CIVIC EDUCATION AMONG HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED YOUTH IN AN URBAN SETTING: PROMISING PRACTICES

BY

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Many American citizens have remained outside of the political process and therefore have not been able to effectively advocate for the full rights, privileges and responsibilities that American citizenship makes possible. For youth from historically marginalized populations who are growing up in lower-income urban areas, the issue becomes complicated by structural and social forces that impact the community and the schools. Although education may be a vehicle to provide young people with the requisite elements for civic engagement, questions abound as to what "type" of civic education curricula and instruction may be successful amidst the complex context of low-performing schools and urban communities.

This dissertation investigated a classroom and curriculum in-use to better understand the contextual factors that inhibit or advance learning in this environment. The sample class, eighth grade students at an urban middle school, was observed as they engaged in a study of the citizen's role in the public policy making process using the Center for Civic Education's *Project Citizen* Curriculum. Following a qualitative case study model multiple methods of data collection were employed that allowed for the students' experiences to be explored in depth. Findings from this study provide educators

and policy-makers with crucial insights to: curriculum materials and teaching strategies that the students related well to; promising practices to increase student performance; and a greater understanding of the students' knowledge and skills beyond what standardized test scores can reveal. The findings also challenge traditional notions of citizenship education and consider practices that may have specific relevance to historically marginalized populations.

Keywords: Civic education, urban education, the achievement gap, social justice, Project Citizen

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Civic education among historically marginalized youth in an urban setting: Promising practices

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CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Civic engagement is considered a vital part of a thriving democracy. It is through public engagement that individuals may contribute to the maintenance, governance and improvement of their local, state and national community. Many political and social scientists view public engagement to be a cornerstone of American Democracy, without which a vital element of the system of checks and balances may be lost and public officials could be free to act without the constraints placed on them by an active constituency. Beyond the potential for a corrupt or self-serving government, Robert Putnam (2000) warns that diminished civic engagement threatens the health of our democracy through a loss of social capital brought about through associations. While civic engagement is an issue of importance for all Americans, it is one that holds special significance for individuals from historically marginalized populations.

Many individuals in American society have experiences of social, economic and political discrimination as members of minority groups. For individuals from such groups, a lack of civic engagement can represent a lost opportunity for improved conditions and advancement through the processes of government or collective community action. This can become a very serious issue, for as political scientist Iris Marion Young explains, “The privileged are usually not inclined to protect and further the interests of the oppressed…partly because to some degree their privilege depends on the continued oppression of others” (Young, 1995, p. 189). To counter this, members of historically marginalized groups must be positioned to advocate for their own interests and advancement in American society. This is best accomplished through varied

methods of formal and informal civic and political engagement. What these methods are and engagement among members of minority groups will be discussed in the next section.

Civic Engagement among Members of Minority Groups

Current Status

> "Democracy, as 'government of the people, by the people and for the people,' depends ultimately on the political wisdom and civic spirit of the people" (Pangle & Pangle, 2000, p. 21).

A civic spiritedness is expressed and often measured through civic engagement in our society. Civic engagement broadly refers to individual and collective actions aimed towards issues of public concern. Such actions may occur through informal means such as; joining civic organizations, attending community or civic meetings, volunteering, contacting officials, and voicing protest of current social and/or government conditions. These avenues hold potential for individuals to positively affect their communities. However, to be effective, such actions require a combination of knowledge and skills, with a willingness and belief that one can make a difference. Formal methods of engagement with the political system offer other means of affecting change. This may be in the form of lobbying government officials, serving in public office, and voting.

Whether it be the formal or informal methods described above, recent data suggests that African Americans and Hispanics are less likely to be civically engaged than are whites. Whites are more likely to volunteer in formal organizations, attend community meetings, and participate in community projects (Foster-Bey, 2009). Although educational attainment and income are also positively correlated to volunteerism, when factors of income and education are controlled for, whites are still

more likely to volunteer and participate in community projects (Foster-Bey; Heyman & Levine, 2009). It is noted that significant contributions to the community may come through less organized means such as church work, and support of community and family members. This is particularly true for African Americans and Hispanics. However, whites tend to partake in more formal and collective means of engagement.

Voting is a formal method of engagement that is viewed by many as a fundamental act of one's civic responsibility and is often studied by political and social scientists. Research reveals that voter registration rates and voting patterns among all eligible voters has declined over the last forty years, but whites are still more likely to register and vote than are African Americans or Hispanics, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). A breakdown of data by race and ethnicity from the 2000 Presidential election illustrate this pattern. Among eligible voters, 62% of whites voted, 57% of African Americans voted, 47% of Hispanics, and 43% among eligible Asians and Pacific Islanders voted. The election of 2008 brought about slight increases in voter participation among African Americans and Latinos. In 2004 African Americans accounted for only 11 percent of the overall vote and this number rose to 13 percent in 2008. Similarly the Latino vote increased from 8 to 9 percent between 2004 and 2008 (NonprofitVote.org, http://www.nonprofitvote.org/Voter-Turnout-2008.html) However it should be noted that in the 2008 election many members of minority groups were strong supporters for President Barack Obama, America's first African American president (Frey, 2009). Given the significance of this election it cannot be determined if increases in minority voter turn out will continue at this rate or if this was the result of minority individuals desire to support a candidate from a minority group. What is certain is that demographic

patterns in the U.S. are shifting and projections indicate by 2020 eligible voters in the 18-29 age group will be 46 percent minority. This fact presents American society with many new challenges.

Future Concerns

A 2002 report, *Civic Engagement among Minority Youth*, presented data on political and civic behaviors among youth ages 15-25. A breakdown of the data based on ethnic and racial categories revealed a complex picture. Voter turnout among young people in this age group is on the decline across all ethnic and racial groups. However, white youth are still more inclined to vote and Hispanic youth are the least likely to. The gap is narrowed between white and African American youth when it comes to voter registration rates in a presidential election year, but the gap widens with whites more likely to register in mid-term years. Hispanic youth register to vote at significantly lower rates in both instances. Additionally, white youth expressed a greater belief that they could make a difference in solving problems in their community, as well as a belief that their vote would count. African American youth were the least confident that their vote would make a difference and African American and Hispanic youth expressed less trust in government than their white counterparts.

On the other hand African American youth demonstrated strong views and behaviors consistent with civic engagement. African American youth were most likely to view voting as important, white and black youth have volunteered at about the same rates over the last two decades, and Hispanic and African American youth reported they were more likely to talk about politics with their parents than did white youth. This data suggests that African American youth have inclinations towards civic engagement, but

lack trust in government. This may account in part for lower rates of voting among African American youth. Hispanic youth also seem to be inclined to participate politically on the informal measures of discussing politic issues with their parents. However they too lack trust in the system and doubt their potential to solve community problems. These beliefs may also influence lower voter turnout rates for Hispanic youth. This data suggests that efforts geared towards civically engaging members of historically marginalized groups must capitalize on positive dispositions towards engagement, while working to build a sense of efficacy and trust in the system.

Underlying Causes of the Civic Engagement Gap

Another important element in understanding civic engagement is socioeconomic status. Although voting patterns are somewhat lower among members of minority groups, when researchers controlled for factors of education and income, no discernable differences were found based on ethnicity (Eagleton Institute of Politics). Additionally, one's level of educational attainment is strongly correlated to political engagement; the more one is educated, the more likely he/she is to be informed about political issues and vote (Hart and Atkins, 2001; Langton and Jennings, 1968). Income levels are also correlated to several indicators of civic and political engagement, such as knowledge of political issues. Carini and Keeter found that "those with higher incomes are more informed than those with lower incomes," (cited in Levinson, 2007, p. 5). Gaps in participation on other indicators such as membership in political parties, making campaign contributions, volunteering on a campaign, protesting or contacting an elected official are also linked to one's income with those who earn over $75,000 annually six times more likely to participate than those earning less than $15,000 annually,

(Levinson). Therefore, any discussion aimed at understanding civic engagement among minority populations must include a consideration of the effects of income and education.

U.S. census data on families living in poverty make clear that poverty in America is largely correlated to ethnicity. In 2006 only 6.1 percent of families identified as white, non-Hispanic were living in poverty. Yet, among black families the percentage was 23.1 percent. These numbers mean that a child born into an African American family is almost four times more likely to live in poverty than is a white child. The situation is almost as dismal for Hispanic families where 19.5 percent are living in poverty, more than two times the rate for white families. The figures on educational attainment tell a similar story. Among white, non-Hispanic 25-29 year olds, the percentage of individuals who have completed a bachelor's degree or higher is 34.3%, and for those in the 30-34 age group the percentage is 36.4%. The reality is quite different for minority students. For black students in the 25-29 age group, only 18.6% have a bachelor's degree or higher, and for the 30-34 year olds in this group the number is 21.8%. Even more disturbing is the fact that among Hispanic individuals, 25-29 a mere 9.5% have a bachelor's degree or higher and only 13% have attained this level of education among the 30-34 year olds in this group. Given this data, correlations between lower levels of minority civic engagement and lower income and educational levels can be made. However these relationships are only part of the puzzle.

Individuals' level of trust in government, their sense of political efficacy, and their level of civic duty are also strongly related to a willingness to participate in politics, (Fridkin, Kinney and Crittenden, 2006). Many studies have shown that trust in government institutions is often lacking among members of minority groups, (Hart &

Atkins, 2001; Levinson, 2007; Macdonald, 2006), which may account in part for lower levels of participation in acts such as voting. Attitudes towards government and one's civic identity are formed through various experiences, both in and out of school. Youniss, McLellan and Yates (1997) found that participation in youth organizations and service during adolescence positively impacts adult political participation. On the other hand, Hart and Atkins (2001) research reveals that if young people are to be inclined towards civic participation themselves, they need to be exposed to an adult population that is inclined to vote, participate in civic life and that is knowledgeable about the workings of government. Thus the context in which young people are civically socialized appears to be of utmost importance. The context in which many urban, minority youth live and attend school presents many challenges, for a host of reasons, to the formation of a civic identity that emphasizes commitment to American principles, ideals and responsibilities.

The story of the American city in the last fifty years has been one of white and middle class flight. In the wake of this flight practices of redlining and discrimination worked to segregate minorities into areas of cities with only the poorest housing available, (Anyon, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993). A lack of policy actions to keep businesses in urban areas led to a steady decline of employment opportunities for the working class city residents, (Gephart, 2000). The net effect of these practices has been the segregation of minorities into areas of concentrated poverty with little economic opportunity.

The situation is exacerbated by the tendency for individuals who achieve educational and financial success to move out of the city. Often these are individuals who

possess human capital, or knowledge that if shared with other members of the community, or family, could serve to make all more productive in their endeavors, (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Examples of a high degree of human capital existing within a family or community would be the presence of individuals who are knowledgeable about the law, such as lawyers, or educators or successful business people. Such individuals not only share crucial knowledge with other members of the community, but they serve as role models. Given the current conditions of urban America, the role models that many researchers see as crucial, are simply in short supply. Thus many of America's minority children are growing up in economic, social and political isolation, (Gephart, 2000).

Another factor considered necessary for civic engagement is a sense of efficacy and a belief that the system essentially is fair and works. Unfortunately many minority adults and children may be inclined towards a less than positive view of their role in the social and political system due to long-term societal and institutional discrimination. In his theory of civic engagement, Martin Sanchez-Jankowski (2002) has concluded that individuals who are members of minority groups that have suffered collective group discrimination and who are also of a low social class ranking, are less likely to be positively inclined towards civic-mindedness and civic engagement. Thus in areas of concentrated poverty it is likely that fewer adults will exhibit traditional forms of civic engagement.

Among younger people similar trends seem to be forming. Focus groups held with minority students who attend schools in low-income and under resourced sections of California, revealed that forty percent of the high school students and half of the middle

school students believed that the government was designed to serve only the rich. When presented with the statement, “America is basically fair and everyone has an equal chance to get ahead,” only twenty-three percent of the students studied agreed (Fine, Burns, Payne & Torre, 2004). Rubin (2007b) has found that urban youth face daily encounters that challenge notions of civic ideals expressed in their civics textbooks and therefore lead to a sense of “disjuncture” between their lives and the ideals they are presented with. Such disjuncture is the result of failures of civic institutions and those in authority to provide these youth with safe environments in which they can flourish. All of this research suggests that young people who live in communities with high levels of poverty, experiences of systemic discrimination and low levels of civic engagement among adults as discussed, are at risk of becoming adults who are do not exercise their full rights of civic participation.

The Purpose of the Study and the Research Questions

The connections between income, education and acts of civic engagement do not bode well for children growing up in poverty today. With current demographic patterns and predictions as they are, it is foreseeable that large numbers of Americans will grow up in households with low levels of economic and educational attainment. Many minority children will also live in cities that are economically and socially isolated. This outcome could lead to a situation where power becomes consolidated in the hands of a few who have had the economic and social means to obtain and remain in power. At best this may lead to uninformed decision-making that fails to account for the needs and desires of many Americans. At worse this could lead to a system where those in power serve their interests, even at the expense of others, and thus perpetuate the cycle.

It is imperative that schools engage in the preparation of lower-income, urban minority youth for meaningful political and civic engagement. How this can be achieved is a central line of inquiry explored in this study. While many factors have been correlated to civic participation, social scientists generally recognize that in order for individuals to participate effectively in the system they must possess knowledge of American principles and practices of democracy, the cognitive and participatory skills needed for successful participation in American civic and political life, and the character traits necessary to the preservation and improvement of a constitutional representative democracy (Patrick & Vontz, 2001). When individuals or groups are denied opportunities to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills, as well as with the desire to become civically engaged, they will not be able or willing to effectively participate in the system. Thus educational experiences must be cultivated that provide the necessary development of knowledge, skills and dispositions.

This study explores the possibilities a particular civics education program holds in providing an avenue for young people from historically marginalized groups living in depressed urban communities to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to participate effectively in the democratic process and ultimately become agents for change in their communities. *We the People…Project Citizen***,** *(Project Citizen)* is a civics program that engages students in the process of identifying and researching a problem, considering existing and alternative policy solutions that address the problem, proposing a policy solution and devising a plan of action to monitor and influence the adoption of the proposed policy solution. *Project Citizen* was first piloted among twelve states in 1995 and has since expanded to all of the fifty states and as well as American Samoa, the

District of Columbia, Guam and Puerto Rico. As of November 2006, approximately 22,500 teachers have taught *Project Citizen* to over 1,400,000 students, (downloaded from www.civiced.org on 12/4/07). The program is primarily funded by the U.S. Department of Education by an act of Congress and supported nationwide by the National Council of State Legislators. Research has shown that through this program students have demonstrated positive gains in knowledge and skills needed for effective civic engagement, as well as some positive shifts in political and civic attitudes. (Atherton, 2000; Soule, 2003, 2005; Vontz & Patrick, 2001).

While these research findings are very encouraging, they leave many questions unanswered that this study sought to address. Primary among these questions was how would youth from traditionally marginalized populations, who live in a community that does not reflect many of the ideals of the American Dream, experience the curriculum? Would the classroom experiences help or hinder the students' development as citizens, and could experience with *Project Citizen* provide the educational experiences necessary for marginalized populations to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions associated with productive civic engagement?

A central focus of this study was to gain insight into factors that encouraged and/or inhibited civic engagement among the students studied. This focus opened the study to exploring the context of the students' lives beyond the classroom. In order to better comprehend the needs of the students and understand how or why some educational experiences may have more success than others, an awareness of the school and community context was necessary. Thus this is a story of the intertwining communities in which the students lived in and attended school. Viewing the students'

experiences through this broader lens helped to shed light on an array of other pressing, and related, educational issues. Among these are conditions in urban education, community challenges as experienced by urban youth and effective pedagogical practices in urban education. All conditions which have bearing on civic engagement.

This study also explored notions of knowledge, how we access knowledge and what approaches are most appropriate for the transmission of knowledge to disenfranchised populations. Within the field of social studies education there is a debate regarding appropriate approaches in citizenship education among minority and disenfranchised populations. Despite its large-scale implementation, *Project Citizen* has not been framed and theorized as a strategy for effective citizenship education for minority youth in the U.S. Therefore the findings of this study offer important insights and perspectives to add to this discussion.

Just as important is the issue of how we access knowledge. Data on minority achievement is largely based on standardized test data. This is particularly troublesome when studying minority populations because many minority children are not performing well on standardized tests. Quantitative measurements are also designed to measure pre-defined standards of civic knowledge (Rubin, 2007b) and therefore do not provide researchers with opportunities to understand and explore what many young people know, think and feel about citizenship and the American democratic system. Additionally, data on minority achievement in quantitative studies is most often presented from a deficit perspective. Studies tend to disaggregate data on minority achievement only for reasons of comparison with Anglo students' performance (Grieshaber, 2001). In this manner the accepted standard of knowledge is that held by the Anglo students. This approach may

obscure the fact that many minority youth already possess many of the analytical thinking skills, organizational and communication skills associated with civic competence, but have not been provided with the academic vehicle to display these skills (Duncan-Andrade, 2004). The case study methodology applied in this study allowed for in-depth investigation of the knowledge, skills and civic attitudes displayed among the students, thus much more was learned about the students than could have through assessment measurements that focused on predetermined standards of knowledge displayed under a discrete set of conditions. The results tell us much about what these students already know, feel and can do, but perhaps most importantly, what capacities they hold for an academic and civic future.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1) What civic knowledge, skills and dispositions do students demonstrate while engaged in this curriculum?

2) What experiences during the course of this study appear to contribute to students' development of civic knowledge, skills and dispositions?

3) In what ways do the contexts of the community, school and classroom shape students' understandings of their roles as citizens?

Answers to these questions may inform a variety of audiences, educators, administrators, policy-makers, and curriculum developers to name a few, about the potential these students hold as students and citizens. Observing the students in their natural setting over an extended period of time allowed me to enter their world and let the students answer these questions for me. Although at times I was deeply troubled and saddened by what I learned from the students, I was also awed and inspired by them and their teacher. In chapters four, five and six, I share what I learned from them. I follow this

with a discussion of the implications of this research and my concluding thoughts in chapter seven. First though, in chapter two I frame the study in the context of related literature on urban education, the achievement gap, civic education, civic education programs aimed at historically marginalized populations, and multiple perspectives on the education of minority students. This chapter is followed by an outline of my research methodology in chapter three.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAME

Several areas of literature were relevant to this study. In order to set the context for the study I first present a review of literature focused on urban education in America as this study was conducted at an urban middle school among minority students. Related to this discussion, an overview of the achievement gap that exists between white and minority students is presented along with a discussion on theories for why this gap persists. The correlations between academic performance, higher education, occupation, income and civic participation are so significant, that it is my contention that any attempts to increase civic engagement among underprivileged minority children must also increase the potential for academic achievement and intellectual empowerment among this population. Lastly, literature related to civic education will be reviewed based on three broad areas. This first area outlines criteria for civic education programs to effectively prepare individuals for democratic citizenship. Next, follows a discussion of research on the success of civic education in this endeavor. In the final section I review various perspectives on how civic education programs should be designed to best meet the needs of minority children.

This review of the literature situates this study in the scholarly research and literature and helps clarify how the findings of this study will contribute to the relevant discussions on effective civic education among minority urban youth. First though I begin with an overview of the theoretical perspective from which I approached my interpretation of the significance of the findings from the study.

Theoretical Frame

Disparities in opportunity and educational experiences can be studied and theorized from a variety of perspectives. Some researchers focus on macro level forces which influence and shape society for explanations. Such macro forces may exist in the form of structural conditions or cultural practices. On the opposite end of the spectrum is emphasis on the influence of micro forces, such as the family or an individual classroom. Borrowing from the traditions of theorists such as Giroux, I applied a more mixed approach that recognizes the larger context of macro forces that shape the students' lives, but also seeks to understand the intervening influence of the classroom experience. As Giroux explains, this enables the researcher, "to understand more thoroughly the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of dominance and constraint," (as cited in MacLeod, 1995, p.21).

Added to this perspective is Bourdieu's notion of a circular relationship that exists among structural forces and human response. He explains, **"…**objective structures tend to produce structured subjective dispositions that produce structured actions which, in turn, tend to reproduce objective structure," (as quoted in MacLeod, 1995, p. 15). In other words individuals contribute to the reproduction of class in the manner in which they respond to structural forces through internalized class values and attitudes. Therefore individuals whose class experience suggests that educational achievement does not lead to economic opportunity do not come to value education in the same light as individuals who come from backgrounds where the connection between educational achievement and economic advancement is more explicit in the lived experience of other members of their

social class. This perspective holds relevance for this study in the implications it has for civic engagement and group experience which leads to subjective beliefs about civic engagement. It is my contention that civic engagement in political activities among historically marginalized populations follows a similar pattern - the objective structure of the political system favors those with economic and political capital, thus leading to subjective dispositions that suggest that the political system does not lead to social or economic advancement, therefore engagement is not viewed as desirable, thus in turn reproducing the objective, political structure. Hence experiences must be introduced that substantially change individuals experiences so that a new set of subjective dispositions may be formed and acted upon.

The final scholar whose work I drew on is Paulo Friere. In his landmark book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Friere (1970) described the process by which the oppressed can alter their conditions and thus reclaim their humanity. Freire states that, "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (p. 49). A goal of the *Project Citizen* civic education curriculum is to develop among students the knowledge and skills needed to effectively influence and monitor the public policy making process. For students from historically marginalized populations and communities experiencing political, economic and social isolation, quality civic education experiences may be a vehicle for students to see an opening and enable them to improve their situations through formal processes.

For such a goal to be reached, a transformation in the delivery of civic education needs to occur. Freire explains that the traditional model of education serves to reinforce

the status quo. The teacher is seen as the depositor of knowledge and the student as the passive recipient, "The more completely they (the student) accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them," (Freire, 1970, p. 73). The type of education that Freire calls for to liberate the oppressed is one that requires students to become engaged in their learning and to think reflectively on important issues, past and present. It is through this type of education that students move beyond the role of passive recipient. Freire claims they, "will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge…they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation," (pp.81-82). The goal of increasing civic competencies among all students is to bring the students into the full participation of civic and political life. However for some students, attainment of such goals might ultimately, "…transform the underlying orders of social life" (Creswell, 1998, p. 81) and substantially improve social and material conditions for more Americans.

Combining the perspectives of each of these theorists presents a vision of intervening forces that may encourage more active civic engagement among historically marginalized minorities. Schools as formal institutions of socialization should play an integral role in this process. Schools and classrooms can be viewed as sites where experiences with the civic and political mechanisms of one's community may be developed. This perspective posits schools and classroom practices in a powerful position and it is with this lens that I sought to understand the implications of the community, school and classroom experienced by the students in this study. For, as Paul Willis explains, individuals interpret conditions through the lens of culture, the "collective use

and explorations of received symbolic, ideological and cultural resources to explain, make sense of and positively respond to 'inherited' structural and material conditions," (as cited in MacLeod, p. 20). Thus it is imperative that an understanding of how the varied settings of the community, school and classroom shape students' sense of civic identity and influence their development of civic preparedness.

Review of Literature

The Status of Urban Education

> When Max Weber and Karl Marx suggested that there were identifiable and socially meaningful differences in the educational knowledge made available to literati and peasant, aristocrat and laborer, they were of course discussing earlier societies…however, in advanced industrial societies such as Canada and the U.S. where class structure is fluid, students with different social class backgrounds are still likely to be exposed to qualitatively different types of educational knowledge (Anyon, 1981, p. 1)

Although almost thirty years ago, Anyon's observation that differences exist in curriculum topics and curriculum-in-use among schools based on social class, sadly still persist. Students in urban schools are still more likely to experience an education that lacks advanced and rigorous courses, (Fine, 2004; Michie, 1996; Obidah, Christie & McDonough, 2004) than are suburban counterparts, and instruction in the basics and rote memorization still permeate the curriculum of urban schools (Anyon, 1997; Delpit, 1996; Lipman, 2004; Nieto, 1996; Rubin, 2007a). Under such circumstances students are not given the opportunities to critically and creatively think about complex topics and issues, tasks that are central to the development of civic competencies. Additionally, urban schools serving largely minority, working class and poor populations are more likely to use styles of discipline and classroom management that are regimented and emphasize rules and behavioral control (Mason, 1999; Rubin). In contrast, suburban schools offer

more open classrooms that "favor greater student participation, less direct supervision, more student electives, and, in general, a value system stressing internalized standards of control." (MacLeod, as cited in Jackson, et al, 2006). Thus the lived school experiences of urban students are often do not foster democratic ideals, skills or tendencies.

Beyond academic concerns, many urban schools are failing children in other important ways. Many students who attend urban schools do not experience the schools as safe or welcoming environments (Rubin, Hayes & Benson, 2009; Schultz, 2008). Violence, overcrowding and indifference on the part of faculty and staff are some of the reasons cited for this among students. Additionally much of urban schooling occurs in buildings that are aging, under-resourced and in need of serious repairs (Kozol, 2005). In an age of media, urban children are poignantly aware of the disparities in their own education and that of suburban students. As one student commented to Rubin in her study of youth attending a low-income, city high school, "Why should some people be treated better just because they live in another place?" (2009, p. 217). Such understandings impact children on an emotional and psychological level.

Attendance at schools in low-income settings may actually lead to disillusionment and alienation among the youth overtime. A study based on the educational experiences of urban youth in California found the, "evidence suggests that these schools not only systematically undereducate…but they taint pride with shame, convert yearning for quality education into anger at its denial, and they channel active civic engagement into social cynicism," (Fine, Burns, Payne & Torre, p. 2193, 2004). As other researchers have pointed out, the messages that society and schools give to students are important in shaping one's self-identity (Banks, 2001; Beachum & McCray, 2004; Tatum, 1997).

When the messages suggest that minority children aren't important enough to have quality schools, teachers and instruction, and in essence are irrelevant to policy makers and government leaders, the students are likely to internalize these messages and come to see civic engagement as a dead end option for change.

On the other hand there is a growing body of literature that points to promising practices and outcomes in urban schools serving low-income and minority students. Authors Greg Michie and Brian Schultz both share personal stories of work with inner city students in some of Chicago's poorest and lowest performing schools. Michie's 1999 book, Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students, describes the trials and tribulations he experienced as a white middle class teacher trying to connect with his students. Ultimately Michie found that by connecting to his students' interests and cultural experiences, he was better able to build meaning for the students and develop their academic skills. Similarly, Schultz (2008) tells of his own teaching odyssey when implementing the *Project Citizen* curriculum, (the curriculum investigated in this study). Schulz empowers his students through the inquiry, problem-based learning experience and his belief in their abilities to succeed. Both men tell powerful stories of the potential for urban children to not only learn, but to excel.

Some researchers have drawn on their years of experience and offered practices or guidelines for academic achievement in urban schools. In the book, The Dream Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) profiles eight teachers who she identifies as successful educators of African American children. Although the teachers profiled exhibit differing teaching styles, Ladson-Billings presents the common threads for success to be teachers dedicated to

intellectually rigorous and culturally relevant classrooms. Through such practices Ladsen-Billings argues minority children can come to see education as meaningful and relevant and thus succeed in school. Similarly in, *"Lessons from Teachers,"* educator Lisa Delpit, (2006) claims that individual teachers can make the difference in transforming the experiences of urban children. When teachers employ practices such as maintaining high academic standards, assessing students regularly, responding to student needs, honoring and incorporating the home culture, and fostering a sense of community in the classroom, (these are just a few among her ten percepts for success in urban education), teachers of urban students can help students to succeed.

