers, and professional videos on the topics.

In addition, some of the activists with whom I spoke often consulted scholarly sources in planning and situating their own work. Local colleges and universities have a wealth of resources, both academic and professional, for educators and students to utilize. Activists can choose to take action on any number of issues in their local community, region, province, country, or on a global scale. A warning from some of the student participants advises seeking a balance in sources of information consulted. They also recommend developing and using critical skills to recognize the biases in all reporting, specific techniques used in propaganda, and to see what the core issues are in apparently complex situations. Young people have often been told by adults, “It is very complex and you simply do not understand the complete picture here.” Such patronizing treatment seems designed to stop their activism before they can disrupt the status quo, and therefore, in light of the aims of social justice activism, should be ignored.

Below are some examples of regional and national sources for further information and resources. Although these are mainly Albertan sources, there are equivalent agencies in each province, across the U.S., and in other countries where individuals are working for positive social change. Because these will inevitably change and evolve, and because there are many more such organizations, activists are advised to establish and maintain fresh linkages with these and other groups:
• Cultural Diversity Institute <www.ucalgary.ca/cdi> engages in research and advocacy on human rights and diversity issues
• Alberta Association for Multicultural Education <www.albertaassociationformulticulturaleducation.ca> offers support and resources related to promoting cultural diversity and combatting racism
• Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre (1-403-220-2505) has a wide array of publications and video resources related to human rights law and education
• provincial human rights commissions; Alberta’s is: <www.albertahumanrights.ca>
• Alberta Diversity Network <www.divnet.org>
• Alberta Teachers’ Association <www.teachers.ab.ca> has various committees and publications related to human rights and diversity issues
• Intercultural and Second Languages Council of the ATA <fis.ucalgary.ca/islc>
• Canadian Heritage <www.march21.com>
• Canadian Race Relations Foundation <www.crr.ca> offers resources, research support, awards, and grants for action projects
• Unite Against Racism campaign <www.uniteagainstracism.com>
• Artists Against Racism <www.artistsagainstracism.com>
• National Film Board of Canada (1-800-267-7710)
• United Nations Association of Canada <www.unac.com>
• Ten Days for Social Justice <www.web.net/~tendays>
• Amnesty International <www.amnesty.ca/youth> has a youth section that offers support and resources on taking action on rights issues
• Harmony Movement <www.harmony.ca> offers an excellent “Exploring Harmony Educational Resource Kit” to encourage explorations in cultural and other diversity


Volunteer activist programs seem to work best when specific roles and responsibilities are designated. Even those groups whose members expressed reluctance to set up a hierarchical structure with official titles have found it useful to have a lead person or team on a specific event. In this way, one person becomes identified as a source for coordinating tasks and time-lines so that plans get made and activities organized. Groups that attempt to involve as many of the members as possible in each event or undertaking tend to encourage a higher level of commitment and ownership in the group. It seems apparent that maintaining an egalitarian and consensus seeking framework within such groups helps to model the cooperation and harmony that it seeks to inculcate in the broader society.
7. Seek administrative approval and support.

It seems a prudent idea to inform the central office staff and principal’s secretary once an activist group has been organized in a school. Activists may be amazed at the volume of materials received annually by each school around social justice, diversity and cultural issues, so many of which typically get filed or discarded. Founding a program that addresses these issues also means that there is now a central clearinghouse for all social justice materials. With the administration’s support, many of the excellent resources that become available to a school-based group can be purchased by the school itself, the students’ council, the parent or school council, the school district, or through the group’s own fund-raising.

Many students and teachers, and much of the literature on school change, warned of the dangers of dealing with resistant administrators, and the frustrations with all the barriers that can arise in response to social justice coalitions. This proves daunting for some, but the challenge that can emerge is how to position the activism as a value and strength for the school or district. Winning over a reluctant administration through strategic framing of initiatives—using terminology such as promoting fairness, building harmony, reducing violence, maintaining safe and caring schools, or celebrating diversity—can invigorate the membership and relevance of a coalition that can then continue its work toward challenging racism and other systemic forms of oppression within a supportive environment.