Other researchers present a picture of possibility through specific classroom practices. Rubin (2007b) found distinct teaching practices could build students' critical awareness and foster a sense of possibility among the students. In Rubin's study of civic education across different contexts, students from urban schools who experienced daily disjunctures with the civic ideals presented in text books developed different concepts of civic responsibility, in part due to the type of instruction students received. Specifically, students who were presented with opportunities to engage in discussions, critical analyses of current issues, simulations and democratic classroom practices, expressed more willingness to engage the system and work for change. Duncan-Andrade (2007) analyzed the classroom practices of successful teachers in low-income urban schools in California and found that the teachers shared several traits. Among these traits were behaviors that impacted classroom practices such as attention to planning, inclusion of students' lives in the learning process, and a respectful, intellectual and trusting classroom environment. Another study found that teachers employing practices associated with teaching for social

justice empowered students to engage intellectually and dream of improving their communities, (Esposito & Swain, 2009). These studies all demonstrate the promise of classroom practice in the successful education of urban students.

The Achievement Gap

The quality of instruction and the atmosphere that permeates many urban schools certainly may contribute to low academic performance among the students that attend these schools, however many researchers see these conditions to be only part of the problem leading to what has been dubbed, the "achievement gap". The achievement gap refers to a persistent gap between the academic performance of white students and African American and Hispanic students on a variety of indicators such as standardized tests, high school completion rates and enrollment in advanced placement courses in high school. African American children typically score below seventy-five percent of white students on standardized tests, (Jencks & Phillips, 1998) and African American and Latino children have been found to perform between three and four grade levels behind white students (Portes, 2008). Under the federally mandated 2002 No Child Left Behind, (NCLB) legislation schools are held accountable for making annual progress in raising standardized test scores. In a recent study of schools identified as underperforming the researchers found that schools that have black or Hispanic students as the largest racial/ethnic group meet the determined benchmarks about one-third of the time, while schools with whites as the majority group make the standard 53% of the time (Balfanz, Legters, West & Weber, 2005).

High dropout rates are also pervasive among minority students. Some reports list graduation rates among minority students to be only 50% of all black students, 51% of

Native American students, and 53% of all Hispanic students with male students faring even worse; black males 43%, Native American males 47%, and Hispanic males 48%, (Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004). A third measurement of academic achievement is enrollment in advanced placement courses. Not only are white students overrepresented in advanced placement classes and African American and Hispanic youth underrepresented, in many urban schools advanced placement courses are not even available to students (Lipman, 2004). On all of the measures presented, African American and Hispanic children appear to be lagging behind the educational achievement of white students, hence the notion of the achievement gap.

The achievement gap is an issue of significance when researching minority urban youth educational experiences in general, but this topic also has specific relevance to this study for several important reasons. First, many of the key predictors of political and civic engagement are related to educational success. As already noted, while race *appears* to be an indicator of engagement, once researchers controlled for educational levels and income, race no longer was a primary predictor of political and civic behavior, (Eagleton Institute of Politics, http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu/News-Research/NewestVoters.html). The fact that African American and Hispanic children appear to be lagging behind academically does not bode well for these children in terms of future levels of educational attainment, and ultimately income levels. In this way not only is the civic engagement among this group of students in jeopardy, so is that of their future children because the educational and financial resources of one's family, "are a fundamental element for understanding the political engagement of children," (Fridkin, Kenney, & Crittenden, 2006, p.607). Thus the cycle is perpetuated.

A second reason the achievement gap is important to this study is the significance of civic knowledge as a predictor of political and civic engagement. Researchers have found that higher levels of civic knowledge are positively correlated to civic engagement, (Kurtz, Rosenthal & Zukin, 2003). However, on measures of civic knowledge the trends associated with the achievement gap are present. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Civics is administered in order to evaluate "students' understanding of the democratic institutions and ideals necessary to become informed citizens in shaping America's future," (NAEP 2006 Executive Summary Report found at http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard). Recent data from the 2006 NAEP in Civics did reveal that at the fourth grade level students knowledge of civics was higher than it was in 1998, and that most of the knowledge gains were seen among lower-performing and minority students, however, this was not the case on the grade eight assessment.

The tests results among eighth graders demonstrated that white students scored higher than all other minority groups, with Hispanic, Native American and African American students receiving the lowest scores. Scores are further broken down and categorized at levels of basic, proficient or above. The criteria for each level of achievement are determined by the National Assessment Governing Board and can be found at http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard. The criteria for each level are:

> Basic: This level denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade
>
> Proficient: This level represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter
>
> Above: This level signifies superior performance

Students must reach the minimal requirements to be categorized at the level of basic. Scores that do reach the minimum benchmark requirements fall below the level of basic.

A comparison of achievement levels by ethnic group reveals large differences in performance. The results by ethnicity indicate that 30% of white students are performing at or above proficient levels, while only 9% of African American, 8% of Hispanic children and 7% of Native American children performed at this level. Results by ethnicity for students scoring at the level of basic civic knowledge are: 52% of white children, 41% of African American, 42% of Hispanic children and 39% of Native American children (NAEP, 2006). These results suggests that half of the population of African American and Hispanic children lack even partial mastery of key civic concepts and skills, while the percentage of white students scoring in this range was only 18%. Without the knowledge and skills identified as being necessary to participate effectively in a democracy, what can the future of civic engagement be among these sizeable percentages of African American and Hispanic groups?

Explanations for the Achievement Gap

There is no clear agreement among educators for why the achievement gap exists. Theorists' explanations range from factors resting within individuals and cultural groups, to structural inequities in society and social forces of reproduction, to problems in how instruction is delivered to minority children. Some theorists even combine factors to explain the tendency for lower academic performance among minority students. Each of these areas will be discussed.

For several decades the dominant theory for differing levels of academic performance was based on the notion of a "culture of poverty" (Lewis, 1966). This theory

posited that lower-income families and communities did not emulate cultural values associated with advancement such as hard work. Another theory suggests that a culture of resistance has developed within groups who have been involuntarily incorporated into American society, (Ogbu, 1987). According to this view, rejection of mainstream cultural values, such as academic achievement, are a means of claiming a sense of autonomy from the ruling majority. Although Ogbu's theory takes into account societal and historical forces, the blame for current conditions is ultimately viewed as resulting from actions and attitudes among those who are marginalized.

Other researchers attempt to understand behaviors and attitudes of individuals as members of groups living within and responding to distinct contexts. MacLeod (1995) identifies differing levels of aspirations to be a response to societal forces. According to this theory, children from lower-income strata do not see educational achievement leading to economic and social mobility among other members of their social class. This leads to very different notions of opportunity and aspirations among youth from this group. Although the conditions that inhibit social mobility are due to larger structural forces, the response becomes internalized and acted upon at the individual and group level. In this way, lower educational and occupational aspirations contribute to a reproduction of social class. Rubin, (2007b) offers that identity development is also influenced by complex interactions of societal and contextual forces. In her study of urban youth she found that for some students, daily occurrences of injustice and disappointment in the system lead to conscious decisions to not engage. For these individuals the system had shown itself to not apply to their lives, thus a lack of

engagement may represent a rational choice. Both of these theories recognize the actions and values of the individual resulting from both macro and micro forces.

Other researchers frame the problem of underachievement among minority children as the result of structural inequities. Some researchers recognize the relationship between different levels of cultural capital resulting from one's socioeconomic status and the probability of academic success, (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman and Hoffer, 1987). According to Bourdieu, schools play a role in legitimizing some behaviors and knowledge over others through rewards and sanctions. Students who come from homes with "more" cultural capital are privileged, while those who come from families that lack cultural capital are disadvantaged in schools and thus are not rewarded. Cultural capital in this sense are behaviors such as use of standard English, to be well-groomed, work well with others, and possess cultural knowledge associated with middle class life. Rist, (1970) suggested that teachers begin early in children's educational careers to judge one's potential for educational success based on such qualities and then sort children accordingly. Based on Rist's theory, children begin to gain a sense of themselves as either "smart" or not, a vision that is reinforced through teacher's expectations and treatment of students. Overtime this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of academic successes and failures. For each of these theorists children's educational success is closely related to their parent's educational attainment, economic status and how they are received in schools.

Other theories also see schools as serving to maintain the existing social structure. The "type" of education found across schools serving different social classes is viewed as one method to perpetuate the current class system and prepare workers to fulfill roles at

different levels in the workforces (Anyon, 1980; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Anyon found that students attending schools in working class communities received an education that focused on mastery of basic skills and learning to follow rules, skills needed to be good laborers. Conversely, students attending schools in middle class communities are more likely to acquire skills associated with middle management positions, such as leadership and problem-solving skills. Bowles and Gintis found, these schools, "favor greater student participation, less direct supervision, more student electives, and, in general, a value system stressing internalized standards of control" (1976, p. 56). Thus the status quo is maintained as middle and upper class students are prepared for roles in the workforce that will enable them to remain members of their current social class.

Inequities that maintain the status quo or limit opportunities can also be played out in the context of the school with practices such as tracking, curriculum choices and school funding. Tracking practices place disproportionate numbers of poor and minority students among the lower tracks (Fine, Anand, Jordan & Sherman, 2000; Fine, 2004) and therefore deny access to more rigorous programs of study. Selection of content and teaching strategies can also serve to perpetuate or challenge the status quo. Funding formulas leave schools serving lower-income communities chronically under-resourced and therefore without access to high quality materials, equipment and even teachers to support student achievement (Lipman, 2004). Structural inequalities also play a role outside of the school context where one's social class and income levels may serve to provide access to educational resources, such as tutoring or cultural activities, primarily among middle and upper class white children, but not for lower-income minority children, (Fine, 2004). For this group of theorists fundamental changes in how we

allocate resources and educate children need to occur in order to remedy many of the inequities that contribute to the achievement gap.

Another group posits the problem mainly with actions at the school level that give priority to some cultural groups at the expense of others. One perspective suggests that pedagogical practices can serve as barriers to student achievement. Teaching approaches focused on teacher directed learning, where a discreet body of knowledge is presented as the correct and often only narrative, may serve to reinforce the superiority of the dominant culture at the expense of minority cultures (Duncan, 2002; Erickson, 1987). This may serve to distance minority children from the learning experience. This school of thought also sees existing power structures maintained through subtle messages such as the "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 1975), where through action or inaction, messages of power related to gender, race and ethnicity are routinely delivered to students. When minority students are regularly treated as if their cultural knowledge and background are insignificant in the creation of knowledge, and may even be treated as deficits to overcome, a negative pattern can be set in motion; "repeated failure and repeated negative encounters with teachers, they [minority students] develop oppositional cultural patterns as a symbol of their dissatisfaction," (Erikson, p. 346). Thus academic success as defined by the mainstream may no longer be viewed as desirable among some minority students. This may have the consequence of perpetuating the achievement gap.

Another, closely aligned perspective suggests that cultural gaps that may be experienced among minority children in their educational experiences contribute to the achievement gap. Such cultural mismatches can easily be seen among children who are not native speakers of English. However among many urban minority students, such a

linguistic gap may occur when Standard English is not spoken in the home or community, yet the children are faced with readings, lessons and testing in Standard English, (Brice Heath as presented in MacLeod, 1995; Michie, 1996). Other cultural differences may exist in learning styles, expectations and values. Assumptions based on misunderstandings or cultural mismatches can be harmful to the psychological, and ultimately academic, well being of students, (Asante, 1991; Carter, 2005; Duncan, 2002; Erickson, 1987; Hale, 2001; Murrell, 1993). While many theorists recognize the impact of such cultural gaps, there is broad disagreement over proposed solutions to address these gaps. These differences are primarily found in how each answers the questions, who is best suited to teach minority children, how should minority children be taught and what should these children be taught? These questions will be addressed more specifically in a later section when approaches for providing quality civic education to minority children are considered.

Finally, there are theories for the persistence of the achievement gap related to the implications of policies, reform efforts and teacher preparation. Researchers look to government actions, particularly NCLB as aggravating the situation by encouraging schools to focus on test preparation rather than meaningful learning, (Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith & Theide 2000). Others fault reform efforts for a lack of follow through, (Cuban, 2007), or for focusing on early childhood intervention, but lacking support measures in the upper grades (Portes, 2008). Still others criticize reform efforts that call on scripted teaching practices as inhibiting teachers from utilizing practices more relevant to their particular students or from fostering critical thinking (Esposito and Swain, 2009). Lastly, Duncan-Andrade (2007) calls on teacher preparation programs to provide better

preparation of teachers for urban schools. All of these theorists see policy changes as a necessary part in remedying the current trend in educational achievement among minority and low-income children.

Whichever view one agrees or disagrees with, the data on minority school achievement makes clear that the current system is not succeeding at preparing minority students for academic success and higher education in a large scale manner. Adding to the body of knowledge of successful practices in urban education was one goal of this study. How such practices impacted preparation of democratic citizenship was the overarching concern. Therefore the following section looks specifically at literature related to education for democratic citizenship.

Democratic Citizenship Education

The Criteria

Although the precise words may change from one mission statement or set of standards to another, there are three generally agreed upon components of civic education for citizenship in a democracy, they are: 1) civic knowledge, 2) civic skills and 3) civic dispositions. Some educators further define civic skills by breaking them into two categories of cognitive skills and participatory skills (Patrick & Vontz, 2001). Whether it be the three or four component model, all aim to develop students' civic competence. Civic competence involves a students' knowledge of American principles and practices of democracy, the cognitive and participatory skills necessary to effectively participate in American civic and political life and the character traits necessary to the preservation and improvement of a constitutional representative democracy (Patrick & Vontz).

Civic competence is embodied throughout the leading guides for civic education such as the National Council for Social Studies' Ten Themes of Social Studies Instruction (1994), the National Standards for Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education 1994), the framework for international civics education outlined in *Civitas: A Framework for Civic Education* (The Center for Civic Education, 1991) and in the structure of the 1998 and 2006 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in Civics. The NJ state standards, (the standards relevant to this study as the class investigated is in a NJ public school) also reflect similar goals. At the time this study was conducted the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards for Social Studies Education stated, that students must:

> Acquire a basic understanding and appreciation of American traditions and values based on knowledge of history and of the development and functioning of the American constitutional system of government; Develop critical thinking skills which enable them to function as lifelong learners and to examine and evaluate issues of importance to all Americans, (NJ Department of Education, 2004).

Although the NJ State Standards were revised in 2009, the new standards echoed these sentiments as seen in two, of the three, revised standards presented below:

- **Standard 6.1 U.S. History: America in the World.** All students will acquire the knowledge and skills to think analytically about how past and present interactions of people, cultures, and the environment shape the American heritage. Such knowledge and skills enable students to make informed decisions that reflect fundamental rights and core democratic values as productive citizens in local, national, and global communities.

- **Standard 6.3 Active Citizenship in the 21st Century.** All students will acquire the skills needed to be active, informed citizens who value diversity and promote cultural understanding by working collaboratively to address challenges that are inherent in living in an interconnected world.(found at http://www.state.nj.us/education/cccs/2009/std6_ss.doc)

Clearly, the fundamental components of civic content, skills and dispositions are embedded in the Core Curriculum Standards, both former and revised, for NJ students. (For the purposes of this study, more specific criteria for what constitute civic knowledge and the requisite skills and dispositions for effective civic participation have been defined and are presented in the section on methodology.)

Beyond the baseline standards that have been set by various state and national organizations, many practitioners and scholars in the field of civic education have added to the discussion of what makes for quality civic education in a democracy such as ours. A review of the literature makes clear that there are a few basic assumptions or common themes that permeate this literature. The first and foremost assumption is that democratic citizens are not born, but rather need to be socialized into becoming responsible, citizens (Engle & Ochoa, 1986; Galston, 2001; Parker, 1996). Secondly, students need to become active participants in their learning in order to develop authentic skills necessary for democratic participation such as research, writing, analyzing and debating past and current issues (Engle & Ochoa; Mathews, 1996; Newmann, Bertocci, & Landness 1977; Parker, 1996). Widespread agreement exists within the field of civic education as to what participatory democratic citizens need to know and be able to do, as well as what the values are that best accompany democratic citizenship. The question then becomes are current civic education programs succeeding in the preparation of our next generation? The next section reviews research aimed at addressing this question.

Success of Democratic Citizenship Education

In this era of standardized testing one might think that we could look to state testing data to ascertain if civic education standards were being met. However as of April

2005, only nineteen state assessment systems included knowledge of government or civics, and only eleven states include performance on civics/government or social studies assessments as part of their school or district accountability systems (National Center for Learning and Citizenship, 2005).). Currently NJ does not have a standardized state test given in the social studies, thus NJ can't assess the acquisition of knowledge among the state's school children. Even where standardized testing in social studies or civics does exist, the emphasis is primarily on measuring the acquisition of content and few skills, (Marshak, 2003). Therefore, many of the key elements of what is considered necessary for preparation for democratic participation are not assessed. The NAEP Civics Assessment continues to be the best source of data available in terms of presenting aggregated data of students' knowledge of civics. This data paints a fairly grim picture of a youth lacking in basic civic knowledge, with as many as seventy-five percent of American students scoring at "basic" or "below basic" levels (The Civic Mission of Schools, 2003).

The picture is a bit more promising when U.S. students were compared to students around the world. International data collected on the knowledge and skills among 14-year olds across twenty-eight countries allowed for comparisons of U.S. students and their international counterparts. Results from the study were made public in 2001 in a report entitled, *What Democracy Means to 9th Graders*. The findings were that American 9th graders performed significantly above the national averages when the subsections of civic knowledge and skills were combined. When scores were evaluated by subsections, U.S. students' scores were still superior on civic skills, but fell below performance levels of six other countries on civic knowledge. Overall though, the results

suggest that American students are comparatively well prepared in terms of civic knowledge and skills. Other significant findings of the study were that minority and low-income children in America did not perform as well as did non-minority and middle and upper middle class children, and students who received daily social studies instruction performed better than those who did not.

The findings on these large scale measures present a conflicting picture of U.S. students' civic knowledge and skill levels. The studies also do not provide much insight into practices that may be effective. Although the results of the international study and other recent studies that focused on civic education in general, make a connection between increases in student knowledge and engagement as a result of participation in civics-related studies in school (Torney-Purta, 2002, Kurtz, Rosenthal & Zukin, 2003). Thus more specific information appears to be needed on successful practices and/or curricula.

Evaluations of specific civic education programs offer some insight into the question of curricula. One program that has been widely evaluated is, *We the People…The Citizen and the Constitution.* This curriculum focuses on the teaching of American constitutional history and principles through interactive teaching strategies. Educational Testing Services (ETS) conducted independent research of the *We the People* program in three separate studies conducted in 1988, 1990 and 1991. Each of the studies revealed that students enrolled in the *We the People* program at upper elementary, middle and high school levels, "significantly outperformed comparison students on every topic of the tests taken." (Center for Civic Education website, 2005).

While the ETS studies focused primarily on knowledge gains made from the use of the *We the People* curriculum, other studies have looked to skills and knowledge gains, as well as attitudinal shifts as evidence that civic education is producing positive results. A study conducted by the Political Science Department of the University of Stanford concluded that high school students taking part in the *We the People* program were inclined to develop attachments to political beliefs, attitudes, and values essential to a functioning democracy, (Brody, 1994**).** A series of studies of *We the People* alumni concluded that alumni were far more likely to vote, work for or make financial contributions to a political campaigns, and exercise civic rights such as protesting, writing letters to representatives, etc, (Soule, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 & 2005).

A second curriculum produced by the Center for Civic Education and the subject of this study is *Project Citizen*. In several studies *Project Citizen* has been found to positively affect students' civic knowledge, development of civic skills, beliefs that one could make a difference and a willingness to participate in civic life and activities, (Atherton, 2000; Vontz & Patrick, 2001). At the annual 2007 *Project Citizen* Conference, researchers Root and Northup shared findings that not only validated the results of the previous studies, but revealed that students who used the curriculum made gains in areas of Language Arts literacy as well, (Presented Oct, 2007). These studies strongly indicate that the *Project Citizen* and *We the People* programs are useful in advancing goals of civic education. However the primarily quantitative design of these studies has not revealed much about students' experiences with the curriculum or allowed for in-depth investigation into elements of these programs that aid in the development of civic knowledge, skills and civic identity development.

Among other national organizations that engage in the development and implementation of civic education curricula are, The Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, The Constitutional Rights Foundation in Los Angeles, and Street Law, Inc. These organizations partnered in the creation and administration of *Deliberating in a Democracy*, a program designed to improve teaching and learning of democratic principles and the skills of civic deliberation. A 2009 study of the program, *Results from a Three-Year Evaluation of Teachers and Students Participating in the Deliberating in a Democracy Project* (Avery & Simmons) conducted in the U.S. and throughout Eastern Europe employed a mixed-method approach involving program coordinators, classroom teachers and students. The results demonstrated that students made gains in knowledge of democratic principles. Additionally pre and posttests revealed that more students reported, knowing more about politics than most people their age, being able to understand most political issues easily, and that they were interested in politics, as a result of participating in the program.

It appears that educators have much in the way of guidance in the teaching of civics. Numerous standards and scholarly literature consistently outline the components deemed necessary for effective civic education and several national curriculum models exist that have been validated to be effective through research. However, the studies conducted on general levels of civic knowledge and skills, still point to gaps between lower income and minority students, and middle and upper income, white students. On the other hand the studies of effective programs have not focused on disaggregating data, and therefore do not offer guidance on effective strategies among traditionally marginalized groups. The next section turns to literature that has addressed this need.

Democratic Citizenship Education among Underserved Youth

Discussed previously, many demographic factors, such as family income level and race, have been shown to have an adverse affect on one's level of civic knowledge, skills and attitudes towards civic engagement (The Civic Mission of Schools, 2003). Given such correlations, one might expect to find more research studying the impact that civic education programs could have on children who fit into these demographic groupings. In reality very few studies have been conducted that focus specifically on these groups.

However, the research that has been conducted among underserved youth offers some promising insights. In one study Rubin (2007b) sought to understand the impact that students' socioeconomic and racial backgrounds and experiences had on forming one's civic identity. Among her findings was that while the contexts of students' lives contributed greatly to their development of civic identities, the "type" of civic education that students were exposed to could make a difference in how they ultimately viewed their capacity to make a difference and their outlook on the future. Rubin concluded that:

> Instructional practices that engage students in a consideration of problematic aspects of U.S. civic society can benefit all students … Frank discussions of civic rights, processes, and social disparities facilitated a more active civic identity. (pp.474-475)

Other studies that have focused on minority, urban youth have reached similar conclusions. Practices that provide students with opportunities to think critically about society, the past and the present, to research societal problems and take informed stands on issues have been successful in the development of advocacy skills and in developing a

predisposition towards civic engagement among urban youth, (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Kirshner, Strobel and Fernandez, 2003). Junn (2004) cautions that a study of American democratic practices and principles that does not allow for critical analysis, can lead to further disengagement for some student populations. She explains,

> …from where these young people sit, discrimination is a norm of everyday politics that is felt palpably in economic, social, and civic life. Inequality and barriers to action structure rather than pepper their daily lives, and concepts such as freedom, fairness, equality, justice, and even democracy are far from unambiguous. The American democratic creed, tidy as it may sound when one is advocating its support, does not apply equally, but instead depends on where one is situated in relation to others…Consequently, the disadvantaged are rationally more suspicious of its promise, less likely to support its maintenance, and harder to convince that it is worth pursuing in its current form, (p. 254)

Thus for students from historically marginalized populations the development of patriotic ideals must incorporate a realistic consideration of social injustices and the development of critical assessment skills.

Although limited in scope, the literature to date on minority, urban youth and the development of civic identities is very powerful. It is to this body of research that I hope to make the greatest contribution by adding to understandings of the type of instruction to which students respond positively. However, as will be discussed in the next section, there is no clear agreement among educators about what approach to pursue.

Democratic Citizenship Education for Historically Marginalized Youth

Since the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the national professional organization for social studies educators, states that, "NCSS has long supported civic competence as the goal of social studies," (NCSS website, downloaded 12/9/06) it seems only natural that social studies education should equip students of all backgrounds with the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to reach this goal.

Unfortunately we know that this is not the case. The quality and manner in which lessons are delivered to students, as well as the topics covered and materials utilized, can produce very different results among students. This is particularly true among students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Epstein, 1998) There is strong disagreement over what approach is best suited to educate children from minority and historically disenfranchised groups. This debate extends into democratic citizenship education as well.

A survey of the differing philosophies concerning education among minority youth and the implications for democratic citizenship education is offered in this section. For some the issue is framed in terms of content and curricula goals, and for others the issue rests in *what* and *how* students are taught. These differences are presented through three board models, a common curricula approach, and an ethnic-centered approach and culturally relevant teaching. Each of these views is presented.

A Common Curricula Approach

There are those who advocate for a common curriculum in history, civics and literature, regardless of one's racial, ethnic, religious, or class background. The central argument of this approach is that without a common, core knowledge, how can Americans successfully interact with one another and work to maintain the ideals that America is built on, (Ellington & Eaton, 2003; Hirsch, 1999; Ravitch, 1990). Diane Ravitch, for example, maintains that "public schools exist to teach children the general skills and knowledge they need to succeed in American society, and the specific skills and knowledge they need in order to function as American citizens," (p. 15). Ravitch agrees that children should be taught to appreciate diversity, but does not see it as the role

of schools to engage in what she terms "particularistic multiculturalism" or the teaching of one's own ethnic background to the exclusion of teaching about "American" common history and culture.

Many of the scholars in this camp view attempts by teachers to teach students to openly question and even criticize past and present power structures in the U.S. as blatant attempts to use the classroom to advance individual ethnic agendas, or to call for a general restructuring of the power relationships in society, (Leming, 2003). As Ellington & Eaton state, "The danger in placing the locus of American identity in its separate minorities…is tribalization, the balkanization of our country" (p.88), instead Ellington & Eaton offer that a history curriculum should include achievements of minorities and send a message that America is "now one of the world's most advance societies in the treatment of minority groups…due to this positive development, teachers can and should draw upon a multicultural pantheon of people of color who have realized the American Dream," (p.87).

This philosophy is reflected in the recommendations of the Core Knowledge Foundation, established by E.D. Hirsch in 1986. The Core Knowledge curriculum is built on the idea that there is a *specific* body of knowledge that needs to be taught to all children. A quote from the Foundation's website illustrates this point:

> Many people say that knowledge is changing so fast that what students learn today will soon be outdated. While current events and technology are constantly changing, there is nevertheless a body of lasting knowledge that should form the core of a Preschool-Grade 8 curriculum. (Core Knowledge website, downloaded 12/8/06)

An example from a history unit on "Civil Rights" illustrates what topics are part of this "core" knowledge. The unit focuses on the accomplishments of the following

individuals: Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary McLeod Bethune, Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez. Critics of the Core Knowledge approach may view this as focusing only on the positive aspects of advancement among a few individuals, while never looking deeper at the persistent inequities that led to the conditions these individuals fought to overcome. Hirsch defends this point by claiming that focusing on critical thinking does not produce knowledge, "Knowledge builds upon knowledge…Broad, well-chosen knowledge in the academic disciplines is the one thing needful in effective early schooling," (Hirsch, 1999). In this manner advocates of a common curriculum claim that all children regardless of racial, ethnic or class background, will be prepared to participate in the American democratic system by obtaining specific, core knowledge that will in turn provide them with the necessary intellectual capital to succeed.

An Ethnic-Centered Approach

A contrast to the common curricula approach is an ethnic-centered approach. This approach claims that the idea of an American mainstream is a myth and that, "the domination of information, the naming of things, the propagation of concepts and the dissemination of interpretation were and still are in most cases in the west, a Eurocentric hegemony," (Asanta, p.268, 1991). The remedy offered to this Eurocentric hegemony is to fully infuse curriculum with ethnic history and perspectives. In this way truth will be achieved in understanding the struggles and contributions of America's ethnic and cultural groups. This knowledge of the truth can, and should, lead to a shift in attitude among all ethnic groups when it is realized that the white culture does not have a sole claim to cultural superiority, (Asanta, 1991). This shift in attitude may encourage

minority children to feel empowered to seek their rightful place in the unfolding of the American Dream, which in part is obtained through civic engagement.

In the extreme, an immersion philosophy calls for children to be taught in separate programs with a curriculum, pedagogy and classroom management approaches based on the ethnic group's history, perspectives and knowledge of child development and learning patterns among minority children, (Murrell, 1993). The basic assumption is that teachers trained in traditional teacher education programs come to teaching with a white, middle class knowledge and cultural bias that is inadequate to fully address the needs of children who live outside of this limited perspective. Even when well intentioned, teachers with such an orientation may actually do more harm than good. Therefore, advocates of this approach believe minority children are best taught by individuals who share the ethnic background and cultural experiences of the children, (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Murrell; Ramos-Zayas, 1998).

Supporters of immersion claim that educational experiences for minority children that do not conform to these recommendations run the risk of alienating the children. The risks can be a lack of connection to the curriculum, a feeling that school is not about them and therefore not for them, as well as strained relationships and misunderstandings between the students, teachers and parents, (Murrell, 1993). By offering urban minority children a curriculum that explores issues of the past and present in the context of their lives, the children can become engaged in learning that is relevant and therefore meaningful to them. In this way children will build many of the skills associated with democratic citizenship and develop a sense of agency vital for civic engagement.

Without the benefit of the immersion or total infusion experience, it is feared that minority children will continue to see school as representing mainstream cultural knowledge, values and ideals and therefore not represent them. When the gulf between these cultures becomes too wide, students may choose to disengage from their schooling entirely (Erikson, 1987). This scenario has negative implications for these students in terms of educational and economic attainment, which in turn are correlated to civic engagement. Thus advocates of immersion suggest that this approach offers possibilities for engagement of mainstream values such as educational success and formal civic participation.

A Culturally Relevant Approach

A final approach is that of multicultural or culturally relevant approach. Denying an education of cultural and ethnic infusion to ethnic and cultural minorities, forces them to repress and even forgo their cultural identities (Banks, 1997). Banks argues that while programs must represent diversity, they must also focus on unity. Banks calls for a curriculum of multicultural infusion that does not need to occur in ethnically and culturally segregated settings. In, “Democracy and Diversity; Principles and concepts for educating citizens in a global age”, Banks states:

> Multicultural societies are faced with the challenge of creating nation-states that recognize and incorporate diversity of their citizens and embrace an overarching set of shared values, ideals and goals to which all citizens are committed. Only when a nation-state is unified around a set of democratic values such as human rights, justice and equality can it secure the liberties of cultural, ethnic, language and religious freedom, justice and peace. (Banks, p. 7, 2006)

For Banks, recognizing and honoring diversity is essential, but with the aim of common commitments to civic ideals.

Educators who support the approach of culturally relevant teaching recognize that while there is not necessarily a single ideological approach in this instance, there are practices that can be employed to reach the goal of a civics education that can both embrace the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of students and focus them on shared American values and ideals, (Delpit, 2006; Esposito and Swain, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Such an approach in democratic citizenship education would call for culturally responsive teaching tactics, along with a study of U.S. institutions, founding documents, history and values from a critical perspective that is focused on high levels of student engagement in the process of constructing meaning.

Others who favor culturally relevant pedagogy embrace styles of teaching that foster students' advocacy skills and the development of predispositions towards civic engagement. This is accomplished through opportunities for students to think critically about society, the past and the present, to research societal problems and take informed stands on issues (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; M, Kirshner, Strobel and Fernandez, 2003; Jackson, Gilmore, Bedolla, Jimenez, Flores, Espinoza & Perez, 2006; Ramos-Zayas, 1998; Tello, A., Guajardo, F., Guajardo, J. & Saldivar, J., 2000). Studies conducted by the above named researchers all focused on the need to give voice to minority students who are so often silenced in education and society. By allowing the students to draw on their own experiences and apply their knowledge to critical assessments of school, community and even global problems, the researchers found students' abilities to research and understand complex topics were validated.

Another vital component of these programs was the fact that the students were encouraged to take active roles in addressing problems that they uncovered. Advocacy

experiences helped to provide the students with a sense of empowerment. This empowerment was often accompanied by increases in academic success and renewed goals for future academic and civic pursuits. As one of the subjects in Ramos-Zayas (1998) studied commented:

> I came with very little knowledge about my people, my community, and my history. But I came out with enough to give people a good argument, and to know what I am talking about. I chose to pursue my college education and major in criminal justice. I would like to come back someday and help my people. (p. 10)

Educators in the culturally relevant camp believe that without such opportunities the students might continue on a path of low academic achievement, high school dropout, low-income jobs and civic disengagement as discussed earlier. Instead these young people have been given a sense of hope that they can be agents for change in their own lives, their community and perhaps even the nation. These are qualities associated with effective and engaged democratic citizens.

Conclusion

As I engaged in the analysis of the data from the study I considered each of the approaches outlined above. I sought to determine which elements of each approach may or may not be reflected in the students' experiences with the *Project Citizen* curriculum. By doing this I was able to draw conclusions and add to the discussion of pedagogical and philosophical approaches in the academic and civic identity formation of historically disenfranchised youth.

I also sought to understand my findings in light of the theoretical frame I presented in this chapter. Bourdieu's notion of a circular relationship among structural forces and human response, combined with Giroux's consideration of mediating contextual experiences, even in light of larger macro forces, and Freire's vision of education as a liberating force provided me with a frame in which to analyze the data. Ultimately it was through this frame that I came to understand what I learned from the study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The overarching goal of this study was to understand how historically marginalized, urban youth might come to build knowledge, skills and dispositions associated with civic engagement as they experienced the *Project Citizen* curriculum. A case study methodology was selected in order to observe first hand much of the students' experience and to capture their interpretations. By viewing the students in their natural environment over an extended period of time, I was also able to gain insights into the dynamic interactions of the varied contexts of city, school and classroom that the students regularly experienced. Finally, as a curriculum is nothing more than a collection of concepts on paper until a teacher brings it to life, it was essential that I observe the teacher in action in order to understand the practices and attitudes she brought to the experience that either benefitted or hindered the students in their development. In this chapter I present the research design and methodology employed in the study.

The Setting

The literature cited in chapters 1 and 2 on urban America made clear that urban centers are suffering from a combination of economic, political and social disadvantages as a result of decades of urban decline and isolation. The City of Evettston, (a pseudo name for the city), is no exception to these conditions. As did many cities across America, Evettston experienced a transformation in the 1960's from a largely middleclass, commuter population, to a lower income, racially concentrated one. The current demographics for the city are representative of NJ's cities, but not suburban communities. In 2000 residents of the city identified themselves in the following ways:

61.8% African American, 24% white (this figure does not account for white, Hispanic and white, non-Hispanic), 25.2% Hispanic and 10.8% as other. 23.7% also identified that they were foreign born and 28.7% stated that a language other than English was spoken in the home. The data percentage of whites residing statewide is 72.6%, with the statewide African American and Hispanic populations at only 13.6% and 13.3% respectively, (downloaded from http://quickfacts.census.gov on 12/9/07). These statistics support the conditions of urban centers as racially and ethnically isolated and segregated locations that researchers such as Gephart, (2000) and Massey and Denton (1993) describe in their research. These researchers also found that urban centers had become economically disadvantaged since the 1960's and this appears to be the case in the City of Evettston as well. In the state of NJ the median household income is $57,338. This is well above the national level of $44,334. NJ also has significantly fewer persons living in poverty, only 8.4% of the state's population, whereas nationally the figure is 12.7%. Unfortunately the relative wealth of NJ residents is not represented in economic data for the City of Evettston where the median household income is only $46,683 and the percentage of individuals living below the poverty level is 15.9%, almost twice the rate for the rest of the state and higher than the national average, (downloaded from http://quickfacts.census.gov on 12/9/07).

The educational levels of residents have also been discussed as important to a community for a variety of reasons. Among the areas discussed were predictors for political behavior, benefits in social and human capital, and in providing roles models for young people. Therefore it is important to consider education levels among the residents of the City of Evettston. Although the census data from 2000 indicates that 70.6% of the

city's residents possess a high school degree, this is still below the state average of 82.1%. The percentage of adults with a college degree is more troublesome at only 18.5% of the population, whereas the percentage statewide is 29%, (downloaded from www.census.gov on 12/9/07).

Additional data on the high school provides information about the newly rising adult population. In 2008 (the most recent year that data is available) only 32% of the students who graduated were able to pass the state High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) required for graduation with a standard high school diploma. This is in contrast with 89.2% of graduates statewide in the same year. Thus the vast majority of the students who completed high school that year were not able to meet the minimum standards for literacy and numeracy set by the state, in contrast to their peers statewide who overwhelming did meet the minimum standard. Not surprisingly the high school was placed on the state's "In Need of Improvement" list for the sixth year in a row.

Other academic indicators also point to a student population that is not well prepared for academic life beyond high school. Only five advanced placement (A.P.) courses were offered at the high school during 2007-2008 and only 4.8% of the school's students enrolled in these courses, compared to 18.3% of the state's student population enrolled in A.P. courses. The students taking A.P. classes may elect to take the corresponding exam offered by the College Board for an opportunity to receive college credit. The exam is graded on a five point scale, with the recognized minimum score of a three to be eligible for college credit. The Evettston students sat for fifty-eight A.P. exams and only one student obtained a score of three or higher.

Another academic indicator is the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). In 2007-2008 slightly less than half the student population, 49%, took the SAT that year, this is in contrast to 74% of high school students statewide. More significant though is the level of performance on the SAT as it is regarded as a predictor of success in higher education. In every area of the exam, mathematics, verbal and essay, the students at Evettston High School scored more than 100 points below the state averages. Lastly, only 25.4% of the graduates in 2008 went on to a four-year college, (all statistics downloaded from http://education.state.nj.us on 2/6/07). The indicators referenced indicate that at the present time the high school is not graduating large numbers of individuals who are ready to pursue higher education. This data is all consistent with the picture the researchers such as Anyon (1997) and Lipman (2003) revealed and was discussed in the literature review. Therefore it appears that the concerns expressed by researchers such as Coleman and Hoffer (1987) and Hart and Atkins, (2001) of the negative implications for communities lacking in high levels of social and cultural capital, may be relevant for the City of Evettston.

Another important feature of the community is the level of crime and gang violence that have become commonplace in recent years. According to a 2004 FBI Crime Report, the rates of murders, rapes, robberies and aggravated assaults committed in Evettston are well above the national average, (areaconnect.com, 2006). The gang problem in Evettston has become so severe that in 2006 the city was added to NJ Governor, Jon Corzine's list of targeted cities under Operation CeaseFire, an anti-gang law enforcement initiative in NJ (Hester). Other sources, such as the Great Schools website confirm the high rate of crime in the city. The site offers a crime index used to

report the level of violent crime associated with a given community based on a ten point scale, with 1 representing a lower violent crime rate and 10 corresponding to a higher crime rate. The four types of offenses included in the crime index calculation are murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault, all of which involve force or threat of force. The indexes rating are based on data provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The current score reported for the City of Evettston is a seven, (downloaded from http://www.bestplaces.net on 2/6/09), whereas the U.S. average score is a three. The city's gang and drug violence led to a large scale sting operation carried out by the city's police department and the New Jersey State Police Street Gang Unit Drug Task Force during the winter and spring of 2008. The operation resulted in the arrest of more than ninety individuals on drug, gang and weapons charges, (NJ State Police Official News Release, April 2008). As will be explored in future chapters, crime has become a prevalent aspect of life in the city.

The literature reviewed on urban education paints a rather dismal picture of institutions that are under resourced and not adequately challenging and preparing students for academic success. In many ways the Evettston schools fit this profile. Evettston is one of the thirty school districts that the NJ Supreme Court ruled to be incapable of providing children with the education guaranteed by the NJ State Constitution due to a lack of funding at the local level, (NJ schools rely on local property taxes as the first means of funding schools). As a result of the court rulings, these districts all receive additional state aid and are under mandates to provide educational services intended to reverse the trends of low performance in these districts. The NJ Department of Education also ranks communities based on socioeconomic factors using a

rating formula of A – J, with A being the lowest ranking possible. Rankings are determined through comparative analysis of NJ communities. Factors utilized in this process are; the percentage of adults lacking a high school diploma, the percentage of adults with some college education, occupational status, unemployment rates, percent of individuals in poverty and median family income. In each of the last two years that schools were ranked, 1990 and 2000, the City of Plainfield received a B ranking (NJ Department of Education District Factor Groups for School Districts, 2008).

The students participating in this study all attended one of the district's two middle schools, Jackson Middle School. Several sources were reviewed in order to assess current academic standings at Jackson Middle School and to determine if Jackson Middle School reflected the larger trends in urban education. However, it should be noted that each of these sources relied on standardized tests scores, which are largely focused on measuring pre-determined standards of knowledge that may not reflect the full range of knowledge and skills possessed among a given population. Nonetheless, reports based on test data all indicate that Jackson Middle School is struggling to prepare students to perform successfully on standardized tests. Table 3.1 shows a breakdown of the scores for the school on the statewide assessment measures. Column 1 and 2 represent the two academic years preceding the study and column 3 presents scores for the academic year this study was conducted. This is the three year time period that the majority of the students who participated in the study attended the school, (the school serves grades 6, 7 and 8). The last two columns indicate if the scores met the baseline standards for the year and what the state average was for schools meeting the standard.

Table 3.1

Results of standardized tests scores in Language Arts and Math

	Academic Year 2005-2006	Academic Year 2006-2007	Academic Year 2008-2009	Made Adequate Yearly Progress	Statewide Results
Language Arts					
Partial	49.4 %	57.7 %	61.2 %	No	21.8 %
Proficient	49.0 %	40.6 %	37.7 %	No	65.2 %
Advanced	1.6 %	1.7 %	1.0 %	No	13 %
Math					
Partial	66 %	62.9 %	59.4 %	No	30.4 %
Proficient	31.3 %	34 %	35.8 %	No	47 %
Advanced	2.7 %	3.1 %	4.8 %	No	22.6 %

(Data available at http://education.state.nj.us).

Although some progress can be seen math scores over the three year period, the overall picture shows that many students at Jackson Middle School are not doing well on these measurements. In order to better understand these scores in the context of statewide performance I looked to the Great Schools rating system. This is a rating system based on in-state comparisons of state test results across grade levels, content areas and overall school performance. The reported rating system is a ten point scale based on a 100% comparative scoring, therefore if a school's scores fall into the lowest 10% of all state scores, that school receives a ranking of one. Conversely, schools whose scores were in the top 10% statewide would receive scores of ten. The most recent score published for

Jackson Middle School is a two, (downloaded from http://www.greatschools.net on 2/6/09). Finally, using the rating method prescribed under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, Jackson Middle School has failed to make "Adequate Yearly Progress" for last five years. This data all indicates that the students at Jackson Middle School are not performing at the levels determined as academically appropriate by the state and assessed through the state's testing instruments.

The Sample

The participants in this study were all eighth grade students enrolled in a civics elective at Jackson Middle School. The majority of the eighteen students in the class chose to voluntarily participate based on information they had obtained from other students who had participated in *Project Citizen* or based on a presentation the teacher made to seventh graders. A few of the students' parents requested that the child take the class. In some ways this sample group did reflect the larger school population and in other ways it did not. The elective nature of the class was one significant way the class differed. By definition this was a largely self-selected group of students who chose to engage in the study of civics. However, even among this group there was a wide range of student abilities and backgrounds. The class consisted of eleven females and seven males. Three of the students were Hispanic, two African, twelve African American and one student was West Indian. There were no academic requirements for participation in the class, and as reported by the teacher, the students represented a range of intellectual and academic abilities. At the start of the study the teacher noted that she did not feel that the students in general possessed adequate writing, communication and analysis skills. Three of the male students were also classified with learning disabilities. Additionally

two of the males were identified as being “at-risk” by the district and each was enrolled in an alternative school during the previous school year. The majority of the children did not come from homes with college-educated parents. Seven of the children lived in homes with both of their parents, one child was in foster care and nine live in single-parent households. All of this data indicates that while this was a self-selected population, the students still possessed many characteristics that presented potential challenges to their academic success. Add to this that the class was situated in a low-performing school, in an economically disadvantaged community that had been riddled with violence and crime in recent years, it is seen that the students do in most ways represent typical urban school students.

The *Project Citizen* Curriculum

Project Citizen is a curriculum designed to foster the development of students' interest and ability to participate competently and responsibly in local and state government (CCE website, November 2005). The curriculum is broken down into a six-step process. In step one students study problems in their school, community and state. At this stage students spend a considerable amount of time collecting and presenting data on the problems under study. This process of sharing data with their classmates prepares the students for step two where they select a problem to study further as a class. Once the class problem has been selected students conduct more in-depth research of the problem. At this stage students are encouraged to interview members of the community and relevant local officials. They are also required to study existing policies in their own community, or in other communities, that may address the problem. Several of the alternative policies must be analyzed by the students and presented as part of the

portfolio. Students will begin in step four to compile all of their research into a *Project Citizen* portfolio. The portfolio is comprised of two parts, a large multi-part presentation board and a documentation binder. On the presentation board students are given direction about the length and content of text that should be posted, in addition, students must include visual representations of their research. Students keep records of additional research data in the documentation binder. This part of the project represents the hard evidence of the students' research and conclusions.

The next step engages students in an oral presentation as they present their portfolio before an audience of interested stakeholders. This audience can include members of the community, politicians, educators, etc. Audience members are encouraged to ask the students questions as they present their portfolio in a step-by-step manner. First the students must make a case that a problem does exist that should be addressed through a public policy proposal. Next the students present a few of the alternative policies they have research and then the policy that have elected as a class to support. This policy can be their own creation or modeled after existing policies. The final step of the portfolio presentation requires the students to present a plan of action for how they would try to get their policy adopted. This must include a well thought out plan to gain support from the community and government. The final step of the project is step six where the students reflect on what they have learned from the experience.

Definition of Terms

The National Standards for Civic Education produced by the Center for Civic Education (1994) served as the basis for establishing the criteria of civic knowledge, skills and dispositions. The use of these standards is widespread as evidenced by the fact

that they were used to guide the development of the NAEP Assessment in Civics and the National Council of Social Studies standards for government and civics. The National Standards identify five broad areas of civic knowledge that students should master based on grade level clusters. Two of the standards are most relevant to this study. They are: Standard II, *How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embody the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?* and Standard V, *What Are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy*? Relevant content for grades 5-8 in each of these areas was reviewed for applicability to this study. Content was considered relevant, and thus included in the matrix below, if it could be reasonably expected that students would develop or display knowledge in this content area while engaged in the *Project Citizen* curriculum. This criteria was then further refined based on the language of the NCSS content themes of *Power, Government and Authority* and *Civic Ideals and Principles,* as well as the NJ Core Content Standards for Social Studies, Standard 6.2 Civics, (the NJ Standard 6.2 that was in use during the period of the study was used, the standard was revised in 2009). Finally I used my knowledge of the *Project Citizen* curriculum to include additional content knowledge that could be expected to develop or be displayed among the students during engagement with the curriculum. These additions are listed in the matrix below only under the content area of “Public Policy Making”. Table 3.2, presented below, represents the content areas and associated knowledge identified using the above outlined process. These predefined standards will be used as a guide to identify civic knowledge that is demonstrated by the students.

Table 3.2

Definition of "Knowledge" Associated with Civic Knowledge

Content Area	Associated Knowledge
Laws	• Discuss the sources, purposes, and functions of law • Explain the importance of the rule of law for the preservation of individual rights and the common good • Describe criteria for evaluating rules and laws
Government	• Describe the structure, major characteristics and sources of the American democratic system of government • Explain how power is distributed, shared, and limited at the national, state and local levels • Explain financing government through taxation • Describe the organization and responsibilities of state and local governments • Identify represents you in legislative and executive branches of your local, state, and national governments • Explain how individuals can contact their representatives • Describe the role of the citizen in keeping government responsive to the needs of the people
Individual Rights & Responsibilities	• Identify the sources of individual rights • Provide examples of social, political and economic rights • Discuss the scope and limits of rights • Explain the role of the judiciary in the protection of the rights of individuals • Describe differences between personal responsibilities and civic responsibilities and provide examples of each
Citizenship	• Discuss the rights and responsibilities of citizens • Discuss how the rights of citizens may be in conflict with each other . • Explain the benefits, costs, and conflicts of a diverse nation. • Discuss basic contemporary issues involving the personal, political, and economic rights of American citizens
Public Policy Making	• Explain the need for, limits and functions of public policies • Describe the steps in the public-policy making process • Discuss the role that non-governmental organizations and individual citizens can play in influencing legislation and policies • Describe various ways that individuals can show support or dislike for current or proposed public policies

As with the content knowledge matrix, the National Standards for Civics, the NAEP Assessment, the NCSS themes and the NJ Core Content Standards all were used to determine criteria useful in measuring competency in the acquisition of skills associated with effective civic engagement. Although the same resources were utilized to identify a baseline of the skills needed for effective civic engagement, NJ Core Content Standard 6.1 Social Studies Skills (based on Standard 6.1 as it existed at the time of the study), was also referenced. Finally, based on my experience with *Project Citizen*, I included several other skills that could be expected to develop or be displayed among the students during engagement with the Project Citizen curriculum. These additions are represented in items 11 – 14 below, along with all of the identified skills in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Definition of “Skills” Associated with Civic Engagement
1. Ability to think critically
2. Make informed, responsible decisions
3. Evaluate information
4. Analyze information
5. Discuss issues and consider multiple perspectives
6. Recognize the role of bias, point of view and context, as well as assess the credibility of a source
7. Examine current issues and events
8. Formulate questions based on information
9. Use effective strategies to locate information
10. Summarize information in written, graphic and oral formats

Table 3.3 continued
11. Work cooperatively with others to achieve a goal
12. Provide leadership
13. Problem solve
14. Build an effective and rational argument

The final area that is considered crucial to civic engagement is civic dispositions. Again, the same resources and process was applied in identifying dispositions that are associated with effective civic engagement and that could be expected to develop or be displayed by the students during engagement with the *Project Citizen* curriculum. The dispositions identified are presented below in Table 3.4

Table 3.4 Definition of “Dispositions” Associated with Civic Engagement
1. Recognizing the need for individual’s to take personal, political and economic responsibilities as citizens
2. Respecting individual worth and human dignity
3. Respect for and trust in institutions of authority; respect for the rule of law
4. Tolerance of divergent views and lifestyles
5. A sense of efficacy at being able to affect change in one’s community
6. A sense of civic responsibility as seen by promoting the healthy functioning of American constitutional democracy and participating in civic affairs in an informed, thoughtful, and effective manner

The criteria presented in Tables 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 was used to define the terms of civic knowledge, skills and dispositions associated with civic engagement as applied to this

study. These were the definitions that were utilized in structuring student interviews, guiding field observations and in the initial coding of the data.

Data Collection

In order to examine the experiences of the students while they were engaged in learning via the outlined curricula, a single site, collective case study was conducted (Creswell, 1998). With the aim of describing the students' experiences with the curriculum, I utilized multiple methods of data collection that included observations, interviews, and analysis of student work.

Observations

In order to gain deep insight into the bounded system of the classroom and the way this curriculum was enacted and experienced by the participants, I functioned as an observer in the classroom over a period of six months. During that time I conducted twenty-five class observations of forty-five minutes each, and observed the students present their project at the NJ State *Project Citizen* Showcase. Data from these observations was compiled relying on a "participating-to-write" approach (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) that required that I make mental notes and jottings while in the field that I later drew on when I wrote-up my field notes. Field notes were focused on descriptions of the lessons, teacher and student actions, and interactions among the students and the teacher and students. I was particularly interested in evidence of student understandings and how knowledge was constructed in the class, therefore I paid particular attention to capturing the students words as close to their precise wording as possible. At the end of each observation, I read over my notes, filling in details where possible and typed up full narratives within forty-eight hours of the observation.

Student work

In order to assess the students' growing understandings I analyzed student work produced as part of the *Project Citizen* portfolio, (Appendix C). As part of *Project Citizen* the students are expected to complete several writing components. The first is a statement of the problem. In an approximately two-page, typed, double-spaced statement the students need to present a cohesive and persuasive argument that a problem exists that should be addressed by a government body in the form of a public policy. Part of this statement is a consideration of any current policies and controversies that may exist in the community. The students are also required to incorporate data from their research to make this case.

The next written requirement is a presentation of alternative policy analyses. Each of the assessments should be presented in a one page, typed, double-spaced. Each statement must explain an alternative and discuss the pros and cons of the policy. Students may offer two to three alternatives at this stage. On the third written task the students must present a policy that the class has agreed upon as "solution" to the identified problem. In a one-page minimum statement, the students must explain their proposed policy and describe the strengths and weaknesses of the policy. The students must also scrutinize their proposal in order to determine that is does not violate either the federal or the state constitution.

The final written portion of the portfolio is presented in a minimum two-page, double-spaced, typed statement. This assignment requires the students to outline a plan of action detailing how they would build community and government support to get their policy adopted. In order to do this the students must identify which governmental

authority is appropriate to address in order to get the proposed policy adopted. The student must also consider how they will deal with opponents of the plan.

Other elements of text appear on the portfolio in the form of data, captions for graphics, tables and charts, and citations for sources. However only the four written assignments described were analyzed as part of this study. The reasons for this were two-fold. First, the class was divided into four small teams and each team took responsibility for writing one of the statements. Each statement represented a collaboration of all the team members and in this way the statements were a reflection of the entire class. Secondly, the written statements were a compilation of the work the students engaged in over five of the six months I observed them, thus analysis of this work enabled me to ascertain the depth of understanding the students had of their selected problem, of their ability to apply the research they had gathered and how they presented their understandings in a written format.

Interviews

Based on my observations of classroom behaviors and attitudes, along with recommendations from the classroom teacher, twelve students were selected and invited to participate in interviews. Students were selected based on their ability to express their views, and to represent a range of initial attitudes towards the class. Therefore a purposeful sampling method was employed so that students who may have already possessed a degree of civic knowledge and a sense of efficacy were selected, as well as students who appeared to be less knowledgeable and did not reflect attitudes that were consistent with the goals of the program. Interviews were conducted during the months of May and June, towards the end of the study after the students had been exposed to the

program materials for a period of between four to five months. The focus of the interviews was directed towards students' understanding of their rights, the rights of others, their conceptions of community and views of their own communities, how to affect change in one's community or school, what to do when rules, laws or practices are seen as unjust, and the students' experiences with the curriculum.