8. Strengthen existing social justice networks.

The overwhelming consensus from my participants and my own years of activism is that the work seems more rewarding when other agencies and groups are involved. Many activists spoke of an additional layer of coordination when an outside group joins in the planning or implementing of a specific undertaking, but they all expressed the many benefits of organizing joint projects with groups with similar goals. Our own program has worked cooperatively with non-profit agencies in the community, programs at our local college, with local service clubs, and with a few different government departments. One benefit is that each group gains new perspectives on the issues being addressed, as its members learn to work across differences in approach and priorities. Often other people have done similar work or addressed related concerns, saving the other partner valuable time and energy. Still, if too much conflict is generated so as to be unproductive, or if either party does not seem
comfortable with some aspect of a particular project, it may well be best to work independently.

Any kind of networking that school coalitions can do in their immediate community can be very useful. Some activists spoke of sending letters or making calls to agencies or groups that seemed naturally related to the issues they are tackling. In many cases there are people who have a common interest in these issues and want to get more involved, or have resources—not just financial—that can help another group achieve its goals. Our STOP group is very fortunate to receive many generous grants and gifts, letters and calls of support on a regular basis, and many opportunities for individual members who want greater involvement in other community initiatives. For example, our student members are routinely invited to serve on committees seeking meaningful input from young people, learn about volunteer opportunities, and are often are called to help organize or attend special events, meetings, and conferences.

Some possible community contacts include local immigrant/refugee serving agencies, women’s shelters and crisis centres, service clubs, youth associations, police race relations and community relations committees, AR or MC community and school committees; gay and lesbian support groups, and teacher association committees on diversity, human rights, and social justice.

9. Get attention and raise awareness in a variety of ways.

The groups that reported the highest rate of success in attracting new members and maintaining continuity from year to year, all recommended that new groups try to create a positive stir in the community. Members of activist programs can use all kinds of ways to share their message and attract attention to these social justice issues. Suggestions for creative ways to garner this awareness raising include drama presentations, interactive theatre, street protests, awareness events in relevant and legal public places, musical concerts, comedy, posters, puppets, face-painting and costumes, petitions, public debates, charity fund-raisers, and participation in community forums.

School programs are encouraged to get the local media involved. Activists know that media outlets must fill up each broadcast or newspaper every day, so will cover any of the negative events about young people in the community as they arise, if all they rely on is a
police radio scanner. It seems far more prudent and proactive to learn to write an effective news release and send it to all the media outlets in advance of an event, or at the launch of a specific awareness campaign. Media experts may even be willing to come and give a short workshop to a group, encouraging them to write successful press releases. Some basic tips include having an interesting opening line, including all the relevant information, using a few quotations from people involved, and listing a contact person and telephone numbers. Many activist group members will also regularly write letters to the editor and even guest editorial opinion columns on contentious local issues of relevance. Even after an event has taken place, groups may consider sending a few good photos with a detailed commentary to a local newspaper outlet; they often appreciate the information and may decide to provide coverage even as a light feature, another small step in helping to share key messages.

10. Have fun.

A final note must include recognizing the sense of optimism that seemed to pervade each of the thriving groups with whose members I spoke. Even though this work takes its members into the ugly and often discouraging underbelly of human cruelty, hatred, and apathy, it also offers great promise for a better future. Those activists who seem to enjoy the greatest personal reward from this struggle somehow manage to strike a balance between facing the unpleasant realities of racism and other oppression, along with the shining hope of achieving a more equitable and inclusive society as an end goal. Along the way there can be both laughter and tears, and hopefully, a growing appreciation of the many intangible benefits of camaraderie in the collective struggle for social justice.

The factors above are not intended to be an exhaustive or prescriptive list of foolproof ways to foster activism, but rather, suggestions that have emerged from the lived experiences of veteran and rookie activists alike. Each can be adapted or adopted as suits a particular school or community setting. The notes above are provided as a starting-off point for those who seek to initiate further activism, or as a boost to more experienced activists already working in coalitions of students and teachers toward social justice.