The student interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. An interview guide with predetermined questions and prompts was used (Appendix A) and all sessions were audio recorded with student permission. Interviews lasted between thirty and forty minutes and were conducted on-site at Jackson Middle School during the school day at non-instructional times.

Student Focus Groups

Throughout the study I met with small groups of students to conduct focus groups. Each of the focus groups was comprised of four to six students and lasted for a period of thirty to forty minutes. The sessions were held during the students' lunch period in the classroom while the classroom teacher was out of the room on lunch duty, allowing me to meet alone with the small groups of students. A total of five focus group sessions were held over a two month period during February and March. The initial discussions focused around a few central topics or questions relating to the students perceptions of their school, community and their rights, (Appendix B). The later sessions were guided by events in the classroom or drawn from the students' project. All of the sessions were recorded and a method of targeted transcription was used for analysis. Students were asked to participate in the focus groups based on my observations of classroom behavior as well as teacher recommendations. However all students who chose to participate were

welcomed to participate. Between the focus group sessions and interviews all but two of the students were able to participate in one of these forums.

Data Analysis

In keeping with a case study design, the analysis focused on building rich descriptions of the setting and the case (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Data from the multiple sources was analyzed, aggregated and studied in order to determine emergent themes and patterns. To construct this case, several steps were followed.

Organizing and Describing the Data

Each of the data sets was initially coded by applying both deductive, (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and inductive coding strategies, (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Once the interviews recordings were transcribed, the interview data, my field notes and the student work was coded based on a pre-developed coding categories drawn from the research questions regarding the students experience and meaning-making for the following topics. The qualitative research software Atlas.ti was used in the initial coding process. All data was uploaded, coded and initially aggregated using the software. In addition to the pre-developed codes, I also relied on an inductive immersion strategy (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) using my own interpretative capacities to determine what additional codes emerged from the data. Once data was organized by coding categories, codes were collapsed and eliminated as necessary.

After the initial coding and collapsing of codes, data was further reduced by looking for common themes. Common themes were identified by organizing the data into categorical aggregations (Creswell, 1998) and the continued process of looking for patterns within and across the categories. Throughout the process I tested emergent

understandings by continuously returning to the data to check for alternative explanations and negative instances. Additionally, all assertions were tested by checking for confirmation within data and across data sources, i.e., interviews, field notes and student work. In this way I was able to further clarify and identify the central themes regarding the students' experiences.

Memos were a regular part of the process and allowed for early analysis of the data. As themes began to take shape I wrote memos in order to flesh out initial assertions. Memos were linked to individual coding categories or from developing themes across codes. Memos were drawn on throughout the process and added to (or discarded) as the data supported the initial assertions.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Validity and trustworthiness were insured in several ways. Methods drawn from post-positivist, constructivist and critical paradigms were drawn on in the form of triangulation techniques, collaboration, and rich description (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Triangulation occurred first within each data source by comparing codes generated from the analysis of a data source, i.e., the student writings, the student interviews or the field notes. This within data source triangulation was applied to find common themes and validate findings. For instance, for an emergent theme to be accepted I looked for supporting evidence from a preponderance of the student interview data sets, or across multiple notations from field observations. Triangulation across methods of data collection was also used. By comparing data from field notes, interviews and analysis of student work, common themes were identified and validated (Creswell & Miller).

Additional techniques used to ensure validity were collaboration and in-depth description of the case. Collaboration was employed by reviewing observation notes or memos or analyses of student work with the classroom teacher. By collaborating with the classroom teacher in this way I sought to build consensual validation and credibility in my interpretations (Creswell, 1998). Rich, thick descriptions in my narrative account of the findings also build credibility in my findings by helping to recreate the setting for the reader (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 1998). Student voices are included throughout the presentation of the findings so that their understandings and experiences were captured in their own words. I also incorporated direct quotes form field notes in order to describe events as experienced directly by me at the time they occurred. Lastly, although I did not conduct formal member checks, a final feature to build trustworthiness is that all participants will have access to a final copy of the study.

Role of the Researcher

It was necessary for me to apply researcher reflexivity and to bracket my beliefs, biases and assumptions (Creswell & Miller). I needed to be aware of three issues and how each might taint my perceptions or lead me to biased assumptions as I observed and interacted with the students and teacher and during data analysis. The first was my role as a civic educator, a coordinator for civic education programs in urban schools and trainer of the *Project Citizen* curriculum. It was essential for me to acknowledge my connection to the project and my views of civic education when analyzing the data from the study. I had a several years of experience working with the *Project Citizen* curriculum and had a positive view of the curriculum. I also needed to acknowledge that as the mother of two-biracial sons I have an emotional attachment to the education of youth from minority

groups. Lastly, I had a previous relationship with the classroom teacher. Although our relationship was purely professional, I liked and respected her prior to the start of the study.

Each of these associations required that I question my assumptions and potential bias and validate my observations with data. Detailed field notes, analysis of student work, the interview and focus group sessions, and the observation of the students' presentation at state showcase event, all served as validity checks for my assumptions. Additionally, collaboration with the teacher and consultation with my dissertation committee members helped me to stay aware of my bias and remain as impartial as possible while analyzing and interpreting the data.

My status as a white, middle class woman also needed to be considered. As an "outsider" to the community it was important for the students to get to know me through direct interactions. Seidman, (1998) cautions that when ethnic and class differences exist between the researcher and the subjects there could be problems of trust. Prior to the start of formal observations, I visited with the class, explained what I would be doing and allowed them to ask questions of me. The students seemed to appreciate the opportunity to ask me questions, which focused mostly on my education and the goals of my research. Additionally, I spent several weeks in the classroom prior to conducting the first focus group, and months with the students before I conducted the first interview. Allowing the students to gain familiarity with me appeared to be instrumental in overcoming issues of distrust. Another factor that facilitated the observation process for me was the classroom teacher's manner towards me in front of the students. The classroom teacher treated me with respect and trust throughout the study. Due to these

factors, there did not appear to be any issues of mistrust among the students. Throughout the study the class carried on in the same manner and the students were very forthcoming during the interviews.

I believe the design of the study and the methods employed to ensure validity, allowed me to glimpse into the students' world and tell a part of their story. The next three chapters describe what I found.

CHAPTER 4

THE STUDENTS' WORLD

The context in which students live and attend school can play a central role in how they develop a sense of themselves and of society. The daily experiences of the students in this study, both in the city and their school, were an integral part of their story. The students regularly participated in several distinct contexts and while there were commonalities among the various contexts, there were also discrete differences that shaped the students' experiences. The three contexts explored in this study were the city of Evettston, Jackson Middle School and the classroom where the *Project Citizen* curriculum was in use. The findings of this study may shed light on the interplay between the varied contexts and the potential for a particular context, in this case the classroom, may have as an intervening force in the development of the students' civic identities. This chapter focuses on the findings related to the students' experiences in the city and the school contexts.

The first finding of this study is that the students' experiences of the city and school contexts form a complex setting amid which to undertake civic education. The students often experienced these contexts as unsafe and disruptive. They expressed clear conceptions of what is wrong in each of these contexts, who shares in the responsibility for the state of affairs, and how a functioning city or town differs from their own. Ambivalence also characterized the students' attitudes toward the city of Evettston. On the one hand many were critical of the current conditions in the city, with some seeking to leave the city behind entirely, yet sentiments of pride were also heard along with a desire to see the town improve. It is with these complexities that the students attended the

class under investigation, where they explored concepts and ideals of American democracy and learned the role that citizens can play in the public policy-making process. In the following sections the students' experiences of the city and the school will be explored separately.

The City Context

A Lack of Security

> Like we grew up where we saw people dealing drugs in front of us, smoke in front of us, drink in front of us. Like this is a basic ghetto community where you see people, like where you see street fights, in parks, you see people get stabbed, you see people, you hear about gun shots. You see people, you see people everyday, you know some of them you know that they go to jail over a fight or a stabbing, or someone getting shot. Like every, like we, like me and my friends we know most people that's in jail cause of street fights or gang violence. (Interview with Samuel)

All of the students interviewed for the study cited violence, gang activity, drug use, and crime as serious problems in the city. Some of the students shared personal stories of violence and crimes against friends, family members and even themselves. Terrence told me of the shooting of his uncle, telling me, "He was just working, he got shot at work. It affected me a lot because he was one of my favorite uncles." Malika related the story of the young cousin of a friend who had been shot and killed by another young boy as the result of a street argument. In a focus group students graphically described the uncertainty of going out with friends on a weekend night. They explained that any party could become violent in a moment with nothing more than a stepped on foot, the wearing of a gang color, or playing the wrong song to set things off. Such offenses could lead to heated arguments, fighting, and even stabbings. As one of the students remarked during a focus group session, "You never know what will happen

when you go out." The threat of violence appeared to have become a part of the students' lives.

The impact of violence extended to all of the students, regardless of if they had a story of a personal encounter with violence or crime. All of the students, (except for a brother and sister who were from a North African immigrant family), described feeling unsafe and explained how this shaped their daily experiences. Most of the students described a lack of freedom in terms of where they could go outside of school. As Dawn explained, "I really don't go outside…like I stay in my house 'cause I know if I go outside, I don't feel safe outside." Or as Malika expressed, "you can't go outside after a certain time, cause you really worry about getting shot, or stabbed or robbed." Deandre explained that young people were even restricted from entering certain streets and neighborhoods by gangs. He described the situation he and his friends faced as follows:

> You know my friends wouldn't, they wouldn't come over because like I had to like, it's a thing called a green pass (a symbol that allowed one to be admitted by gang members into a designated area), and it's like if you're cool with somebody that live in a neighborhood, or the hood, then you are like you are able to go on the block…If I was near this gang called Third Street, and like I was just walking down the street, like they will approach me if like I don't know nobody on that street, or on that corner nearby.

Even simple outdoor pleasures seemed out of reach for the students. This experience is reflected in the comments of Samuel when he expressed his desire to simply, "go down the street and play basketball, and no one talk junk about someone, or they kick you off the court…like they always kick somebody off the court and beat somebody up while on the court." Many outdoor activities such as playing basketball, walking to a friend's house or just having time to one's own thoughts while walking down the street, were

riddled with threats to students' safety and peace of mind. The following quote from Malika's interview illustrates how pervasive this experience was;

> It's more so what certain people would want to do to a child, so like with me as an African American woman, like when I walk down the street, I can't even walk down the street having time to myself to think about stuff. I have to hear people around me, 'Oh look at her, she look good' or whatever, and they're older than me, and it's like I am thirteen years old and you're how old, thirty? And you have the nerve to talk to me that way?" Interview with Malika, 2/6/08

A lack of security and freedom was present in the students' daily lives, exacting a toll on these young people. Whether it was the necessity for students to monitor their actions so that they wouldn't put themselves in harms way, or the inability to be free from worry and simply enjoy the pleasures of youth, the students understood that the crime and violence in the city had a negative impact on them. How they were able to deal with the circumstances is considered in great detail in future sections.

Who is to blame?

Although the students suggested that many factors were to blame for the current state of their city, key among the reasons was the behavior of many of the adults in the community. The students expressed the view that many adults did not care enough to behave responsibly and make positive contributions to the community. The students also identified a lack of effective role models among the adults to be problematic.

Comments from an interview with Emanuel capture the sentiment that the "fault" for Evettston's condition rests with the city inhabitants themselves. After he stated that the people of Evettston simply didn't care about their city I asked him to explain why he felt this way. To this question he simply told me, "Because if they did care, Evettston would be like at a higher level than it is already."

This view expressed by Emanuel was present across interviews and observations of the students. When asked about the sense of responsibility among citizens in the community, a student named Elisabeth stated, "I just don't see it like going on, like people being caring about the community, like they just don't care about it. They just care about themselves and that's that." Another male student, Deandre, simply explained that, "I think it's the people that's, that just messed up. You know because I seen, like I have friends that the garbage can be right there, and they just throw it on the floor." Malika explained adult behavior in the community in the following way;

> I feel just they don't have a care about it, just because sometimes either they know there's stuff they've done in their life, that they know they could have did better, or sometimes they want you to do better they just don't know how to come about it.

Although Kaila saw dysfunction and blamed some adults for not caring, she also recognized that some adults might want better opportunities for the youth in the city but may not possess the needed human and social capital to assist the young people.

Regardless though of the impetus of the actions, the students characterized the actions and inactions of many adults in the city as negative and having a detrimental impact on the city as a whole. This point was made poignantly by Dawn when she decried the negative press the community always received. She explained to me;

> Well there's people working together, but you're like, you mostly don't hear about them, like working together. Like they try to give Evettston a bad name…like the past two years when Miss Nobel won the Project Citizen, they don't put that in the newspaper. But when it comes to like Evettston High School students jumping teachers, or killing, they will put that in the newspaper, trying to give us a bad name.

It appeared that Dawn held members of the media partly responsible for adding to the negative view of the city. She seemed frustrated that positive actions did not get attention in the press, thereby pulling the image of the whole city down.

The negative affects of adult behavior was echoed over and over by the students. Some students made connections between the problem behaviors of young people to a lack of positive role models among the adults. This line of reasoning is evident in the following excerpt from an interview with Bree;

> Like it's a lot, like even adults act crazy at times, a lot of them act crazy at times, like if you go downtown you'll see two men fighting, two grown men, well you would think they would handle the situation a lot different and, sit, sit, sit, like how children are supposed to, like almost like a role model, like but then, then when we follow them, we think that's the right thing to do, so we started acting like that.

Bree's comments indicate that she knew there were appropriate ways to peacefully handle conflict, however she suggests that when young people do not choose these approaches it is the result of negative role models among adults.

Other students felt that those in leadership positions had not fulfilled their responsibilities, resulting in negative consequences for the city. While explaining to me that it was easier to break some laws in Evettston than it was in neighboring towns, Deandre said, "I just say they have better laws, like they [the neighboring towns] actually enforce the law a lot better than in Evettston." Terrence spoke about the inability of the city council to effectively deal with the city's problems telling me, "like some of the problems we have are kind of their [the city council] fault…like the crack dealers and stuff, it's basically about education…they probably dropped out in high school." It appeared that Terrence believed the city council had a responsibility to improve

education in the community in order to combat some of the drug problem. However, he also inferred that the City Council had not adequately addressed the problem and it was therefore, "their fault." Dawn also had formed negative impressions of another governing body, the Board of Education. She explained to me that when she had a problem in school she and her mother attempted to seek help through the Board office, however this did not prove to be a positive experience as her comments below reveal:

> Like, when we go to the board of education, right last year, every time we go there, they like, the person who's in charge of it, be in meetings, they always be in meetings, and they never really return your phone calls so, I can't go there because they're not going to do nothing.

Terrence, Deandre and Dawn all saw those in leadership positions as not living up to their responsibilities. Dawn's comments suggest that a lack of faith in those in authority can lead to a sense of hopelessness. Dawn's experience taught her that those in charge of the schools were, "not going to do nothing" so she no longer saw any point in seeking their help.

The view that adults in the community weren't living up to their responsibilities was expressed repeatedly by the students. While some students seemed sympathetic to the challenges faced by adults in the city, all still felt that the adults should be held accountable. The students strongly asserted that if the adults took more responsibility to care for, follow and enforce the laws, act as positive role models and work to address the city's issues, then life in the city would improve.

Students Understandings of "Community"

Despite this complex context in which there are high levels of violence and flawed role models, the students still possessed visions of what a "functioning" city community would look like and most did not view Evettston as such. The students

regularly made distinctions between "healthy" functioning communities and communities that were not functioning well. Interview date revealed that the students possessed understandings about what elements were necessary for communities to function effectively, as well as understandings of what can happen when these elements were not present in a community. Additionally the students were able to apply these understandings to communities they currently were members of, or in order to make comparisons between their own city and neighboring towns. Table 4.1 represents a summary of the students' responses to interview questions on their understanding of the term "community" and how they applied that term to their lives and to the city they lived in. Questions were asked in an open-ended manner, therefore if a characteristic was not part of a student's response there is no data recorded in the box corresponding to that characteristic.

Table 4.1

Student Responses to Interview Questions about Community

Community defined by living arrangement and/or Geography	Community defined by the actions of the people involved	Individuals have responsibilities in communities	Negative consequences occur when communities don't function well	Is the city of Evettston a community?
8	Yes - All Reasons: Self-interest: 3 Enlightened self interest: 10 Altruistic: 1	7	8	No – 4 Somewhat – 2 Yes -1

An analysis of the data presented in Table 4.1 reveals several significant points. First was a tendency for the students to offer a simple definition of community based on geography (e.g. people living within a similar geographic area). However when

prompted, all but one of the students were able to describe characteristics and qualities required of the people as the basis for defining a community. This demonstrated that the students possessed a more sophisticated understanding of what constitutes a community, but either needed the opportunity to think the subject through more, or needed the prompting to push their thinking forward.

The students' descriptors of communities also indicate a mature and civically enlightened perspective among most of the students. When detailing the necessary characteristics, the great majority (10 of the 12 interviewed) of the students identified behaviors that are necessary for the common good, as well as for the individuals benefit. This was evident in comments such as; "all must work for whole," "working together," and "helping one another out," so that all members of the community benefit and the community functions effectively. Only one student cited purely altruistic actions among members of one of her communities (her church) when reasoning that this group of people was a community. She explained that the group worked together on a weekly basis to feed the homeless and "help out others". Lastly, a few students expressed motives of a more self-interested nature. Common among the self-interested motives were the penalties or consequences suffered when the individual did not cooperate or follow the rules within their communities. While this reasoning suggested compliance to avoid personal penalties, the students still recognized the value in cooperating and following the rules within communities. Only one student did not express the necessity for members to work together as a requisite for a community. What defined community for her was simply if she shared hobbies or likes/dislikes with other members of a community. Although this view have indicated a more self-centered preoccupation with

the individual's comfort and needs than with a concern for other members in the community, she was the only student of the twelve that expressed such a view. Clearly the majority of the students possessed a strong sense of shared responsibility among community members for the benefit of the whole.

The Students' Understandings of Evettston as a "Community"

Much was learned about the students' conceptions of their city through the discussions of community. When I applying their own definitions of community to Evettston, half of the students specifically stated that the City of Evettston did not qualify at all, or only somewhat as a functioning community. On its own this fact might appear alarming, but when this is considered in conjunction with the general comments students made in class and focus group sessions about the levels of violence, crime and dysfunction in the city, there was a strong indication that most of the students did not see their city as "functioning" well.

The numbers presented in Table 4.1 dealing with the question of whether or not they viewed their city was a community, might also be somewhat skewed based on several factors. One reason was how students defined community. The one individual who stated that Evettston did meet his definition of a community was also the individual who determined that the only characteristic needed to be classified as a community was to share a geographic boundary such as a town or neighborhood. One female offered many examples of functioning communities she was a member of; her family, church, and academic activities offered outside of the school and community, yet she never mentioned the school or city. This complete lack of reference to these two communities may suggest a few things. First, it is possible that she did not see either school or the city

as representing functioning communities and therefore simply did not mention them. The second implication relates to the fact that she was one of only two students who did not describe feeling unsafe in the community, the second student to do so was her twin brother, and both were from an immigrant North African family. This information taken together with her statement that she, “doesn’t walk around Evettston” at all by her own choice, that she spends a great deal of time interacting with the larger Nigerian community in northern NJ and attended extensive after school and summer enrichment programs, suggested that she really lived separate from the city community. Insulated by her strong family and cultural ties she appeared to have a very different experience than most of the students. This may account for why both she and her brother offered interpretations of the community that were inconsistent with those of the other students.

As the conversations on community with the students progressed, the students offered many images of what functioning communities would look like. These descriptions were often offered in contrast to their city and many times followed by negative characterizations of their city. Sometimes these examples were general expressions of how students viewed functioning communities. In the interview with Emmanuel, he referenced the notion that Evettston could be at a “higher level” and when I asked him to elaborate on this point he told me, “Well, uh, the schools would get better test scores and there would be no gangs and violence, because there is a lot of gangs in Evettston”. In this instance Emmanuel linked higher tests scores, and a lack of gangs and violence with a community that would be at a “higher level” e.g. a community unlike Evettston. The young man Samuel who desired to play basketball without a confrontation, described his ideal community in comparison to his current community as,

"I think that um it would be quiet, like over here it's always, you could always hear gun shots, you could always hear people yelling outside".

At other times students drew on their knowledge and experiences with neighboring towns when forming their visions of what functioning communities looked like. These comparisons suggested that the students saw other communities as more desirable than their own. This sentiment was expressed by Samuel as he compared the city with a neighboring community, "Like if you was to go to Weston,…its going to be loud, but like at nighttime it's quite. Out here is loud!" A more peaceful society is only one quality described, other comparisons included a lack of gangs, students performing better in schools, citizens more likely to follow the laws, and people taking better care of their homes and town.

At times the comments made by the students revealed that they believed that residents of neighboring towns held a negative impression of their community. This sentiment was evident in the comments of Deandre:

> You know, honestly if I was in Weston I probably be scared to come to this town…like I just probably wouldn't want to go there, like my kids said oh let's go, I heard there's a nice restaurant in Evettston, I probably just say no, why I want to have to deal with that?

In another conversation with Deandre he told me that he gave me, "a lot of credit" for coming to Evettston to do my research. He cited the fact that I didn't have to come to the city, this was my choice. His making this comment suggested that he viewed the choice made by me to come into the city as one that he would not make lightly and in fact, as his above comment indicated, he might not have made that choice at all given what he knew about the community.

Another line of reasoning presented by some students suggested that the people within different communities handled situations differently, thereby leading to very outcomes. This assessment was also tinged with suggestions that the people of Evettston were themselves at fault for the current state of affairs. Comments made by Malika during our interview illustrate this point:

> Me: Now, do you think that that's any different than for teenagers say in Weston?
> Malika: Um, a little different.
> Me: How so?
> Malika: Because certain teens might just want to do drugs, or sell drugs, or be in gangs, whereas in Weston they're more kind of laid back with stuff that they do, like they think about it before they actually do it.

It is evident that Malika actually thinks the students in the neighboring town put more thought into their actions, and perhaps into the consequences of those actions, and were therefore less likely to commit negative and unlawful acts. Whether or not Malika had any justifications for this belief is really secondary to the fact that her comments once again revealed a vision that other towns were in some ways "better" than the city where she lived.

This sentiment was echoed many times as students commented on the seeming inability of Evettston residents to control their actions or take responsibility for their lives. Bree offered one of the most troubling critiques of members of her community when she explained the presence of violence in the city by comparing how different ethnic groups dealt with conflict. She explained to me that,

> If a Caucasian person or somebody got into a conflict, they would just leave it alone, but if an African American person, or a Latino or Hispanic person got into a conflict, they probably going to fight, or jump somebody.

When I questioned Bree further about this idea that different ethnic groups responded to conflict differently, she modified her comments to place the blame more specifically on the environment that people in were raised in. She offered, “It has a reason to do what, where you’re living, and like how people react to situations, and like how we see people react, and then that’s how you will react.” Her comments were rife with the inference that in other environments, people learned to handle conflict in more appropriate ways due to the behavior observed among role models.

While the precise reasons that the students offered for why their city differed from surrounding towns varied, three themes emerged from these exchanges with the students. The first theme was that the students had developed conceptions of what a functioning community was and the majority did not characterize their city in this way. Secondly, the students’ experiences in the city served as a frame of reference which students drew on to make comparisons between their city and neighboring towns and these comparisons often led the students to see their city in a negative light. Many of the students also believed that outsiders also viewed their city in a negative manner. The final theme was that the students felt that the behaviors of the residents in Evettston were partly to blame for the problems present in the city. Each of these themes was part of the complex manner in which the students formed understandings of the concept of “community” and how they viewed their own city.

The Students Feelings about their City

As discussed above, the students’ characterizations of the city often portrayed a city riddled with problems that were adversely affecting the youth who lived there. Most

of the students experienced the city as an unsafe place, and many felt let down by the adults in the city. Additionally, comparisons with neighboring towns usually cast Evettston in a negative light. However these sentiments do not reveal the full extent of the complex and often ambivalent feelings the students had in regard to their city. A conversation with Samuel reveals some of this complexity:

> Me: I've been asking everyone is there anything in your community, or your school that really bothers you, that you think is a problem, and you'd like to see changed.
>
> Samuel: Um, violence. Cause like, um basically the thing that ruins a community, Plainfield, is violence, and that's why most kids is, that's why our test scores is basically low, because most people, most kids are stuck up in the streets, and they so focused on the streets, and not on school.
>
> Me: So when you talk about violence, can you just describe a little bit what kinds of violence the young people experience, or what kind of violence they're afraid of?
>
> Samuel: Gang violence. Um, the people being wrongfully drunk, fighting, fighting over colors, over girls, just dumb stuff.
>
> Me: Is it usually in the form of like getting beat up, or does it get more aggressive with like knives, and guns and things like that.
>
> Samuel: Yeah knives, guns, fist fighting, they, everything. Um, drive-bys, everything that basically happens in a ghetto community.

Although Samuel's description is troubling , I had heard about the violence in the from many of the students and through the news, so I wasn't surprised by his comments. However when I asked Samuel why he never discussed the problem of violence with friends or adults in the community his answer revealed more to me about how the students responded to this aspect of their environment. He explained:

> Because like, it's never, like we're used to it, so it's not a major thing to us, that we, that most of our friends, we grew up out here, we grew up in the streets, we know how it is. So it's not a major problem to us, so we already know what's coming to, so we don't, there's nothing to be bothered, cause there's nothing major, we already know what's going to happen.

Samuel's comments suggest that a lack of security that most people would find unacceptable has in many ways become acceptable to these students. Samuel indicates

that he and his friends have learned how to effectively cope with the circumstances of their surroundings by not dwelling on this aspect of their life since they "already know what's going to happen." However, this might also suggest that he has learned to cope with circumstances by downplaying, or even denying the seriousness of their circumstances.

Setting Samuel's remarks in the context of events that occurred in the community during the course of this study help to explore this idea further. During the months spanning January to April of 2008, the city's police department worked with the New Jersey State Police Street Gang Unit Drug Task Force in carrying out a massive drug and gang investigation within the city of Evettston. This investigation led to the arrest of more than ninety individuals and the seizure of a variety of guns, drugs, cash and even body armor. Commenting on the arrests, an officer said, "It's important to get guns and drugs off the street, but Operation 5-SPOT (the code name for the investigation) achieved much more by locking up the gang members and associates responsible for creating an environment of violence in Evettston and the surrounding areas". (NJ State Police Official News Release, April 2008). Knowledge of the arrests was pervasive in the school and many students had friends and family members who were involved. When the topic of the arrests came up during a focus group session one of the students explained the impact at school as follows, "Because like there's somebody friends got locked up, family members…it's distracting to some students". Yet in the midst of this environment Samuel states that "nothing major" is going to happen. This reaction suggests that Samuel has learned to incorporate such events into his daily life so that he does not devote too much of his attention to them. As he explains, "there's nothing to be bothered,

because there's nothing major, we already know what's going to happen." In this way he is able to move forward in his daily life and pursue his interests, such as playing basketball.

Ambivalent feelings towards the city were commonly expressed among the students. My interview with Dawn graphically illustrates the interplay between the students' awareness of the city's troubles and the ambivalence she experienced surrounding these events. Excerpts from our conversation are presented below:

Me: Can you tell me what should be a citizen's responsibility?
Dawn: I don't know.
Me: Well let's just think maybe about some things that would make Evettston better.
Dawn: If citizens did things that they're supposed to do.
Me: What would those things be?
Me: Um, like, like they try to like, control the gang violence, like stop selling drugs, um, like try and help like the homeless.
Me: What happens in a community when people don't fulfill their responsibilities?
Dawn: If they don't fulfill their responsibilities, like that community, it starts to break apart, and it starts to get like out of control.
Me: Do you see that happening in any of your communities?
Dawn: Um, I think so.
Me: Which communities that you're a member of, do you think are breaking apart or out of control?
Dawn: No, I think we're not breaking apart, I don't think that.
Me: You don't think Evettston as a community is getting out of control?
Dawn: Well, no, it's not like really getting out of control, like not that much, but Evettston is starting to get out of control.
Me: Ok. How is it starting?
Dawn: Um, like people shooting different people, drive-bys, um, people are robbing other people, um, I mean that's it.

Clearly Dawn is aware of the problems plaguing the city, yet when directly asked if Evettston is breaking apart based on her definition of a community, Dawn seemed to defend the city as not, "really getting out of control". This pattern was evident also among students who attended one of the focus group sessions. During the session the

students spent considerable time describing reasons why they did not want to attend the high school. Among the reasons was the high incidence of fighting in the schools, such as regular episodes of young women being attacked by classmates, beaten up and even slashed with box cutters, knives or nails. Yet as the session was wrapping up I asked the students for any final remarks about their city and the following comments were made:

Student # 1:	It [the city] not always as bad as they [the newspapers] make it seem. Its not always that bad because like they always, they always bring up the bad, a fight in the school, a bad fight, some body gets hurt, a teacher gets hurt, but they never will talk about the good things."
Student # 2:	Makes everyone think Evettston is so bad
Student # 3:	Evettston has some good things and some bad things like any other community

In light of the descriptions of the fights at the high school, these final comments seemed to indicate that the students have learned to assimilate the bad elements of their community into a vision that also incorporates the positive and shapes their full understanding of their community. For all of these students violence may be just one aspect of life in Evettston that they have become skilled at coping with. For some this may involve downplaying events and for others it means integrating the incidents into their larger life experiences.

The community the students lived in was a complex setting fraught with dangers, challenges and disappointments, yet it was also the place they called home. This dynamic left the students with a mixed set of emotions: fear, longing, pride, and ambivalence. Most of the students would like to see the community change, but as they fear that won't happen, leaving the community appears to be the only viable option for many. Malika explained to me that although Evettston was her hometown she did not see herself remaining there. When I asked why she answered:

> Because I don't want, alright, I don't want my children, my family to go through like, being, sitting around like being like, being scared, to be in your own home, or walk down your driveway. Like the people are shooting and stabbing you, like if you wanted to be into a gang, you got to go and like just stab somebody.

It is in this setting that the students attended school each day. They came with complicated perceptions about their lives, life in neighboring towns, citizenship and community. It is with this background that the students were preparing for their future as workers and citizens. The extent to which the school community reinforced or challenged these experiences will be explored in the next section.

The School Context

As one seeks to enter Jackson Middle School they will first learn that the front doors to the school are locked and one must be buzzed in after identifying themselves. Although this has become a fairly common security measure in many NJ schools, the next encounter is not so common. Just beyond the front entrance there is a security guard who is dressed like a police officer. The officer instructs all guests to sign-in and inquires as to what business they have with the school. Once the security guard has cleared you, you are sent to the front office where a secretary will contact the classroom teacher or administrator that you have come to see. After the teacher or administrator verifies he/she is expecting you, you are free to proceed to your meeting. While each step in this process is designed to ensure that guests to the school have legitimate reasons for being there, the process speaks to the need for careful scrutiny of those seeking entrance to the building.

As one moves through the halls it becomes apparent that the school has many positive features: wide hallways, windows in most classrooms, classroom computers,

TV's and VCRs, as well as a large cafeteria, auditorium and gym. However a closer inspection reveals a physical environment that speaks of neglect or disregard among school staff and students. I regularly noted lockers coming off the hinges, or with doors dented and broken; windows and fire alarm shields cracked or shattered; garbage lining the hallways; and graffiti recently scribbled on walls or painted over. Much of this is seen and experienced as negative by the students. This is heard in remarks by Malika:

> If you go up in the bathrooms it's spray paint and stuff…the custodians have to come and spray paint over it, and it's like always something going on at school, it can't just be a regular school.

Malika saw the vandalism in the school as creating a negative environment, an environment that kept her school from being, "a regular school". Similar to the perceptions that the students had in regard to their city compared to neighboring towns, a common theme voiced by the students was that their school did not measure up to other, "better" schools. This section will explore how the school environment was experienced by the students and what they had to say about why conditions existed as they did in their school. Much like in their vision of community, the students expressed strong desires to experience a different type of educational setting, yet many of them did not see this as possible within the Evettston School District.

Chaos & Disruption

Me:	Is there something else (other than the issue the class had identified for their *Project Citizen* topic) that you would like to see changed in your school or city?
Jenna:	The behavior of kids.
Me:	The behavior here in school?
Jenna nods.	
Me:	Is it in the classroom or in the hallway?
Jenna:	Everywhere!
Me:	Just to elaborate a little bit, what's the problem you see?

Jenna:	Like in classrooms, like in some classrooms, some of the students they don't pay attention, and they're doing other things, and like their own, they're in their own little world. And in the hallways they're like ten minutes late for class, they running around everywhere, and like in the bathrooms they write all over the walls, or all over the mirrors, stick tissue on the top of the walls, and on top of the ceilings, and all that stuff, and like flood the toilets and all that stuff.
Me:	Ok, why is that a problem for you?
Jenna:	Because it shows that they have no respect for their school or for themselves.
Me:	And how does that affect you?
Jenna:	Um, how? Because I have to go to the school.

The above conversation with Jenna provides a glimpse into the world that the students experienced as part of their daily school life. Her comments revealed that this world was filled with chaos, disruptions and the regular suggestion that those around her were filled with a sense of apathy and perhaps even anger. Comments made by the students in interviews, focus group sessions and in class, along with my observations support the idea that Jenna is not alone in her experience.

All of the students were asked during interviews to discuss their perceptions of the school and all but one student provided negative characterizations. A general disregard for academics, property and the rights of others were regularly described by the students. One issue though appeared to take center stage across my observations and the students' interviews; the issue of chronic disruptions to the learning environment. Dawn's comments reflect this daily experience when she explained, "I'm in class…they [students] come running around the hallway, they screaming and the security guard have to scream after them, it affects the class because you could all hear them." Dawn's experiences are validated by the many comments of classmates who also describe students as "loud", "banging on the walls", or in Malika's words, "it's people running in

the hallways". These occurrences also characterized my time in the school. Regular disruptions in the hallways during class time were frequently noted in my field notes such as:

January 15, 2008:	As another class was let out the hall became extremely noisy. There was yelling and banging on the walls
March 10, 2008:	There were loud noises coming from the hallway as students were now passing
May 7, 2008:	There were loud disruptions in the hallway. Shortly after the teacher was interrupted in the classroom by two security guards who were responding to the outburst in the hallway
May 19, 2008:	Students were running and yelling in the hall outside of the classroom and sometimes students would bang on the walls

Dawn's comments also spoke to the frustration that she felt due to the negative impact of the disruptions on her own learning experience. This view was shared by her classmates. I noted during several class observations that students discussed the negative impact of student disruptions in the school making comments such as, "they [students] be able to focus during day without interruptions," (Field notes, January, 30, 2008) and, "If you have a couple of bad kids in the class they could like, they could distract the other students that are willing to learn," (Field notes, February 25, 2008). While all educational settings may be sites for minor disruptions, the frequency and nature of the disruptions at Jackson Middle School contributed to an environment where students had to work harder to focus or simply hear what was being said in class, adding elements of challenge that are not present in all academic settings. This was a reality that the students appeared to be well aware of.

A Threatening Environment

Beyond the constant noise disruptions, there were a range of other factors that contributed to the development of the school environment. Many students provided

stories and comments that revealed an environment that was threatening to the students' psychological and physical well-being on a daily basis. Adolescent disagreements could easily erupt into fights. Such as an incident described by Bree,

> Like last year, there was this girl…she was saying something about this one girl and the girl just wanted to turn and hit her and then they started fighting and people started jumping in it, and then she went to lunch…and then people came and jumped her again, and then they ran out, she was running, they ran outside, started jumping her and she had, um, to go to the hospital.

Although the scale of the fight described above may not have been a common occurrence, the threat of a fight in school was. This idea was validated by the comments of students during interviews, in class and in my own observations.

Due to the regular occurrences of conflict it appeared that many of the students, faculty and staff came to accept this as a "normal" part of the school experience. I often observed situations where students exchanged verbal insults and shoves in the hallway. Sometimes these incidents were diffused by a teacher, or more often the students' friends would pull them away before things escalated. One such incident occurred when I was walking the hallway with a small group sent to interview the Vice Principal. My field notes from that day describe the following incident:

> On the way to the front office I observed a situation in the hallway where a female student brushed by a boy intentionally bumping him. He responded by yelling at her in a loud aggressive voice, which she responded to in the same manner. This all took place just a few feet away from two security guards who did nothing to intervene. The students kept moving and the situation didn't escalate. (Field notes, 5-19-08)

The above incident is illuminating not just in highlighting a common hall incident, but for how it was responded to by the adults. The fact that the security guards did not respond suggests that they either did not see this as a potentially volatile situation, (maybe due to

the routine nature of the exchange?), or they simply were not concerned with maintaining an orderly and safe environment in the hall. Either scenario is disturbing. As will be discussed in the next section, the students saw this behavior on the part of the security guards as part of the failure for the adults in charge to make the school a safer, more functional environment.

Threats to the students' sense of well-being could take many forms. Sometimes the threat was more subtle, yet still felt by the students as Deandre explained to me,

> It's like because most kids are like scared to, there's a lot of boys in this school, and when somebody like mess with you, you're mostly scared of them and the gang they with. So to me, that's really distracting, when you try and get your work done.

Although Deandre didn't have a specific incident of being harassed by gang members in school, he still felt threatened by their very presence. Another potential threat the students described came from intruders entering the school. During a class discussion focused on how to improve the school environment one student raised the issue of school uniforms, which led to a discussion of the pros and cons of school uniforms. Students contributed many reasons both in support or against uniforms, however when one female pointed out that uniforms would help to identify and keep intruders out of the school many students agreed with this point and several talked about how this had been a serious problem at the school. For some of these students this argument appeared to be very persuasive indicating this was a threat they would like to see eliminated.

The students attended school in an environment that was rife with disruptions and threats to their emotional and physical security, as well as their academic well-being. On a frequent basis the students were challenged to overcome the disadvantages of what

should be a baseline expectation in a school setting; a classroom environment that is safe and conducive to student learning. Sometimes these experiences were ameliorated through pockets of positive and productive educational environments that existed within a few classrooms. One such classroom will be explored in the next chapter.

Who is to Blame?

> Evettston's education rating is based on its public schools' test results, '10' being rated best…Evettston's rating is '2'…while both Jackson and Hillside schools (the two middle schools in the community) have a rating of "1". This simply means that our school test scores were and still are extremely poor/low and are not making the grade…If we satisfy and make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress, the benchmark for improvement set under the terms of No Child Left Behind) there will not be a school takeover in our district. (Excerpt from the students *Project Citizen* Portfolio problem statement)

As the above text makes clear, the students who participated in this study were well aware of the poor results on the state standardized tests among students at their school and the implications of this. This topic was of such great concern to the students that they chose this as the problem to address for their *Project Citizen* topic. What the above quote does not reveal though is the many factors that the students viewed as contributing to these results. Table 4.2, presented below, provides a look at the general categories identified by the students as factors responsible for the conditions within the school. Student responses indicate, the students saw the responsibility as being shared by multiple parties; students, teachers, staff and administrators. The majority of the students interviewed saw the main problem as being the behavior of the students. Many students in the interviews and class observations argued that if the students of Jackson Middle School would change, than the school would improve. However, little hope that this would occur was also a common theme in the students' comments.

Table 4.2

Student Characterizations of the School Climate

Provided negative characterizations of school climate	Identified problems associated With faculty	Identified problems associated with students	Identified problems related to other factors
92%	50%	83%	33%

Note: Other factors included staff and administrators

Elisabeth expressed the sentiment held by many of her peers when she stated during an interview:

> Well they have to change [the students], but I am not sure if they'll ever change…the only change is [if] the students take the initiative to learn, to do their homework, to stop playing in the halls, to stop giving into the nonsense…it should change, but I don't know when.

The students offered many reasons for why they thought their peers behaved as they did. Several reasons offered were; the students simply didn't know better, this is what they had always seen; that they lacked the maturity to understand the implications of their behavior; or there wasn't enough parental guidance in the students lives. Whatever the reasoning offered, much of what the students saw as the problems in the school, the poor academic performance, the vandalism, students cutting classes, disruptions in the classrooms and hallways, fights and disrespect towards teachers, were behaviors executed by the students themselves. Sadly though, most of the students did not express great faith that the students would make the changes needed, although their comments indicated they would like to see such changes.

Another place that the students put blame was the type and quality of instruction that typified many of the classes. Common complaints related to instruction were that teachers simply "Teach right out of the book," (Field notes 5-15-09), or "he just writes notes on the board says copy it with me and watch a movie" (Interview with Derrick), and "Teachers focus on the smart kids only" (Field notes 1-9-09). Students also described teachers who didn't appear to care or take the students' learning seriously. Some students even offered this as an explanation for negative behavior among the students, as seen in the comments by Malika below;

> I skip class sometimes. But sometimes I do it just because its stuff that we've been learning, and we have to learn it repeatedly over and over again and I feel like why should I have to learn this again? Like I know what it is already I shouldn't have to sit here and answer the same questions over.

Malika's statement suggests that if the learning was more meaningful, she would attend class. Therefore some of the students' behavior can be viewed in reaction to the quality of teaching they experience.

The students also raised concerns over the qualifications of some responsible for teaching them. "Absenteeism of teachers and having long term substitutes that are not teaching the students contribute to the students missing work they should have received" (Excerpted from *Project Citizen* Portfolio, solution statement). Another serious problem identified by the students dealt with the practice of staffing of teachers who were not qualified to teach in a given content area. Student analysis of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation led them to a feature of the law that allowed for a teacher to have three years to become "highly qualified" in a content area, all the while teaching in that area. The students provided examples of teachers in the school who were teaching in content areas in which they did not possess the necessary content background due to this system.

Below are excerpts from the students' *Project Citizen* Portfolio where they outline recommendations to the school board to address the concerns of teachers' qualifications:

> We are going to strongly request that they [the school board] hire highly qualified teachers that have the proper credentials. It is a mental disadvantage for the students in Evettston to continue to have classes taught by teachers that are not certified and qualified

While the students recognized that teachers alone were not responsible for bringing change to the school, they took very seriously the notion that faculty should be qualified to teach in a given content area and possess the proper pedagogical tools to effectively teach the students, as well as the passion and interest in the children's future.

Students identified a final element contributing to the problems with the school as a lack of enforcement of school rules and codes of conduct. This behavior was most commonly associated with the school security guards. Students complained that the prevalent problem of students skipping class was in part the fault of security guards because as Jenna explained,

> I feel they don't care because one of the security guards, she knows the girls be in the bathroom, but she just tells them to get out and then they don't get out, she just doesn't do anything about it.

My own observations of the interactions between security guards and students support the notion that the students did not see the guards as enforcers of school rules. I regularly witnessed students yelling, running or shoving one another in the hallway while security guards stood nearby and said nothing. In my interview with Dawn she specifically stated that, "they tell them to go to classes, they [the students] don't go to classes… security guards, they don't take them seriously." Students also noted that many classroom teachers simply ignored disruptions or violations of school rules. Although administrators were not specifically blamed, students did cite the fact that penalties were

not enforced as a problem, which can be viewed in part as the purview of the administration.

This section reveals that students possessed an understanding of the complex and multi-faceted issues that lead to the current state of their school. They recognized that many parties were responsible and would need to be engaged in changing the environment to one of a safe, secure and productive center for learning. Sadly the students' comments and actions also reflected a belief that things will not change anytime soon. As Elisabeth so poignantly stated, "it should change, but I don't know when." The fact is that of the twelve students interviewed for the study, none of the students viewed the possibility of attending the local high school as desirable. Six of the twelve students already had plans in place to attend other schools. These plans included attendance at the County Vocational High School, a public school that required an application and acceptance to attend; attendance at private schools with funding coming from academic and athletic scholarships; and moving to different communities to live with extended family members. Among the six who will attend the high school, many also expressed the desire to attend a different school, but lacked the immediate resources to do so. This sentiment is evident in the comment by Bree when I asked her about her plans for high school and she said, "I'm just hoping, I'll probably have to go there [the high school] for the first year." Based on informal conversations with other students in the class, at least two of the six not interviewed for the study were also planning to attend high school out of the district. This means that of the eighteen in the class, eight or 44%, had plans in place to attend out of district high schools. This statistic might be one of the most telling

in regards to the educational opportunities afforded the students and about the visions and aspirations they have for themselves.

Conclusion

Structural and macro forces shape individual's lives in many profound ways. The students in this study lived in a city that represented the trends and problems in urban America. A loss of a middle and professional class, high unemployment and low levels of educational attainment have left the city without much needed social and human capital. For the students this has meant a loss of some of the role models that they might have benefitted from. Crime and gang activity are not just statistics, they are realities that impact the students' sense of safety, their conceptions of their city and their desires to see change in the city. Thus, the context in which the students lived impacted their lives.

The school context also reflected many of the challenges of urban schools. Disorder, disruption, low-academic standards, a lack of responsibility and leadership, and even threats to one's safety characterized the students' descriptions of their school. The finding presented in this chapter that the students' experiences in the city and school form a complex setting amid which to undertake the study of civic education has serious implications for the development of the students' knowledge, skills and civic identities. The question becomes, can an intervening force ameliorate the impact of the larger forces of city and school that influence the students' perceptions of themselves and society? In the next chapter the classroom will be considered as such a force. In the words of Giroux, focus on the classroom experience enabled me to, "understand more thoroughly the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their

own lived experiences and structures of dominance and constraint," (as quoted in MacLeod, 1995, p. 15). The role the classroom played in this process will be explored next.

CHAPTER 5

AN OASIS IN THE CLASSROOM

The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides two definitions for the word “oasis”. The first being, “a fertile or green area in an arid region,” and the second, “something that provides refuge, relief, or pleasant contrast” Both of these definitions address the idea that conditions within an oasis provide for opportunities, whether it be relief, refugee or even life for vegetation in a dessert climate. Further, the definitions suggest that these conditions exist in contrast to an alternate situation, e.g. the desert. The second finding of this study is that the classroom under investigation offered markedly different experiences and opportunities for the students from those of the City of Evettston and Jackson Middle School, thereby providing an “oasis” for the students. It was this oasis, or classroom context, that provided students with an intervening educational experience that helped them reach new academic heights.

Chapter four presented students’ experiences and characterizations of the city and school. These were environments subject to disruptions, threats to one’s safety, disrespect and violence. Student voices often reflected disappointment over the actions of those around them, including those in positions of authority. In contrast, the classroom offered a refuge where respect, personal accountability and high academic standards were the prevailing characteristics. This chapter will focus on the classroom experience as framed by the students and the factors that created this “oasis” of learning, safety and respect in the midst of a school environment where cutting class, disrespect and substandard performance by students and teachers had become pervasive.

The Classroom Culture

> The teacher asked the students why they thought that so many students (in other classes) had behaved so badly. Students discussed the fact that in some classrooms students know the teachers don't take education seriously. Students then began talking about teachers that said things and didn't follow through and who you knew you could get away with stuff in their class. The conversation turned to why the students don't behave that way in all classes and several students started commenting on why students don't behave that way with the teacher. Malcom explained because they knew her "as a strict teacher". Someone else said it was because "students know you take education seriously". (Field notes 3-5-08)

The teacher in the study, Ms. Prince, (a pseudonym) played a primary role in creating the "oasis" this classroom offered to the students. Through months of observation and countless conversations with the teacher and students, a combination of beliefs held and actions taken by the teacher, emerged as the underlying foundation on which a productive learning environment was established. Ms. Prince cultivated a rich fertile area for student growth through a combination of structure and purpose; high standards and student accountability; and a respectful, inclusive and student-centered environment. Each of these qualities will be discussed in the following sections. First though a 'look' into the classroom will be provided.

Academically Oriented

In order to reach the classroom one has to briefly walk outside, cross over a covered walkway and enter a large trailer that has been set up at the rear of the building. The trailer looks like an extra double-wide trailer from the outside and has eight classrooms within. The wide hallway is occasionally decorated with student work, but more often the walls are bare. As in the main building, signs of vandalism and neglect

are present with a broken pan of glass in a door or garbage lining the floor. Entering the classroom one leaves much of the school world behind.

The classroom itself was a large square with walls covered by a whiteboard, bookshelves and bulletin board and windows, (but with blinds usually kept shut so as not to distract the students from outdoor occurrences). On the whiteboard homework assignments and lesson objectives were posted daily. The bulletin boards were used to display student work, which was changed with regularity. Book shelves were piled high with resource books and posters with inspirational messages to the students covered blank spaces on walls. These features made the classroom an inviting academic space.

Structured and Purposeful

The teachers' desk always remained at the front of the room, although I never saw her seated at it. Approximately twenty-five student desks filled the room, however on any given day the desks were arranged differently based on Ms. Prince's expectations for student interactions and learning. Occasionally the desks were lined up in rows of five desks each, facing the whiteboard. However, it was more common for the desks to be grouped differently. Sometimes the desks would be arranged into a large circle allowing all of the students to see one another. At other times the desks were clustered into small groups of four to five desks, or paired up for students to work together. The arrangement of the desks was never random or haphazard, rather this spoke to careful planning on the part of the teacher. Ms. Prince used the desk arrangements to facilitate different types of interactions among the students. The routine nature and careful planning by the teacher signaled to the students that different desk arrangements simply meant different types of collaboration.

As students entered the room they took cues from the arrangements of the desks. Students would regularly join together with the group or partner they had been working with during the last class depending on how the desks were arranged. The response by the students allowed for class to begin in an orderly manner rather than time lost with students moving desks or shuffling to new seats at the beginning of the period. While the routine movement of desk arrangements could have appeared as a lack of structure to a casual observer, the students demonstrated to me through their actions that they understood the purpose of these arrangements and they responded accordingly.

Structure was central to Ms. Prince's style of teaching as well. In a world where students could seemingly roam the halls or cut class at will, this classroom operated in sharp contrast with structure embedded on a daily basis. Whether it was a class discussion, a reading activity or a small group activity, structure was present through rules, procedures and precise directions given by the Ms. Prince. Before students embarked on a task the expectations and limits were clearly laid out by the teacher as the following examples make clear;

> The teacher referred to several articles on school rankings, cheating, performance and standards in NJ. She directed the students to take out their highlighters to use while reading to note important points. She explained they would have seven minutes to read one of the articles. She set the timer and told all to read the article on DFG rankings in NJ. After all completed the reading, she allotted them two more minutes to write down questions or comments about the article in order to prepare for a class discussion. (1-9-08)

> The teacher passed out lap tops to the students who were organized in pairs and instructed them to think of questions to use for the student surveys. She mentioned the various age groups that the students might want to question and discussed with the class how questions should be varied depending on the audience. She then told the class they had seventeen minutes to work and she set the timer. (2-18-08)

This level of structure let the students know exactly what was expected of them. By setting time limits and using the timer, the class became accustomed to getting right to work, knowing the buzzer would go off when the designated time had expired.

Also crucial to the success of these activities was the follow through by the teacher and the methods she employed to hold students accountable. When the timer went off the teacher moved the students to the next stage of the activity. On rare occasions if it was apparent that the majority of the students needed more time she would provide a few more minutes, but most often this was not the case. It appeared that the students worked well within the time limits and structured activities.

The structured environment of the classroom may be likened to the requisite soil conditions that would need to exist for optimal plant growth to occur. Even in an arid climate, in order for an oasis to exist proper mix of soil needs is necessary before growth can occur. The structure of the classroom provided a first, necessary condition for the students to achieve academically. However, just as soil needs to be joined with various other elements such as sunlight, water and seeds for germination, the teacher brought other essential elements to the structured foundation, as the next sections will reveal.

High Standards and Expectations

Another feature that contributed to the class culture was the high standards the students were held to. Ms. Prince was a dedicated, conscientious and hardworking woman, qualities she also expected in her students. She approached her students with the belief in their ability to learn and held high expectations for them to do so. She understood the challenges that many of them faced inside and outside of school, but she did not allow for this to be an excuse for underachievement. She conveyed her high

expectations to the students through challenging tasks and reading materials and questioning and prompting.

Early in my study I recognized that the teacher believed in the students' abilities to think critically and play a central role in their own learning, even when the task at hand was difficult for them, as seen in the excerpt below;

> The teacher prompted the students to form a statement about their data. She wrote the beginning of a statement on the board and instructed the students to complete the statement…The class still didn't state any specific reasons, so the teacher continued to direct the students to identify specific reasons to support the statement. (Field notes 12-11-07)

Although the students did not provide the initial response that the teacher was looking for, she responded by providing more specific direction, but not the answer for the students. This was a practice that I regularly observed, noting instances such as,

> The teacher told the class that they needed to see the actual law to read what it specifically said and then make the correct connection. She told them she could not give them the information, they needed to find it. (Field notes 1-28-08)
>
> The teacher asked Jocelyn, "Do you want to know more?" Jocelyn nodded and concluded that she needed to ask follow-up questions to get the information she sought. (Field notes 2-18-08)
>
> The teacher was leading the group in answering prompting questions in the text. The teacher would rephrase or direct the students' attention to aspects of their research. (Field notes 5-15-08)
>
> The teacher focused on asking the group to substantiate statements, she would ask, "how many" or, "how do you know?" (Field notes 5-23-08)

The above quotes are indicative of the delicate balance the teacher provided in order to scaffold, or support, the students' learning, while still maintaining high academic standards.

Through questioning and prompting Ms. Prince provided a platform for the

students to think critically and substantiate their understandings. Rather than simply supply the needed information, as in the case of the law referenced in class on January 28, 2008, the teacher told the students they had to read over the law to understand the specifics themselves. She told them she could not simply give them the information. Teachers often supply students with correct answers rather than pushing them to use their own cognitive abilities to interpret, analyze and draw conclusions for themselves. While the reasons for such teaching practices can be many, there is an underlying message conveyed to students that they lack the abilities to think critically themselves and take responsibility for their learning. The message conveyed by this teacher was that the students were in fact capable and required to participate meaningfully in their learning. This message signaled to the students that the teacher had faith in their abilities and high standards for their learning. Students noted this difference in interview comments such as, "it will make you think more…you have to find the answers for yourself" and, "it's student driven, like you have to do the work."

Another way that the teacher exhibited high standards for the students was in the topics dealt with in the class. Many times teachers avoid complex or controversial topics fearing that students will not be able to grasp the meaning and time will be lost. This was never the case in this classroom. Throughout the time that I spent with the class I observed student discussions and class activities centered around topics such as: the system of District Factor Group (DFG) Ratings used in NJ to rate schools based on socioeconomic data; analyses of the relationship between a community's DFG rating and standardized test results; where power and authority are derived from at the national, state, local and school level; the role that parents should play in the education of their

children; how the press covers stories and the impact of this on public perceptions; and the role of males in the law-making process in the past and the present. In fact the research the students conducted for the *Project Citizen* portfolio dealt with an issue of such seriousness (how to improve the quality of education the students received at Jackson in order to increase student achievement) that during the state showcase presentation a former school superintendent informed the students that most adults shy away from dealing with such a complex and serious issue.

Part of maintaining high academic standards is exposing students to complex issues that require careful thought and analysis before inferences or conclusions can be drawn. The following excerpt from my field notes of January 30, 2008, helps illustrate the processes the students regularly engaged in as they grappled with complex topics. The students had recently been dealing with concepts of authority, power, responsibility and limits on power. Now the teacher directed small groups to apply these ideas to their class topic of the low levels of academic performance in the school:

> Nazzeriah explained what limitations meant, “Like whatever power you have there limitations, or limited things you can do.”
> One of the boys added, “Like speed limits and you can’t go over them”
> Beatrice nodded and said “Yeah”.
> Nazzeriah then offered the example that a teacher can’t hit.
> Derrick said, “Parents’ have limits, they can beat you, but not like – “
> And Carlton interjected “kill you!”
> “That’s what DYFS is for,” Nazeriah said.
> Beatrice spoke up and said, “We all have limitations. Kids can’t get smart with, well they, they do it but, it’s not good to disrespect your elders. So the students have limits like who they talk to, like the way they talk to their friends, [and] not supposed to talk to adults. Everybody got limits”
> The teacher came over to the group at this point. She directed the students to look at a specific page in a text they were using. She asked Carlton to read from a passage.
> Carlton read, “Power and authority provides order and security. Manages conflict, protects rights.”
> The teacher prompted the students to see the connection between the concepts of

> power and authority to their issue.
> Nazeriah said, “The students have the power to bring up the test scores”
> The teacher asked, “Who has the authority over you to make sure –“
> Several of the students interrupted her stating “The teachers” or “The parents”
> The teacher asked “How?”
> Carlton said, “They ensure that you are learning in the class,”
> And someone else added “Help you understand”.
> The teacher then asked, “What if the school was a safe and secure environment?”
> Nazeriah said, “Then everyone would be more focused.”
> Carlton added, “More civilized”
> Derrick said, “No one roaming the hallways.”
> Nazeriah clarified and said, “Be able to focus during day without interruptions”.

At the beginning of this discussion the group sought to refine their understanding of the concepts of power and authority and what limits there were to power by discussing examples easily accessible to them such as speed limits. After this initial discussion Ms. Prince intervened in order to move the students forward in their understanding. By refocusing the students on the concepts in relation to their class project, Ms. Prince helped them to achieve a new understanding of the problem.

Discussions such as the one cited above were common where students focused on complex notions and the implications of these concepts to their lives. This was never a classroom where the teacher was satisfied that learning had occurred because the students had been able to correctly define boldfaced terms from a text. Rather, Ms. Prince required students to read and interpret materials such as state statues, board policies, newspaper articles and educational reports. The students were then called on to analyze the sources and make connections to their learning, their lives and society. All evidence that the teacher held high standards for the learning experiences of the students.

Academic and Personal Accountability

While high standards can be viewed as a water source that is needed for growth to occur within the refuge of an oasis, holding students accountable may be seen as the

sunshine that is required for growth. Holding students accountable for their participation and the quality of the learning were other essential features that enabled the class to succeed. Ms. Prince accomplished this through routine informal and formal assessments, and feedback to the students.

During timed activities the teacher would hold students accountable through multiple means. One method I regularly observed was the teacher scanning the students work as they wrote to see if they were on task and understanding the assignment. Another method of assessing the students came in the form of the follow-up activities which usually involved the students participating in a class discussion or group activity. During these activities the teacher could informally assess the extent that the students had been able to read and comprehend the materials, thus determining if the allotted time had been used properly, or if the students required assistance in understanding key concepts. This is seen during a discussion that followed the analysis of articles on DFG ratings and School Report Cards in NJ. The articles contained tables showing the school rankings by state and rankings within each DFG and among Abbott schools. Ms. Prince opened the discussion by asking students for questions or comments pertaining to the articles and the following ensued:

> A student asked wasn't McNair Academy an Abbott school district? (McNair Academy was ranked as the number one school in NJ) The teacher suggested maybe not and asked how one could know. Another student pointed out that McNair was on the list of Abbott schools. The teacher then prompted the students to discuss the differences between the tables. Several students pointed out the seeming correlation between Abbott schools and lowered overall state rankings. This led to a discussion among the students about the financial problems of Abbott schools and the impact on education. (Field notes 1-9-08)

By directing the students to begin the discussion with their own questions or comments Ms. Prince was immediately able to assess if the students were prepared to discuss the

article and if they comprehended key ideas. As the discussion moved forward she was able to ascertain the students' ability to utilize the data from the tables and make connections to the larger topics of school performance and socioeconomic factors. These types of structured reading activities appeared to help the students focus on the relevant materials and prepare for upcoming activities, as well as provide the teacher with informal feedback of the students' learning.

The teacher also required students to be accountable for their behavior. This could mean giving students zeros when assignments were not completed and low grades for unsatisfactory work. Ms. Prince regularly assigned grades for homework and class work. I observed students receive zeros for a class period for being unprepared, e.g. no homework, book or notebook, or for failing to participate satisfactorily in class. In this way students understood that their actions (or inactions) did come with consequences and rewards.

Accountability also extended to unacceptable behavior in the classroom. Although the students regularly witnessed acts of disruption and disrespect in the larger school context where consequences often did not appear to exist, the standard in this classroom was quite different. Students were expected to adhere to standards of respect and civility whether dealing directly with the teacher or amongst themselves. An incident that occurred early in my research helps to illustrate this point:

> While this discussion was going in with the girl's group, Donald and Samuel engaged in a verbal confrontation. Suddenly Donald yelled out, "Don't talk to me!" The teacher removed Samuel (who she identified as the instigator) and took him out into the hall…While the teacher was out of the room the class continued to work. When the teacher returned with Samuel, he made an apology to the entire class for the outbreak and also directly to Donald. The class listened to him and then returned to work. (Field notes 1-28-09)

The way this entire incident was handled by the students and the teacher suggested to me that this was a routine they were familiar with. Based on incidents of disruption throughout the school, the fact that an outburst occurred was not so surprising, but how the teacher and students dealt with the situation was. The teacher demanded that students take responsibility for their actions, yet she also took the time and care to speak with the student individually to understand what was happening to him. In this instance the teacher learned about the struggles the young man was experiencing at home as the "man of the house" with his father in jail. While the teacher sympathized with him, she still required that he be held accountable for unacceptable classroom behavior and required him to apologize for his actions to both the class and the student he had antagonized. His willingness to do so demonstrated many things, a respect for the teacher and his classmates, but also an understanding that to remain a member of this classroom society he had to account for his behavior. Due to the established culture of standards and accountability, an outburst that could have derailed another class became an opportunity for an individual to take responsibility for his actions and for the class to forgive him and carry on.

Support and Guidance

Sometimes the students felt the pressure of the class was too much and Ms. Prince needed to step in and offer the students support and guidance. As the date of the showcase approached some students showed signs of stress. One day in particular Jocelyn appeared to be having a difficult time. She repeated several times that she had a headache and finally blurted out that she was simply too stressed to work that day, (Field notes 5-21-08). At times other students also echoed such feelings. Ms. Prince seemed to

know when the class needed extra encouragement and would stray from the topic at hand for a moment or two to talk about responsibility, or the importance of the students' education, helping to refocus them and encourage them to move forward.

One day when the students appeared to be feeling uncertain about how they would measure up against other schools at the state showcase the teacher offered them support by telling them that they were more prepared for the showcase than they realized. She also told the class that attending the showcase wasn't about winning or not, and that they shouldn't be concerned with who else was there, only with their own performance, (Field notes 5-19-09). While others may have set the bar for success lower, fearing that a group of urban kids from a "failing" school could not measure up at a state showcase where mostly middle class, suburban schools would be represented, Ms. Prince maintained her belief in the students' abilities and preparedness. Although she was not overtly sentimental with the students, her assurances, support and the high standards she held them to let the students know she did indeed believe in them.

The maintenance of high standards, student accountability and Ms. Prince's encouragement and support were all like the rays of sunshine essential for noteworthy growth in the oasis. Without the bright sunshine a few plants might attempt to peek out from beneath the soil, but would most likely have their growth stunted and many would even die. Similarly, many students in classrooms where there is chaos, a lack of accountability and low expectations, may find it increasingly more difficult to push through the metaphorical dirt and thrive in the environment at hand.

Inclusive and Student-Centered

> The teacher commented that Bree's question was making an assumption, Bree then changed it to, "Are you working to your potential?"…Anthony read a

> question, "Were you and your parents satisfied with your previous NJASK (the state standardized test) scores?" At this the teacher asked the students if they knew what their NJASK score was and about half the students said that they did. Based on the response from the class the teacher asked how the question could be reworded? Keisha offered that the word "grades" could be substituted for NJASK scores. (Field notes 2-15-08)

This was an environment where student voices were sought out and respected. Every student was viewed as an important member of the class community with valuable contributions to make. As the above conversation illustrates student input was an integral part of the learning process. Students also played a role in guiding the direction of the learning experience. The early steps in the *Project Citizen* curriculum call on the students to identify problems in their community, research these problems and then vote on one to address with a public policy solution for the class project. Based on the preliminary research and reading of the state statutes pertaining to education, the students had identified an aspect of the law that they believed was antiquated and should be changed. The statute they were concerned with allowed for the father of a child to determine the level of education a child received after age sixteen. Although Ms. Prince confided in me that she had reservations about the class topic, she believed it was up to the students to choose their own topic and therefore she was allowing them to pursue the initial topic.

One day the teacher informed the class that many students had approached her outside of class saying that the problem the class identified didn't appear to be the real problem and they thought the problem should be changed. In conversations with the teacher several students expressed that they now thought that a lack of parental involvement was really the problem that the class should address. Based on this information the teacher asked the students to each write out their own thoughts on

whether or not the topic should be changed. This was followed by a discussion in which the majority of the students agreed that parental involvement did appear to be the real problem, (Field notes 2-13-08). What was most remarkable about this sequence of events was that it was all initiated by the students and supported by the teacher.

The fact that many students had approached Ms. Prince outside of class to discuss their views strongly suggests that the students viewed themselves as partners in the learning process. The teacher in turn validated the role of the students by opening up the issue for further class discussion. During the discussion all students were encouraged to share their views on the topic change and all were given the opportunity to vote. While Ms. Prince played a central role in guiding the learning experience, it was clear that the students were an integrated part of the process.

Another way that Ms. Prince validated the students' ability to think critically and to be active in their own learning process was through regular periods of reflection. An exchange such as the one below might occur on any given day at the conclusion of a lesson:

> As the class was coming to an end the teacher asked the students what they had learned form the activity. Keisha said she had to think about how a student might respond. Then she brought up the issues of race and said, "If you look at it like a race thing, you might get different answers." Louis commented that you need to make the reader feel comfortable. Derrick added that not everyone has received their NJASK scores and they needed to consider that. (Field notes 2-18-08)

Requiring the students to reflect on their learning was another means of fostering student engagement and partnership in their learning. Ms. Prince also called upon the students to reflect on each other's strengths and weakness and assess the impact of these qualities.

In the final days that I spent with the class Ms. Prince facilitated whole class feedback sessions. After the first session the teacher felt that the students weren't getting the full benefit of the exercise so she provided more guidance to the class. She began by telling them,

> That tiptoeing around and giving nicey, nicey feedback isn't going to help individuals grow and improve their work ethic. The teacher said a lot of students were placing blame instead of taking responsibility themselves. She talked to the students about growing up, looking at oneself and changing. She said, "It's easy to say I was excluded, or they didn't let me do anything," but that wasn't taking responsibility. (Field notes 6-4-08)

As a result of her direction several students spoke honestly to their peers and offered valuable insights such Carlton's feedback to classmates:

> Derrick could be productive sometimes; Elisabeth was quite, shy and productive; Dawn argues sometimes, but sometimes with valid points; Kenny don't say anything for long periods of time, but can do work. (Field notes 6-4-08)

During these sessions all students were treated equally, each having an opportunity to provide feedback to the class. Through this process Ms. Prince reinforced that all students had a voice in her class and that she believed they all had meaningful insights to offer one another. It wasn't just the high performing students whose voices were sought out. There was also no room for random or cruel criticisms during such exercises. Students were required to support views and the teacher repeatedly emphasized the value of the practice in helping the students take responsibility for their behavior and develop boundaries. By helping the students develop this skill the teacher was also helping to prepare the students for reflective and responsible citizenship.

Ms. Prince played a paramount role in creating the "oasis" that this class offered to the students. Through her words, actions and expectations she laid the foundation for an atmosphere of serious and purposeful learning and for an environment where student

voices were sought, and valued as central to the learning process. Ms. Prince also helped to create a climate of respect, structure and accountability. However, she could not have accomplished this all on her own. While she was integral in creating the conditions for such an oasis to exist in the school, the students took on the task of pushing through the soil and reaching towards the sky as they availed themselves of the learning opportunity they had been given.

The Role of the Students

Actions taken and not taken by the students were as central to the success of this class as the teacher was. Ms. Prince's style and the nature of the curriculum called for a high level of student initiative, autonomy, responsibility and cooperation; all behaviors I regularly observed. The individual and collective actions of the students will be considered in this section in order to explore the role such actions played in the creation of the class culture and in the academic achievement of the class. An analysis of these actions and interactions reveals that the key qualities that the students brought to the learning experience were; an overall desire to participate in their education; the ability to collaborate to achieve common goals; and a willingness to support and critique one another. Each of these qualities was essential in enabling the students to push through the low expectations that so many had placed on them and to bloom as they sought to overcome many educational barriers. Each of these themes will be explored in the following sections.

Initiative and Ownership

As previously noted, the class was characterized by a high level of student engagement. However the role of the student went beyond engagement, to ownership and

all that entails. While it was necessary for the teacher to create the atmosphere that allowed for the students' voices to be heard, it was nonetheless up to the students to engage this opportunity. The students demonstrated that they were more than willing and capable of capitalizing on this circumstance. As previously explained, it was the students who raised the issue with the teacher when they thought the class topic needed to be changed. The students approached the teacher on their own time to express their views and concerns over the class topic and then when given the chance to discuss this with their peers many students advocated for the change with mature reasoning and a passion which spoke of their investment in the project.

As the class moved forward with the project, this initiative continued to be displayed. Although the students looked towards the teacher for guidance they appeared to grow increasingly more comfortable making decisions for themselves. The following excerpt demonstrates this point:

> The group began to discuss items that they needed. Nina mentioned a floor plan of the school, explaining that they needed to identify what space was being used when. Everyone started taking notes on what was needed. Next, Nina said they needed a copy of the teachers' schedules. At this point individuals in the group began volunteering to take on the task of getting these items. Both Malcom and Derrick volunteered to get either the schedules or the school budget information. Nina continued and said that they needed to find the school curriculum. Keisha mentioned that she had been looking for the curriculum the night before, but had been unable to find it on-line. So the group then discussed how they would get this information. Keisha said she would continue to look. Nina asked Carla if she would get information on other schools, such as how they grouped students, for comparison sake. Carla agreed to do this. (Field notes 5-15-08)

As the class ended most of the students in the group had taken on a responsibility to gather the identified information needed. One of the students from the group, Dawn, stayed behind for a minute to ask the teacher for a pass so she could go to the office and ask the Vice Principal for a copy of the floor plan. As I left I walked out with Dawn and

was with her when she approached the vice principal. He told her to come back the next day and he would give her a copy. During my next observation on 5-19-08, I noted that Dawn had supplied the group with the floor plan. She had followed-up with the Vice Principal and fulfilled her commitment to the group.

Many other students demonstrated the same initiative and commitment to the class project that Dawn did. Other examples of such initiative included a student bringing in data she gathered on her own in order to compare Evettston's report card data with a neighboring community, students coming after school to work on the project, a weekend conference call among group members to work on the project, or simply getting right to work without prompting from the teacher and staying beyond the bell and even through lunch to continue work. In an environment where many students felt it was okay to cut classes because as Bree explained to me in an interview,

> I do it [cut classes] just because it's stuff that we've been learned, and we have to learn it repeatedly over and over again and I feel like why should I have to learn this again, like I know what it is already I shouldn't have to sit here and answer the same questions over,

and where disruptive behaviors was common, students choosing to take a more active role in their education and putting in time beyond what is required was truly remarkable.

Evidence that the students followed through on the initiatives is abundant in the completed proposal they created. Without the research conducted on the school schedule, the students would not have been able to recommend that a reduction of class sizes is possible and would lead to "utilizing all classrooms during the school day…the building would be fully utilized 98% of the time" (Student *Project Citizen* proposal, p. 1 of the "Action Plan"). Obtaining and researching the school curriculum led the students to conclude that the school curriculum, "does not align with the state standards" (Student

Project Citizen proposal, p. 3 of "Class Policy") and therefore needed to be revised. The identification and acquisition of the documents that led to these proposals came directly from the students. Due to the initiative of the students, they were able to expand on and build rich understandings of the problem they had identified and ultimately create their own proposed solutions. All of these are examples of the students' ownership of the project.

Collaboration and Coaching

The relationships that were forged among the students also played a central role in the class culture, the attainment of class goals and the students' academic growth. Given the high degree of group work employed by Ms. Prince and called for in implementing the curriculum, many opportunities to observe the students in small group settings existed. These observations revealed several significant patterns of group interactions. One common theme was a high degree of collaboration among the students. Evidence of collaboration took many forms; coaching, scaffolding, critiquing and even sanctioning one another. While most of these strategies yielded positive results, there was a tendency for the females in the class to assume the leadership positions, even at the cost of the males. This tendency became more pronounced during periods of stress. The next few sections will explore each of these themes in more depth.

> I moved to observe the small group of Samuel, Nina and Beatrice. They were analyzing a hypothetical proposal to raise the age to obtain a drivers license to twenty-one. Nina said this would lead to fewer teen accidents. Beatrice offered a negative consequence, "People might rebel against the new law". Samuel took the lead writing on chart paper. He wrote consequences across the top of the paper and then positive on one side and negative on the other and he began to write down what the girls were saying. Nina reasoned that you must be twenty-one to go to clubs so fewer people would be sneaking into clubs. Samuel challenged this connection. Nina tried to explain her reasoning but clearly Samuel didn't understand so he simply told her to write down the reason since it made sense to

> her. Nina then went to the board and hesitated, finally she said to Samuel, "I understand what you are saying now" and she didn't write anything. (Field notes 1-15-08)

During this exchange the students each felt responsible for taking an active role; Nina began with the conversation by pointing out a potential consequence, this was immediately picked up on by Beatrice as she made her own contribution and then without any prompting Samuel chose to act as the scribe for the group. Each of these individuals appeared to naturally accept and fill an important role in the group, indicating that this was not an uncommon practice for them. A strong spirit of collaboration was also evident in the exchange between Nina and Samuel. When Nina offered a consequence that didn't appear to be rational, Samuel was quick to question the logic. Samuel's comment and manner were not derogatory, but rather that of a colleague questioning a conclusion. When Nina could not explain her reasoning to his satisfaction, he was still willing to allow for the idea, but asked her to record it. Through this process Nina was forced to clarify her own thoughts and ultimately she recognized the illogic of her conclusion. Such an academic discourse enabled both of these students to think critically and push each other to more fully form and define their ideas. This is an example of collaboration at its best.

Many other examples of collaboration filled my field notes. Sometimes these interactions took on the role of students coaching one another, such as:

> Derrick read a passage from the book. When he faltered on a word, Nazzeriah told him "opportunities". Beatrice then asked him to state the costs and benefits of going to school. She reworded disadvantages for him explaining that it meant problems that could come up. She said, "Keep going" and Derrick began to make a point about diversity being both a benefit and a burden. Nazzeriah asked him, "How would some schools benefit?" (Field notes 1-30-08)

Both of the girls in Derrick's group stepped in to coach him and encourage him. They clarified words and meanings for him, encouraged him to make contributions and asked prompting questions. Through their actions Derrick became a more involved and productive member of the group. Without having the concepts explained to him, or the gentle prodding of the girls, it is likely that Derrick would not have offered his insight about diversity as a benefit and a burden. In this way the whole group profited from the collaboration; Derrick was offered the support he needed to make a meaningful contribution, and the group benefited from a sophisticated insight that Derrick offered about diversity.

Other times the collaborations enabled the students to play the role of "critical friend" to one another. As with the first example between Samuel and Nina, the students often offered critiques or comments that helped their peers. Sometimes this advice was actively sought out as was the case when Jenna asked members in her group, "Does this make sense?" and after reading over her work Samuel offered the input to change, "whereas to were as" (Field notes 5-29-08). Other times the input was not directly sought, but still welcomed.

> Carlton typed a question as Louis read it. Louis offered a critique, "Don't put do you think, ask instead, why do you think parents aren't involved in their children's education?". Louis explained that in order to get the respondents' perspective they couldn't ask yes/no questions. Carlton took this in and revised the question. (Field notes 2-18-08)
>
> Nazzeriah began with a question, "Is your parent involved?" Beatrice helped to refine the question by adding, "with your school" (Field notes 2-18-08)
>
> Jenna was telling Roselyn how to phrase something saying, "and your attitude towards learning." Roselyn questioned the input saying, "learning?" Samuel then suggested "academics". (Field notes 5-23-08)

In each instance above the students felt free to offer their input in a supportive, yet critical way. Just as importantly, in each instance the criticism was received in the spirit of collaboration and led to an improved product or understanding.

At other times students sanctioned one another as a means to communicate displeasure with behaviors. Sanctioning was most often exhibited among the females in dealing with the males in the class. In some instances the sanctioning did appear to bring about the desired change in behavior as was the case with Derrick and Nazzeriah in the following exchange,

> Nazeriah asked, “Derrick, aren’t you paying attention?”
> Derrick responded, “Oh, I apologize”
> He explained he couldn’t find the passages on limitations or restrictions.
> Nazzeriah promptly pointed them out to him. (Field notes 1-30-08)

However, far more often there was no discernable positive change in behavior. Usually the treatment inflicted by one of the females led to the continuance of the behavior, frustration, or further disengagement on the part of the males. Each of the situations presented here makes this point:

> The debate in the group continued with Keisha dominating much of the discussion and the some of the boys were getting frustrated. Derrick kept saying “Excuse me, excuse me!” Keisha told him he needed to wait because he just wanted to make fun of the ideas they were presenting. Derrick said this was not true and that he had a point to make, but he was not able to share his point before the period ended. (Field notes 5-13-08)

> The girls were busy writing. Donald finally spoke up and said he wanted to know what the girls were writing. Nina said in a slightly impatient voice, “What we just said”. The girls continued writing and Donald just sat there doing nothing. (Field notes 5-21-08)

> Donald asked Nina what she was going to do with the blank space. He spoke directly to her and from where I was seated I could hear him fine, leading me to conclude that there was no reason for Nina to have not heard him. However, she did not respond to him. Instead Nina asked the other group members for input

> about the board and if everything looked straight. Donald asked again what would go on the board in the blank spaces. Still no one answered him so he just sat there silently. (Field notes 5-29-08)

What is interesting to note is that the nature of the interactions between the males and females changed as the date of the state showcase drew nearer. Table 5.2 charts the nature of the interaction between the females and the males and incidence based on the month it occurred in.

Table 5.2

Nature and Incidence of Interactions between Students by Month

Type of interaction	January	February	March	April	May
Coaching/ Encouraging	1	1			
Scaffolding	5	5	2	2	3
Sanctioning	1	1	1	1	8

The changes in the nature of the interactions and the rate of occurrences across time suggest that the females were more benevolent in their actions towards the males during the early stages of the project. However, as the date of the showcase approached and a sense of urgency was felt among many of the students, the girls appeared to be less patient and even dismissive of the males in the class. Many examples of such dismissive attitudes occurred during the month of May, even when the males involved appeared to want to make contributions. This is seen in the following.

> In group 2 Elisabeth and Beatrice were collaborating on the writing of the note cards for their presentation. Louis was sitting to the side of Elisabeth and needed to lean all the way forward so that he could add to the discussion. Elisabeth kept her back to him throughout, although he continued to speak to the girls. (Field notes 5-29-08)

> Roselyn was reading and Jenna was preparing the note cards. Bree was busy reading over the written statement. Jenna asked, "Does this make sense?" Samuel said to her, "Let me read it", however Jenna showed it to Bree first. (Field notes 5-29-08)

The treatment of the males over the course of the study may suggest that as the stakes became greater, the females' willingness to collaborate with the males diminished.

Generally the students worked well together and ultimately the groups did complete and present a portfolio at the state showcase where they were awarded second place. This achievement came in part because of the high degree of student initiative, ownership of the project and the collaborative spirit that existed among the students. The coaching and scaffolding the students provided for one another enabled all to grow as learners. Although there is a suggestion that collaboration has limits when academic pressure increases.

Even in the most arid environments of a desert, an oasis can exist. However, for such an oasis to be possible many elements must come together to create the necessary conditions. A water source, soil, and sunlight all play an essential role, as did the teacher and students in this classroom. Though it was Ms. Prince who created the conditions for the oasis, she still needed a vehicle to expose the students to a meaningful learning experience as they developed the knowledge and skills needed for civic participation. The *Project Citizen* curriculum provided the teacher with this vehicle. The role of the curriculum will be explored in the final section of this chapter.

The Role of the Curriculum

The design of the *Project Citizen* curriculum is the third element that provided for the students' constructive and engaging learning experience. The emphasis on inquiry,

research, problem solving, group work and collaboration, and the opportunities for students to draw on their prior knowledge, were all significant features of the curriculum. This section will help elucidate how each of these aspects was important to the students' experience as they pursued their study of civics and an understanding of their role as citizens in a democratic society.

Student interviews confirmed that the students had a generally positive experience working with the curriculum. Of the twelve students interviewed, data was collected on eleven students' experiences with the curriculum (the interview tape for one student was partially corrupted by sound in the room and the data in response to this series of questions was unintelligible). Of the eleven, ten expressed positive views of their experience with *Project Citizen*. The top five reasons cited for liking the curriculum are presented in Table 5.3 along with the number of times the reason was cited.

Table 5.3

Student Reasons for Liking Project Citizen

Addressed Community Issues	Made You Think/More Aware	Student Driven	Developed Skills	Good Academic Preparation	Opportunity to Learn
8	3	3	4	5	4

The data presented in Table 5.3 indicates that the students liked the curriculum for a variety of reasons. For purposes of discussion, I have grouped these reasons into two categories; personal connections and academic benefits. Each of these areas will be discussed.

Personal Connections

The results presented in Table 5.3 make clear that the students enjoyed the

opportunity to focus on issues in their own community. This idea is represented in Bree's comments when she told me, "I like it [*Project Citizen*] because you just get to address certain problems in your community that you know you have a problem with." This is an opportunity that students are not usually given in a traditional social studies class. This situation is compounded even more when minority students study U.S. History from the traditional Eurocentric approach, which many researchers believe leads to a sense of alienation from the topic. Bree specifically described the fact that she liked the chance to look at issues that she and her classmates knew to be a problem, not topics provided to the students. Carlton's comments also reflected this idea when he shared with me, "I'm used to getting problems and solving them, I'm not used to finding a problem in the whole community." Focusing on their community was an experience that the majority of the students interviewed expressed appreciation of.

For some students the chance to study problems in the community provided new and important links to the community. Beatrice stated that, "It helps me with um, learning more about Plainfield, which really helps me cause I don't know too much about towns and stuff." For Beatrice, an immigrant student from Nigeria, this was a chance to learn about the community she lived in. For Kaila the experience signaled an even deeper connection to her community as seen by her comments;

> You think about personal issues, and issues that you learned about in your community, and how you, it makes you feel a part of, feel like a part of the community and that you could change something.

Other students saw the focus on community as a chance to simply increase student awareness of these issues. Jocelyn raved to me, "I think its awesome 'cause it really makes um, students aware of things that are going on around them, in the community,

and what problems we have." Regardless of the specific reason, the students welcomed the occasion given to them to focus on their school and community as the topic for their *Project Citizen* portfolio.

Opportunities to make personal connections to their learning enabled the students to apply background knowledge while learning about concepts of democratic governance and public policy-making. These connections aided the students in their learning by helping to illustrate concepts and add depth and richness to the exploration of topic. As students grappled with concepts central to our democracy such as the rights of the individual and limits to power, using examples from their own lives helped them to clarify their understandings. When discussing freedom of expression and religion Beatrice shared an example of a friend who expressed her right to speech by not saluting the flag in school. Derrick was able to better understand limits set on government and individuals by drawing an analogy that although a parent could hit their child, they could not do them great harm. In response to Derrick's comment Nazzeriah stated, "That's what DYFS (Division of Youth and Family Services) is for." By drawing on their own understandings of individual rights, restrictions and the role of government agencies such as DYFS in safe guarding and limiting rights, the students explored these important topics and deepened their understandings.

In other instances the personal connections students brought to class discussions helped all to hear different perspectives and thus achieve a richer understanding. During a class discussion of whether or not parents should be held responsible for their child's academic performance most of the students appeared to agree that the parents should be held accountable. However Dawn shared a different view explaining to the class that her

mother was a single parent and worked three jobs and wasn't home to help her. A perspective such as this forced the class to examine their preconceived notions of a parent's role in their child's education. Ultimately the class concluded that while it would be best for parents to be involved, they abandoned any proposals designed to hold parents accountable for the students' academic performance.

As the students researched the guidelines set forth in current educational policies, such as the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the language of the law became relatable for the students as they linked it to their school. When the students applied the standard of a "highly qualified teacher" as outlined under NCLB to their school they were able to determine that ten percent of the faculty in 2005-2006 did not meet the standard (*Project Citizen* proposal, p.1, Class Policy section). As students also reviewed the state curriculum standards and curricula of other schools, Nina was able to make the comparison that in other schools students received Algebra 1 in eighth grade and therefore went into high school better prepared. The knowledge and experiences that the students obtained through their experiences at Jackson served as a basis of comparison that enabled the students to critically assess their education and construct a vision for what changes they believed needed to be enacted.

Many times a curriculum is designed with a predetermined body of knowledge to be learned by the students and with the assumption that this is all the knowledge the students need in this area of study. The *Project Citizen* curriculum is designed with the belief that the students' prior knowledge and understandings are crucial to the obtainment of deeper understandings of public policy-making. It appears that the opportunities to make connections to their own lives and apply background knowledge did enrich the

students' understandings and the application of public policy-making.

Academic Benefits

Another significant trend revealed from the interview data was that students valued the academic experience afforded them. Specifically they liked the inquiry based, student driven curriculum and they viewed this experience as an opportunity to build skills that would be useful in their academic lives, now and in the future. My interview with Jocelyn reflects sentiments that many students expressed.

> Me: Is more asked of you in this class?
>
> Jocelyn: Uh hm.
>
> Me: Do you personally like being given that much responsibility, or would you rather just kind of sit back and let the teacher do the work?
>
> Jocelyn: Um, no, I like doing work. It helps me. At first I'm like grumpy because I'm annoyed, and I, and there's too much going on, but then I see it's all for the good.

Samuel's remarks also demonstrate his awareness that being pushed was of value because even as he was telling me that he didn't like the pressure of the high expectations, he admitted, "If Ms. Prince pushes me then it'll make it easier for me when I get to high school, or college." Samuel not only saw the academic benefit, he appreciated it.

The students also recognized that due to the student centered nature of the curriculum they were forced to develop skills that they did not necessarily use in other classes. This point is demonstrated in my interview with Elisabeth:

> Me: Do you think as a student you have a different role in here than you do in other classes?
>
> Elisabeth: Yeah, because in Project Citizen it's like all, it's student driven, like you have to do the work, the teachers aren't going to do it for you, like they'll assist you in it, but it's all you. In other classes, like in math, they teach you, um you do your work, it's not like a project or anything.
>
> Me: Why is that good?

> Elisabeth: Cause it won't make me lazy, it will make you think more, cause the teachers won't give you the answers, you have to find the answers yourself. And the teachers they'll help you, when like you need help, but like that's it, you have to make um, you have to make the connections and everything.

It is clear that Elisabeth sees the value in the students doing the work to find the answers for themselves and learn "to make connections". Beatrice saw the experience as a chance to build better oral communication skills, telling me, "It helps me speak more, cause I still don't, I used to not like speak too much." Carlton also valued the chance to develop skills explaining that "it helped my debating skills… it took me out of my shyness for a little while, like I used to be really shy." He went on to tell me that the value of his newly acquired skills extended beyond this class stating that, "I use what I use in this class, that's why I like it, um, I use what I learned in this class to everything I do."

On any given day one or two students in the class might have been heard complaining about the work load or pressure they felt. However this belied the fact that many of the students recognized and appreciated the academic training they were receiving. Learning to think for themselves and developing skills were specifically cited among some of the students who had been heard complaining. After all Jocelyn explained, "At first I'm like grumpy because I'm annoyed, and I, and there's too much going on, but then I see it's all for the good."

Conclusion

The *Project Citizen* class served as a place where the students could escape many of the difficulties present in the larger school environment. This was made possible through a confluence of actions by the teacher and the students, as well as due to the

nature and design of the *Project Citizen* curriculum. Each of these factors played a significant part in the creation of a classroom that truly was an "oasis" for the students.

The class culture set the stage for the students' learning. The climate was one of serious learning, high academic expectations and respect. Ms. Prince ensured that the high standards were maintained by pushing the students to achieve to their potential and think for themselves. She empowered the students to engage in their learning by allowing them to help direct the process, share their views and experiences, and participate in the construction of knowledge. A respectful atmosphere was achieved by setting clear standards for behavior and holding all accountable for adhering to these standards. Through her words and actions the students understood that the teacher believed in their abilities and the students responded positively to this. The oasis could not have existed had Ms. Prince not provided these baseline elements.

The majority of the students readily accepted the challenges Ms. Prince bestowed upon them. Initiative and responsibility were common characteristics displayed among the students. The students took ownership of their own learning and invested their time both in and outside of the classroom. It was also through their efforts to support one another that the class ultimately reached their common goal. The students played a significant role in their own growth.

All that the students and teacher needed was the vehicle to guide the learning process. This came in the form of the *Project Citizen* curriculum. The student centered nature of the curriculum, combined with the emphasis on the students' background knowledge and circumstances proved to be a means for the students to channel their academic talents and desire to learn. It was in this context that the students were able to

blossom as they reached for new heights, even in the midst of their “failing” school. This finding reveals the power of the context the learning occurs within.

CHAPTER 6

THE STUDENTS' LEARNING: WHAT KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS DID THEY POSSESS?

In chapters four and five I presented findings related to the varied settings in which the students lived, experienced school and attended the class under study. These chapters used rich description to illustrate the contrasting characteristics of the two settings. In this chapter I focus on the classroom experience of the students and their preparation for democratic citizenship. The main finding presented in this chapter asserts that students best develop content knowledge, skills and dispositions in the context of a curriculum that connects to their own lives and engages them in critical thinking. Several areas will be discussed in this chapter to support and elaborate on this finding. Among these are; the students' knowledge of content associated with civic engagement varied based on several factors; the students developed deep knowledge about the issue for their class project (poor academic performance within their school); the students demonstrated and practiced many skills associated with civic participation while engaged with the *Project Citizen* curriculum; and the students demonstrated many positive qualities of citizenship. All of the findings will be considered in light of the students' readiness to participate effectively as democratic citizens.

Student Knowledge Related to Civic Engagement

Effective civic participation occurs when through an interplay of knowledge, skills and dispositions, (NAEP framework for civics; NCSS Standards in Civics; the National Standards in Civics; the Civitas Framework). While each of these components is seen as requisite for effective civic engagement, there is a hierarchal relationship. This

is particularly true in terms of knowledge and skills. In an introductory chapter to *Education for Civic Engagement in Democracy: Service Learning and Other Promising Practices***,** John Patrick (2003) outlined several levels of cognitive skills for civic engagement. These cognitive skills are:

a. Identifying and describing information about political and civic life
b. Analyzing and explaining information about political and civic life
c. Synthesizing and explaining information about political and civic life
d. Evaluating, taking, and defending positions on public events and issues
e. Thinking critically about conditions of political and civic life
f. Thinking constructively about how to improve political and civic life

The successful execution of cognitive skills b-f, are all dependent on an individual having acquired a degree of knowledge first. Without such knowledge the individual cannot analyze, explain, evaluate or think critically in any other manner about the topic at hand. The degree and type of knowledge one possesses directly correlates to the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions as an active member of a democratic system. Additionally, research on civic engagement indicates that those who possess higher degrees of knowledge of U.S. history, principles and practices of American democracy, and issues of public policy, are more likely to be civically and politically engaged (Patrick and Vontz, 2001; Wichowsky, 2001). In this section the findings related to student knowledge will be presented. The discussion of student knowledge is separated into two distinct areas: general knowledge of U.S. Constitution, individual rights, U.S. History and current events comprise one area and knowledge associated with the students' project is the other. A trend that emerged from the data was that the depth of knowledge students possess varied substantially between these two areas.

Student Knowledge Related to Constitutional Rights, Government, History and Current Events

Interviews with the students allowed me to explore their understandings of topics related to civic knowledge, (as defined in chapter 2 under definitions of civic knowledge), but not regularly addressed in class. These topics included knowledge of the Constitution, individual rights, history and current events. The below conversation with Bree is representative of the levels of knowledge, areas of knowledge and types knowledge held among the students.

Me: Talk to me a little bit about what rights you know that you have as an American?
Bree: Um, pause, I can't really think of anything.
Me: I bet you know them, you're just kind of stuck. Think about something that you know you're allowed to do and you can say that's one of my rights.
Bree: I'm allowed to have an opinion.
Me: Yes you are. Tell me a little about that, what does that mean to be allowed to have an opinion?
Bree: Uh, I can speak my mind about something like health, school doesn't have enough money, I would be allowed to have an opinion about what I thought about it, or how I felt.
Me: And do you know where that right comes from?
Bree: I can't think of it.
Me: One of our documents that describes how our government works.
Bree: Um, I can't think of it.
Me: Ok. There are other rights outlined in this document. One of them is free speech, which is what you're talking about. Can you think of some other rights that are guaranteed to American citizens?
Bree: Um, (pause), I just cannot think of them.
Me: How about, what are the guidelines about religion in this country?
Bree: It means you can have your own religion, your own religious freedoms.
Me: Absolutely. How about privacy? Do people have a right to privacy?
Bree: Yes
Me: How do you know that?
Bree: Because it's just that why would you want somebody in your business?
Me: True, but does the government… let's take for instance, the government thinks that maybe someone in your house is selling drugs, can the police just come bang on your door?
Bree: No.
Me: Why not?
Bree: Because it's against the law.

Me: Why?
Bree: Just because you might not have it.
Me: Ok, so can they ever come into your house?
Bree: They can, but only if they have a warrant.
Me: Ok, so how do they get a warrant?
Bree: Um, don't they go to a judge for that?
Me: Yes.
Bree: Ok so that's what they say right to privacy, the government says you do have a right to privacy in your own home.
Me: Right. Ok, so do you have a right to own a gun?
Bree: Yes.
Me: How do you know that?
Bree: First they can, um, for protection.
Me: So could you go out and buy one?
Bree: No.
Me: Why not?
Bree: Because I'm under age.
Me: Ok, so there are still some restrictions on that. How about the right to vote?
Bree: Yes, everybody has the right to vote over 18.
Me: Has it always been that way?
Bree: No.
Me: Can you tell me a little bit about how it's changed over time?
Bree: Um, now African Americans can vote, and women.
Me: Do you know when women were able to start voting in this country?
Bree: I can't think of it, I don't know why.
Me: Who got the right to vote first, African American men or women?
Bree: African American men.
Me: Good.

My conversation with Bree revealed many aspects associated with her knowledge of the topics. One trend that was evident in the conversation with Bree, and among her peers, was the tendency of the students to doubt their own understandings or knowledge, even when they were correct in their understandings. A second trend was that many of the understandings the students possessed were partially or wholly incorrect. The limited knowledge students possessed often led to students offering sentiments that could not be substantiated with concrete facts or data. Lastly, there appeared to be a relationship between the relevancy of a topic and the students' depth of knowledge. Each of these

themes will be examined in the context of the students' knowledge related to Constitutional rights, process of government, and current and historical events in the following sections.

doubt and gaps

When I began the above cited conversation with Bree by asking her what she knew about her rights as an American citizen her initial response was to tell me she "couldn't really think of any." Her hesitancy represents a trend among all of the students to doubt their own knowledge. Once prodded a bit Bree was able to talk about many of the basic rights that American's cherish such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion and the right to privacy. Yet even as it was evident that she possessed a basic understanding of these rights, she continued to doubt herself. When she applied her knowledge of an individual's right to privacy, she offered the information that a warrant needed to be obtained from a judge as a question, again demonstrating the tendency to doubt her knowledge.

The pattern of providing knowledge in the form of questioning oneself occurred regularly among the students. As Jocelyn and I discussed the race for the presidential nomination between Obama and Clinton and I asked her which party they were seeking to represent, she responded, "Democratic?" and as Jenna and I discussed illegal immigration to the U.S. and I asked her what should be done if someone is here illegally she replied, "Can't you get arrested for that or something?" In each of these instances the student had the correct understanding but lacked the confidence in their own knowledge to share this information with me as a declarative statement of knowledge.

A possible explanation for the lack of confidence the students' displayed may have been awareness among the students that there were gaps in their knowledge base. When discussing topics related to Constitutional rights, historical or current events, the students demonstrated only partial or incorrect understandings that can be attributed to a lack of knowledge on these topics. During my conversation with Bree, she was able to tell me that she had a right to express her opinion, but when I asked her where this right came from she was unable to identify the Constitution or the Bill of Rights. Even when I offered more support telling her that it was one of the documents that described how our government works she was unable to supply the correct answer. This suggests that she may not have understood the idea that the Constitution provides the outline for how the federal government works and that the Bill of Rights is the source for many basic civil liberties. This indicates that she lacked basic knowledge of American government and founding documents.

These are areas of knowledge considered vital for civic engagement and are identified under the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards as benchmarks of civic knowledge to be obtained by the end of grade eight. Bree was not alone in this. In an interview with Emanuel a similar conversation took place, as presented below:

Me:	What are the rights that American citizens have that are important to you?
Emanuel:	Um…Good question… let's see, rights…
Me:	Well maybe just tell me any rights that you know Americans have.
Emanuel:	Well, I don't really know.
Me:	Alright. Think about the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. What kind of rights do citizens have in America?
Emanuel:	They have the right to fight for, well basically the guilty, um, I don't know how to explain it.
Me:	Ok. Let's go back for a minute to religion, you talked about religion before. In this country, are you free to practice any religion?

Emanuel: Yeah. That.
Me: Ok. And is that important to you?
Emanuel: Yeah, the fact that you can express yourself in different ways, such as religion is important.
Me: What are other ways that you can express yourself?
Emanuel: Well, by sharing your feelings with other people and communicating.
Me: So, can you think of ways that, in your life, that you get to live those rights?
Emanuel: Well basically certain, well, one way would be talking to people and basically go to church, that's where you meet a lot of different kinds of people and different cultures

Although Emanuel appeared to value his right to express himself and exchange views with others, he was unable to discuss this idea in the context of first amendment rights. As with Bree, he was also unable to or uncomfortable responding to the question about what rights Americans possess. Even when I offered him clues by specifically referencing the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, it appeared that he did not possess the knowledge base to discuss the rights embedded in this document. In fact Emanuel was not able to site a single right on his own and Bree only identified one.

Table 6.1 provides a breakdown of the ability of the twelve students interviewed to identify Constitutional rights and the rights cited. Students were also ranked on their ability to discuss why the identified rights were important using the following scoring system:

1 Unable to discuss the significance of the identified right either for individuals or society
2– Able to articulate reasons why the individual benefits from the right, but did not expand to include benefits to a democratic society
2 Able to explain the significance of the identified right for a democratic society
2+ Able to explain the significance of the identified right for a democratic society by offering reasoning based on instances of injustice and/or undemocratic practices, but without referencing specific historical and/or current events

3 Able to explain the significance of the identified rights for a democratic society with sound reasoning supported by historical and/or current examples

Table 6.1
Constitutional Rights Identified by the Students

Student	Able to identify civil rights	Which rights identified without prompting	Understanding of significance
Bree	Yes	Freedom of Speech	1
Samuel	No		
Elisabeth	Yes	Freedom of Speech & religion	2 -
Malika	Yes	Freedom of Speech	2 -
Dawn	Yes	Freedom of Speech	1
Emanuel	No		
Carlton	Yes	Freedom of Speech	2+
Jocelyn	Yes	Freedom of religion & speech	2
Beatrice	Yes	Freedom of religion, speech, press and the right to vote	2
Terrence	Yes	Freedom of speech and right to vote	1
Deandre	Yes	Freedom of speech	1
Jenna	Yes	Freedom of speech and right to vote	2 +

Several patterns are evident based on the data presented in Table 6.1. Applying the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCC) for civics, it appeared that the students did not possess the knowledge of their Constitutional rights as expected for their grade level. At the time of the study the relevant NJCCC standards established for civics, (and therefore the standards were relevant to civics instruction), stated that by the end of grade eight students are called upon to:

- Discuss the rights and responsibilities of American citizens
- Discuss how the rights of American citizens may be in conflict with each other
- Discuss basic contemporary issues involving the personal, political, and economic rights of American citizens

In order to achieve these benchmark measures, students would need to have knowledge of the rights of American citizens. In fact, the NJCCC standards for civics in use during the study stated that by the end of grade 4, students should be able to "describe how American values and beliefs…and the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights, contribute to the continuation and improvement of American democracy." The analysis of the students' knowledge of Constitutional rights indicates that the students had not yet acquired the needed knowledge base of individual rights. Of the twelve students interviewed, 42% could only identify one of their constitutional rights without any prompting from me, and 33% were able to identify only two Constitutional rights. Therefore the majority of the students did not appear prepared to even meet the standard set for grade 4 at the time of the study.

An analysis of the students' knowledge of constitutional rights based on the revised standards for social studies in the state of NJ tells a similar story. The revised standards call for students by the end of grade 4 to be able to:

- Compare and contrast responses of individuals and groups, past and present, to violations of fundamental rights (Standard 6.1.4 A.9)

- Explain how the fundamental rights of the individual and the common good of the country depend upon all citizens exercising their civic responsibilities at the community, state, national level and global level (6.1.4 A.11)

Completion of these tasks requires that students first possess knowledge of individual rights. Therefore whether the former or revised standards are applied, the students' responses to interview questions suggest that the majority lacked sufficient knowledge to meet either standard set for grade 4.

impact of knowledge gaps

As presented in Table 6.1, several students were able to correctly state a Constitutional Right, however they did not possess an in-depth understanding of these rights. This is evident in that only 33% of the students were able to discuss the concept in terms of the significance to a democratic society and none were able to relate the right to a historical or current event. Depth of knowledge is a prerequisite for individuals to reach higher order levels of thinking. Figure 6.1 presents the relationship between "types" of thinking and associated cognitive tasks.

Figure 6.1 Types of Knowledge and Associated Cognitive Tasks

Type of Knowledge	Associated Cognitive Tasks
Factual Knowledge	Ability to record or present factual data
Subjective Knowledge	Develop informed opinions, using evidence to support
Procedural Knowledge	Analyze situations from multiple perspectives, apply systematic methods to gather evidence, draw conclusions
Constructed Knowledge	Take positions, make choices, commit oneself to a theory or position

Adapted: *Four Types of Knowledge* found at
http://projects.ischool.washington.edu/jscholl/Papers/Unno_4_stages_model.pdf

Individuals who possess knowledge at the factual level are positioned to provide recall or summary of information only. The limitations of an individual remaining at this level of knowledge development can be explored through a conversation with Derrick:

Me: Well what rights to American citizens have?
Deandre: Um, we have the right to um, go anywhere, and freedom of speech,
Me: Where do we get the right of freedom of speech?
Deandre:: Um, I think out of the 1st amendment.
Me: Uh hm.

Deandre: And um, you can um, like not exactly we have all the freedom of speech you want, like you know, like I couldn't just walk around cursing.
Me: Right. Now do you think that's an important right to have?
Deandre: Yeah, I think so.
Me: Why?
Deandre: Because like, like you know I'm talking to you, I think like if I was, you know I have the right to, you know, well you have the right to say what you want, like, but you don't have to keep everything… in.
Me: Ok. Do you think that in a democratic nation, it's important that people can say what they want?
Deandre: Yes.
Me: Why?
Deandre: Um, so maybe just to get your point across.

Although Deandre possessed the factual knowledge that freedom of speech is a Constitutional Right, and he even identified the 1st Amendment correctly as the source of this right, when it came to the more complex thinking task of developing and defending an opinion on the importance of free speech for a democracy, he did not appear to have the depth of knowledge concerning this right or the relevant historical and current examples to build a case.

relevancy

The students' discussions of Constitutional Rights indicate that the students' appeared to have retained knowledge of rights that were most relevant to them. The fact that the great majority, 83% of the students associated their constitutional rights with the freedom to express themselves indicates that they are most familiar with a right that they can currently exercise, or that had relevance to their lives at that time. The rights to vote and to practice one's religion were the second and third most commonly cited rights. This further supports the idea that rights that were familiar to the students, e.g. practicing their own religion, were most likely to be recalled. When I asked Jocelyn if freedom of religion was an important right she explained to me that without this right, "I couldn't

practice my religion then. I wouldn't feel good, like I wouldn't feel spiritually good, if there was like a set religion in the nation you had to follow." Clearly this is a right that had significance to her. The study was also conducted during an election year. The upcoming election and current primaries were often mentioned in class, thus it is likely that the right to vote was reinforced for the students.

Knowledge of History & Individual's Rights

The students demonstrated varying degrees of knowledge in other areas of historical, legal and government processes. During interviews the students were asked direct questions designed to assess their knowledge related to the protection of individual rights, legal remedies if individual rights are violated and historical examples of violations of individual rights. Student responses were once again scored using a 3 point scale with a 3 indicating a depth of knowledge, a 2 reflecting basic knowledge and a 1 when misunderstandings or a lack of knowledge on the subject existed. Pluses and minuses were also used to allow for more accurate assessment of responses. The depth of knowledge students possessed on the topics varied greatly, with one half of all the responses falling at a score of 2- or below, and the other half ranked as a 2 or above. Student responses are presented below along with the patterns revealed.

Several students demonstrated limited understandings of the topics discussed. The topic that students possessed the least amount of knowledge on was in referencing historical instances where individuals' rights were denied. The below conversation with Jenna illustrates her struggle to integrate what she has learned about history with her understanding of individual rights and remedies to obtain rights when violated:

Me: What was Brown vs. Board of Education?
Jenna: I don't know, we learning that with Miss Noble. Yeah. I don't

	know.
Me:	I'm sure you learned a lot about it. Didn't you just watch the movie Ruby Bridges?
Jenna:	Yeah, we didn't finish it. It was about segregation and integration.
Me:	And so when people thought that segregation was wrong, what did they do?
Jenna:	They um, oh um, what is it, they boycotted in the um, oh God, what is that word, oh they, you know they, striked…. like another thing they boycotted the buses, the public transportation, and um, they boycotted going to Caucasian stores and like buying from them.
Me:	Ok, and how was the issue of segregation resolved?
Jenna:	Martin Luther King resolved it.
Me:	Well Martin Luther King was an important leader, you're absolutely right, but who finally had to say segregation was illegal.
Jenna:	Oh, the President.
Me:	Not the president, that's what Brown vs. Board of Education was about. The United States Supreme Court had to say it.
Jenna:	Oh, duh, I was about to say Supreme Court, but I didn't think that was a court.

Although the movie *Ruby Bridges* was still fresh in her mind and she acknowledged that she had learned about Brown v. Board of Education, Jenna wasn't clear enough about the facts to discuss the case in the context of rights violations and the role of the courts in protecting individual's rights. The inability to discuss a topic in depth due to limited knowledge of the topic repeated in my conversations with the students who scored below a 2-. When I asked Deandre if an individual had a right to privacy he first answered, "Um, yes", then when I prompted him to explain to me what that meant he was only able to offer, "Like we have the right to um, you know, ah… I don't know why everything's so hard, like…" Another example was Carlton's response to my scenario of an unauthorized search leading to an arrest. When I asked him if the individual in question would have any recourse he answered, "No, because um, if they have something that was illegal, then they're already violating the, the, do you say, the community, like they can't have illegal stuff." Students whose responses fell below a score of 2- did not

appear to have adequate knowledge of their rights to due process, the division of governmental powers, and paths of recourse when individual rights are violated. If this knowledge base is not developed these students may not be able to effectively advocate for their own rights or those of other members of their community.

Half of the students displayed a greater depth of knowledge on the topics. These students received scores of 2 or higher. Of the topics discussed with the students, they were most knowledgeable about individuals' due process rights. In particular students understood the limits set on the government when it comes to search and seizure. The below conversation with Terrence demonstrates his confidence in his right to privacy and his understanding of how to proceed if this right is violated:

Me:	So what if a cop comes into your house and he doesn't have a warrant?
Terrence:	Then he can't come in my house.
Me:	Well what if he does, and then what if they arrest you, can you do anything about that?
Terrence:	Actually you could.
Me:	Tell me what you could do.
Terrence:	You can sue them, and you can go to, well court, and sue them.

Although he did not elaborate beyond the fact that one could sue if their right to privacy was violated by the police, he was able to provide this information without hesitation suggesting he was sure of this response. This is also indicative of knowledge that Terrence brought into the classroom, obtained from prior experiences. This suggests that through media exposure or discussions with family and friends, he had developed this understanding.

On the same topic other students were able to provide more depth and evidence of knowledge in their responses. Beatrice was one such student as our conversation illustrates:

Me:	Can the government come into your house when they choose to?
Beatrice:	No, I don't think so, cause that's invading somebody's privacy.
Me:	So you do have a right to privacy?
Beatrice:	Yes.
Me:	Where does that right come from?
Beatrice:	Um, what do you mean like come from?
Me:	Well, you talked about that free speech comes from the amendments, like the 1st amendment, so do the amendments give us a right to privacy?
Beatrice:	Yeah, I believe so, isn't it when it's search and seizure?
Me:	Yeah, you're right. And what are the guidelines for search and seizure, can they ever come in and search?
Beatrice:	They can still, they can't go over your doorway, but you can talk to them, you can like say your name, or you can close the door whenever you want. As long as they have a warrant, they can come in. They have to have a local, or um, judge sign it, just for them to go in, and they have to have a reason to come in

Beatrice demonstrated that she understood one's right to privacy, but she also possessed a deeper grasp of the process of obtaining a warrant and what actions are legally acceptable for an individual to take if a police officer asked for entry to someone's home without a warrant. The greater depth of knowledge would be necessary for students to fulfill the NJCCC Civics standard that calls for the more complex task to, "Discuss how the rights of American citizens may be in conflict with each other, e.g., right to privacy vs. free press". Before a student could discuss potential conflicts between citizens' rights, they first must understand the rights in question.

The students' degree of knowledge related to privacy rights suggests that they were again most familiar with Constitutional rights that are more relevant to them. This is not to suggest that the students have had personal experiences with search and seizure or due process rights, although many did indicate they knew individuals or had family

members in jail. This may simply be related to the fact that T.V. crime shows often deal with such issues, therefore this information may be brought into the students' daily lives through T.V. This may also suggest that the students are exposed to conversations among family, friends or other adults about rights and rights violations. Overall, when presented with questions about Constitutional Rights the students responded most accurately on topics that had relevancy to them, or that they possessed a degree of prior knowledge on.

Student Knowledge Related to the Class Project

The prior discussion of student knowledge indicates that the students often lacked the depth of knowledge needed to meet state standards, advocate for their own rights or the rights of others, or to develop and defend informed opinions. The students showed deeper knowledge and understandings in relation to their class project. Several reasons seemed to account for the differing levels of understanding. One was that a correlation appeared to exist between the relevancy of a topic to the students' lives and their knowledge of the topic. A second factor was that given the opportunity to explore topics in-depth the students willingly sought to deepen their own understandings of the issues and build the necessary content base through a variety of sources. Once the knowledge base was developed the students were able to apply knowledge to higher order thinking tasks.

The very nature of the *Project Citizen* curriculum calls on students to consider problems that are relevant and important to them. In the early phases of the project students brainstorm lists of problems that they then research and discuss. During this process the class narrows down their choices until they are able to select a topic to study

that the class agrees upon. My work with the students began after some of the preliminary fact finding had already occurred so I was not privy to the initial list of possibilities. At the time I began my research the class was in the process of narrowing down the broad topic of poor student performance at their school. Before the students could analyze the problem as they currently understood it and even begin to consider potential policy proposals, the students needed time to develop a strong knowledge base of the problem. The process of researching the problem and building the necessary knowledge took place during January, February and early March.

Building a strong knowledge base

In the early stages of the knowledge building process the students relied on survey data and their own experiences to inform them. After assessing this data the students drew the initial conclusion that poor student performance was a problem at the school. As the students sought to build a deeper understanding of this problem they engaged in extensive research of academic performance at their school and made comparisons to data of other school districts. During these conversations the students dealt with a variety of complex topics and applied skills of analysis and reasoning as they sought to make sense of the content before them. As students explored school report card data, school rankings in the state and district factor group rankings many questions arose and understandings were developed. Excerpts from field notes presented below are illustrative of the early stages of this process. On this day the students were beginning to challenge some of their assumptions of why a school might be a “failing” school:

> Lewis observed that in Scotch Plains only a few students scored as partially proficient, whereas in Plainfield many students had. Samuel asked if Scotch Plains was an Abbott district. The teacher directed him to look at the DFG for Scotch Plains. Another student noted that Scotch Plains had an “I” ranking. A

> male student then asked why McNair was ranked as an "A" and no other "A" schools were in the top 75. Elisabeth pointed out that McNair had higher SAT scores and Samuel added that McNair's HSPA scores were 100%, whereas Union Hill in Hudson County had only a 65% passing rate. (Field notes 1/9/09)

As class was concluding that day, several students made comments suggesting that factors beyond being classified as an Abbott school district might account for low student performance. This growing understanding was the result of the students having read and interpreted data on schools' academic and District Factor Group (DFG) rankings in the state. The students discovered that the school ranked number one based on academic indicators was also in an Abbott school district and had the lowest DFG rating of an "A". On the other hand the students' analysis also revealed that the community of South Park had a much higher DFG ranking of an "I" (the rating system is from A, the lowest, to J) as well as more students who scored proficient on the state assessment than did students in Evettston. This new information led the students to ask questions about the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement, as well as to consider what other factors were relevant to educational success, such as parental involvement. The students' thinking was moving from speculation to a more informed view. This new perspective helped the students to see the problem in a more informed and complex light.

In mid-February the students sought to incorporate their growing understandings into a refined statement of the problem. During a spirited class discussion many students advocated for the definition of the problem to be redefined as a lack of parental involvement which led to poor academic performance among many students at the school. One student argued that, "if the parents aren't involved then the parents wouldn't know… so the child would just get off not doing work…That would lead to low grades" Another student suggested that parents were the ones who decided the extent of the

child's education so if the parent doesn't care about their child's education then they won't push the child to work harder. Another argument was, "if you need help in school and your parents don't really have enough money to, like, get them a tutor they should be able to provide them [the student] with the information that they need" This discussion led a student to offer a different perspective stating, "Some parents could care less, or they might be single parents, work, are very busy or have other problems at home and may not be able to be involved." At this point the teacher asked the students if they had enough information to draw any conclusions yet. The students readily agreed that they did not and it was decided that research on parental involvement would need to be carried out.

In the weeks that followed the above class discussion, the students set out to research and better understand the role of parental involvement and student achievement in their school. This was done primarily through surveys and interviews of students, faculty and parents in the community. The students constructed their own surveys and worked together to assess the questions and make final selections for inclusion. The process provided students opportunities to think critically about the topic and apply their knowledge as the below excerpt demonstrates:

> Dawn offered a revised question, "Which one of your guardians or parents are more involved in your education?" Someone else offered a question about whether or not you knew your GEPA (the former name of the grade eight standardized state test) scores. Carlton asked what that had to do with parental involvement? Nazzeriah defended the question by explaining that the scores are sent to your house. Her reasoning seemed to suggest that if your parents shared the scores with the student it indicated parental involvement. Carlton now added that the question had nothing to do with education, he reasoned, "All you need is a house to mail it [the scores] to." And Louis added to this that parents didn't have to ask for the scores, they were sent automatically.

Through discussions such as this the students supported one another in the development of the surveys. Each brought to the discussion knowledge, experiences and perspectives that they drew on in order to question each other, share, and ultimately improve the product. In the end the class chose to ask students if they knew their GEPA scores so that they could look for possible relationships between a student possessing this knowledge and responses to other questions such as, “What is your GPA?” Several students theorized that students who had higher GPAs might also be students who experienced more parental involvement and also knew their GEPA scores. Once the surveys were completed the students were given the responsibility to administer the surveys and collect, compile and analyze the data.

The class continued the process of research, discussion, reflection and refinement of the problem in order to assess how best to address the issue. The students routinely sought to make sense of their research both in large class and small group discussions. After completing the student surveys small groups compiled the responses and then put them on the board to share with the class. Each group noted the responses to the question, “Who is involved in your schoolwork?” on the blackboard under the headings: mother, father, mother and father, grandparent, or guardian. When the survey responses were all listed on the board the teacher asked the students if they saw a trend. When the class did not appear to see one right away the teacher prompted them by asking the students what percentage of the fathers were cited as being involved? At this, Donald yelled out “There’s less!” The teacher still insisted that the students express this as a percent, but she agreed with Donald’s initial conclusion that based on the survey responses fathers did not seem to be as involved in their child’s education as did mothers. In this instance it

was with the teacher's guidance that the students made sense of their data and broadened their understanding of the issue. In other instances this process occurred through conversations among the students. Elisabeth shared with me how her work with Beatrice in analyzing school report card data helped each girl to test their conclusions. She explained:

> Me and Beatrice, we were looking at the report cards, right, so we were like, we looked at the questions, um how many kids were in the classroom…I looked at the Scotch Plains one, um there were eighteen kids in a classroom in each class, so we were like well…we think that less children in the classroom lets [the teacher] to teach more students and get to them more, which sort of makes them learn more. So we were like, we were using that as a rule. So we were looking at Irvington's um, classroom…for the 5th Graders that had 16 students, which the state average was like 21. So we were like well if you use that as a rule, uh, the 5th graders have less students per classroom, and then we looked at the test scores which was, the test scores was bad! Then Beatrice was like if we're using this as a rule, it's not, it doesn't go with it because they have less students and the test scores are bad. So I was like well maybe it's not the students, maybe it's not the teacher, or maybe it's the students. Like their interest in learning, like they're not taking it seriously, so they're doing bad on tests.

Through discussion and reading of the data, the girls' understandings of the problem grew and changed. Without the opportunities to explore authentic data in-depth, the girls may have retained their initial, elementary assumption that smaller classes alone will improve test scores. Only by testing their preliminary analysis against the data before them were they able to see the weaknesses of their initial conclusion and thus move to seek a more informed understanding.

Application of knowledge

The policy recommendations that the students put forth in their final project demonstrated that they came to understand the complexity of the issue of poor student performance. Based on their research the students recognized that a combination of

factors contributed to the problem and therefore a multi-pronged approach would be needed to remedy the situation. Additionally, each of the specific policy recommendations embedded in the class proposal was based on research drawn from multiple sources. The policy proposal reflected an understanding of the issues, a thoughtful analysis of potential alternative solutions and knowledge of the public policy-making process. Additionally, by building a knowledge base first, the students were able to apply critical thinking skills of analysis, evaluation and synthesis as they moved through the decision-making process. The knowledge and congruent decision-making skills demonstrated by the students will be explored in the context of the class proposal and the sources relied on to build the knowledge base.

The students applied their understanding of the problem and of government when they framed the problem and their policy recommendations in the context of local, state and federal government. The students correctly identified that many aspects of the policy recommendation called for action by the local Board of Education. In the "Policy Statement" of the class *Project Citizen* Portfolio, the students proposed that the Board of Education approve a revision of the district curriculum because as the students explained, the current curriculum "does not align with state standards…students are not learning the necessary information to acquire the knowledge needed to pass the state test." Prior to making this recommendation the students studied the district curriculum, curricula from other districts and the state standards. The students based their recommendation on conclusions they drew from the study of these resources as well as the experiences they and their classmates had in school. In this manner the students were able to draw on their

personal experiences, yet move beyond initial assumptions to reach informed decisions after researching multiple sources.

A second recommendation that the students directed to the Board of Education called for changes in class size and composition. The students stated in their portfolio proposal that, "After reading the surveys we believe student performance is affected due to overcrowded classrooms and class disruptions." To combat these problems the students felt that class sizes needed to be reduced and homogenously grouped. The students once again drew on their own experiences as a starting point to understand the issue as the below excerpt illustrates:

> Someone else brought up how the classes were grouped and said that the students at the top get bored. Malcom said that the teachers just focus on the smart kids, but the girls disagreed with this point. Deandre however thought this was true. He talked about how he was treated unfairly. Keisha told Deandre that he was a distraction. Although she did add that he had potential. Deandre responded by saying he was always put with low achieving students. He stated that he "was set up for failure". (Field notes 5/15/08)

As the conversation illustrates the students initially had very mixed views on the subject of homogenous grouped classes. Several of the students expressed the view that homogenous classes would provide an environment better suited to the students' intellectual ability and therefore students "at the top" wouldn't get bored. On the other hand Deandre clearly felt that being grouped with lower ability level students kept him at a disadvantage that "set him up for failure". As the students pursued their research on the topic they uncovered studies that suggested, "…smaller class sizes and homogenous groupings of students in a class can improve test scores exponentially." (*Project Citizen* Portfolio, Class Policy, p. 1) Ultimately the class relied on this data to defend a proposal that called for a reduction in class size and homogenously grouped classes, once again

demonstrating the students' ability to incorporate researched knowledge into reasoned decision-making.

In an effort to achieve the goal of smaller class sizes, the students included a recommendation requiring, "utilizing all classrooms during the school day," (*Project Citizen* Portfolio, Action Plan, p. 1). Once again the students initially relied on their perceptions of classroom use. In field notes from May 13, 2008 I wrote,

> When I sat down the students were discussing 'reconstructing' (their term) the budget. They were discussing teachers' schedules and looking for places where waste occurred and cuts could be made. At this point they were relying only on their own understanding of how many periods a day teachers taught and what the teachers were doing throughout the day.

However the students were now at a stage where they recognized that they needed more than their own opinions and experiences to draw on. They understood they needed to conduct research of the issues in order to better understand them, make informed decisions and substantiate their policy recommendations. This understanding was evident as the class met for the next session, as the following excerpt from the field notes suggest:

> The next item Nina said was the teachers' master schedule in order to see what periods teachers already taught, when they had free time, what additional duties they were assigned, etc. At this point individuals in the group began volunteering to take on the task of getting these items. (Field notes 5/15/08)

During a subsequent class session I observed students as they studied the floor plan that had been obtained by one of the class members. Based on the students' study of the floor plan and the master schedule, the students deduced that the school was not being utilized efficiently. The students final proposal called for a restructuring of classes so that "the building would be fully utilized ninety-eight percent of the time," (*Project Citizen* Portfolio, Action Plan p. 1).

As the students moved through the process of crafting policy recommendations they went through distinctly different phases of knowledge development. Assessing the students experience through the framework presented in Figure 6.1, *Types of Knowledge and Associated Cognitive Tasks*, it can be seen that the students were functioning at the highest level of knowledge construction in development of their policy proposal. They moved from factual knowledge, (the ability to record and present factual data), and subjective knowledge, (an expression of informed opinions), to the highest level of constructed knowledge. At this level the students were called upon to take and support a position only after applying the procedural knowledge produced by gathering and analyzing evidence in order to draw conclusions. This process was seen as the students moved through the stages prior to making the final recommendations of restructuring the curriculum, more fully utilizing classrooms, and grouping students homogenously.

The knowledge displayed among the students regarding their project differed markedly from the knowledge students possessed on Constitutional Rights. The primary differences were in the depth of knowledge and consequently in the students' abilities to use the knowledge in meaningful ways. Most of the students had limited understandings of Constitutional Rights that prevented them from making connections to broader issues such as the significance of individual rights in a democratic society and only two possessed enough depth of knowledge to anchor a supposition in the context of historical or current examples. By contrast the students repeatedly drew on a deep base of knowledge in order to craft and defend proposals to solve the crisis their school faced. In this manner the students demonstrated that they were quite capable and able to meet relevant progress indicators established under the NJCCS for civics in use at the time of

the study. Specifically, benchmark indicators that called for students by the end of grade eight to be able to:

- Discuss basic contemporary issues involving the personal, political, and economic rights of American citizens
- Describe the processes of local government.

The students were even ready to meet some of the progress indicators set for civics by the time a student completes grade twelve in the state of NJ:

- Propose and justify new local, state, or federal governmental policies on a variety of contemporary issues
- Recommend ways that citizens can use knowledge of state or federal government policies and decision-making processes to influence the formation, development, or implementation of current public policy issues

The students would be equally prepared to meet benchmarks under the revised NJCCC for civics. Two of the relevant standards are:

- Deliberate on a public issue in an upcoming election, consider opposing arguments and develop a reasoned conclusion
- Participate in a real or simulated public hearing to develop a legislative proposal that addresses a public issue and share it with an appropriate legislative body

Although the issue the students addressed was not one related to an upcoming election, the students demonstrated their ability to deliberate the issue, consider opposing arguments and develop reasoned conclusions. The students also presented their proposal at a simulated hearing at the NJ Project Citizen Showcase Event, and they presented their ideas to members of the Board of Education.

By engaging with the curriculum the students were not only becoming more knowledgeable about issues that were of extreme importance to them, but they were being prepared to meet the benchmarks outlined by the state, under both the former and

revised standards. It was also clear that as the students developed an informed knowledge base they were able to apply the knowledge to demanding cognitive tasks. The students' development of cognitive and participatory skills associated specifically with civic engagement is explored in the next section

Skills Associated with Democratic Citizenship

> Reconstructing the Plainfield School District is the policy our class feels would best address the issue of our school not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) grade. This process consists of enforcing the No Child Left Behind, (NCLB), revising the curriculum, creating homogenous classes, correcting student teacher ratio in class, reducing class sizes, managing, redirecting the budget and complying with the law. As a class, we reviewed numerous solutions and felt this is the best possible policy. Although we believe the NCLB needs to be revised, this document only confronts the local issues we have identified, and are currently experiencing. (Project Citizen Portfolio, Class Policy, p. 1)

The policy proposal stated above was crafted by the students after months of research, analysis, discussion and thoughtful decision-making. Throughout this process the students displayed skills considered highly desirable for citizens in a democracy to possess. The road these students travelled in reaching this final proposal was filled with demonstrations of the students' abilities and desire to take on a serious and complex problem in order to be active participants in solving the crisis in their school. The framework of skills associated with effective civic engagement that was introduced in chapter 3, and included here as table 6.2, will serve to guide the discussion of the skills demonstrated by the students throughout the time they engaged in this project.

Table 6.2 Skills Associated with Effective Civic Engagement
1. Ability to think critically
2. Make informed, responsible decisions

Table 6.2 continued
3. Evaluate information
4. Analyze information
5. Discuss issues and consider multiple perspectives
6. Recognize the role of bias, point of view and context, as well as assess the credibility of a source
7. Examine current issues and events
8. Formulate questions based on information
9. Use effective strategies to locate information
10. Summarize information in written, graphic and oral formats
11. Work cooperatively with others to achieve a goal
12. Provide leadership
13. Problem solve
14. Build an effective and rational argument

Research, Collaboration and Critical Thinking

Over the course of five months the students' were routinely called upon to develop, apply and refine all of the skills outlined in Table 6.2. In the early stages of the project the students researched and analyzed multiple sources before reaching a decision on what topic to select for the project. As the students read state statutes, newspaper articles and data on school performance they raised questions; "Why is McNair ranked number one and has a DFG of A when no other A schools are in the top seventy-five?"; "Why does the state statute give so much authority to the father?"; "How come Westfield (a neighboring town) has such high scores?" In each of these instances the students

moved beyond a reading of the material, to asking relevant questions in order to expand their understanding of the issues (#8). Sometimes the students would work collectively to reach an understanding (# 11), such as a student offering that McNair probably had more students scoring proficient or above, and then pointing to the high SAT scores as evidence of high academic performance among the students. To this information a third student pointed out the 100% passage rate on the state test that had been achieved at McNair. As the students sought to gain an even deeper understanding of the data they were reading they compared academic data and DFG ratings for other schools (# 4). In this manner the class began to understand that while there appeared to be a link between school performance and socioeconomic factors, this was a complex issue. Throughout this process the students exhibited their facility to think critically (#1) and work cooperatively as they read, formulated questions and analyzed the data.

The class reviewed a wide range of sources in conducting their research. The students created their own survey, which they administered to two hundred and twenty-five individuals. Teachers, students, parents, extended family members and community members were all surveyed. The students then compiled and analyzed their data in order to identify trends across groups, (e.g. parents and students) and within groups. They found that, “parents, students, teachers, administrators, the board members and as well as the mayor and the interim superintendent that are concerned with this issue, (poor academic performance at the school),” (Project Citizen Portfolio, Problem Statement, p. 2). The students used the survey data to access the scope of the problem and gain a better understanding of how others perceived the problem. The students also consulted newspaper articles, state report cards, standardized tests scores, state and federal statutes,

a state Special Review Assessment, and Great Schools ratings as they framed the problem (# 5 & 9). In order to make policy recommendations the students again consulted numerous sources such as the school floor plan and the master schedule of teaching assignments, the district budget and curriculum, data on district teachers, curricula models of other schools, and interviews with various constituents. Information derived from the varied sources was pieced together until a picture of the problem and potential remedies began to emerge. In their final proposal this process was evident:

> Section 1119.A1 of the NCLB clearly states, 'Each local educational agency receiving assistance under this part shall ensure that all teachers hired after such day and teaching in a program supported with funds under this part are highly qualified.' However 10% of the teachers in Evettston Schools, 2005-2006 were not highly qualified in the content area they were teaching, partly because of the overall budget in Evettston. Often teachers are required to teach more than one academic subject. Under the highly qualified teacher provision of the NCLB, teachers in eligible districts who are highly qualified in at least one subject will have three years to become highly qualified in the additional subjects they teach. This flexibility does not benefit the students, it puts students at a mental disadvantage for three consecutive years by preventing them from gaining the required knowledge needed to past [pass] the state test. (*Project Citizen* Portfolio, Class Policy, p. 1)

During the course of researching the problem and crafting a proposal the students studied current issues (#7) in education in depth, such as the provisions and impact of NCLB. They developed a deep understanding of the issue by accessing varied sources of information (#9), they considered and evaluated different perspectives and proposals (# 3 & 6) and ultimately they arrived at an informed decision designed to tackle the problem of poor academic performance in their school (# 1, 2 & 13).

Leadership Skills

> As students filed in they began to organize themselves into three groups without any prompting from the teacher. They appeared anxious to continue their work from Tuesday (the last time the class had met). As soon as they were settled Nina

> took the lead stating they would continue to refine the class proposal. Everyone listened to her and many nodded in agreement. Carlton asked the group if they thought electives should be eliminated. A large majority of the group quickly and strongly expressed their opposition to this idea. The consensus was rather than eliminate electives they should be restructured to better serve the students. Although the discussion that led to this decision was brief, it appeared that all students who wished to were able to share their view and all seemed comfortable with the decision.
>
> Next, Nina began to state items that the group needed. She mentioned a floor plan of the school, explaining that they needed to identify what space was being used when. Everyone started taking notes on what was needed. Nina stated that a master schedule of teacher assignments was needed (although she referred to it as the "scheduler"). At this point individuals in the group began volunteering to take on the task of getting these items. Both Malcom and Deandre volunteered to get schedules or the school budget. Nina continued and said that they needed to find the school curriculum. Keisha mentioned that she had been looking for the curriculum last night but had been unable to find it on-line. The group then discussed how they could obtain this information and who would be responsible for this. Keisha said she would do it. Nina asked Carla if she would get info on other schools, such as how they grouped students, for comparison sake. During this time everyone in the group was engaged; all listened attentively, took notes when appropriate, made suggestions, offered comments and volunteered to take on responsibilities. Nearby another group of four students was busy analyzing the three alternative policies the class had identified, but chosen not to support. Throughout this time the teacher worked with the group who was responsible for writing out the problem as identified by the class. The teacher was able to give this group focused attention as the other two groups worked independently to achieve their goals. As usual, all of the groups worked right to the end of the period. (Field notes, 5/15/08)

As the vignette from class on May 15 illustrates, some students emerged as leaders, but all took initiative in sharing the work. Students demonstrated responsibility, leadership and independence both in and out of the class setting as well. It was rare for a student to volunteer to complete a task and not follow through. On the day referenced above, Dawn volunteered to get the floor plan for the school. Taking her responsibility seriously, she sought out the Vice Principal the next period during her lunch to ask for the plan, before she went to eat. Although the Vice Principal was not able to accommodate her at that time, she evidently followed through as the next time I observed the class

several students were busy analyzing the floor plan of the school. What made Dawn's actions even more significant is that she was primarily a quiet, shy student, however over time she became more assertive taking on responsibility to help the class reach its goal. This pattern was seen among many of the students. Elisabeth, Emanuel, and Bethany's weekend conference call to work on the project, Carlton finding the confidence to speak up in class and share ideas, and Deandre volunteering to take on tasks, are all examples of students who didn't possess the strong leadership tendencies seen among some of their peers, yet all stepped up to take a part in the project. These students were developing lifelong skills of leadership (# 12) and responsibility.

The students also developed leadership skills as they became advocates for their proposal. On May 30, 2008 I observed the students present their proposal at the NJ State *Project Citizen* Showcase to a panel of three evaluators, one of whom was a former superintendent of schools. The students came dressed for the occasion, most wearing black skirts and slacks with button down or polo style white shirts. Some wore black jackets or sweaters over their shirts, all looked well-groomed and ready to be taken seriously. When it came time to present the students were poised and well-spoken. Arguments were made in loud, clear voices and points were substantiated with references to survey results, sections of NCLB, and data on academic performance (Field notes, 5/30/08). Even during the more difficult phase of the presentation when the panel of evaluators asked the students questions, the students remained self-assured and continued to support their conclusions with evidence from their research. All of the students who presented that day exhibited a confidence that came from months of research, a depth of knowledge and a personal connection to the material. Evaluator teams, comprised of

educators, policy-makers and other professionals, recognized the quality of the students' work when the students' project was awarded second place at the showcase. (The first place team that year was a well-resourced, top performing school with a District Factor Group rating of I, J being the highest rating a school could receive.) The students demonstrated that day they could act as ambassadors for the community as they educated others on the serious challenges present in their school and advocated for policy changes.

The class project had provided the students' with an avenue to sharpen already existing skills and develop new ones. Working within an authentic context the students exceeded the expectations set forth by the state of N.J. by meeting standards well beyond their grade level. Based on the standards in use at the time of the study, the benchmark skills identified below are to be met by the end of grade twelve. Each was demonstrated among the students:

6.1.12 A. Social Studies Skills:
Building upon the knowledge and skills gained in the previous grades, by the end of Grade 12 students will:

- Gather, analyze, and reconcile information from primary and secondary sources to support or reject hypotheses.

- Examine source data within the historical, social, political, geographic, or economic context in which it was created, testing credulity and evaluating bias.

- Formulate questions and hypotheses from multiple perspectives, using multiple sources

- Apply problem-solving skills to national, state, and local issues and propose reasoned solutions.

The students appeared to be on their way to developing and possessing skills that would enable them to become effective democratic citizens. The final piece of the puzzle was

whether or not they would be inclined to hold attitudes or act in ways that supported democratic citizenship. This last leg of effective democratic citizenship is the focus of the last part of this chapter.

Dispositions to Support a Healthy Democracy

Emanuel: Well something that bothers me in the town would be littering. I see people, well most of the time I walk home, or I go out on the weekends and I just see people throw stuff on the floor and the streets…

Me: Do you think citizens in communities have responsibilities to their community?

Emanuel: What do you mean by that?

Me: Well, you're a member of a church. (Louis nods) Do you have a responsibility as a member of that community? Do you have obligations that you have to fulfill?

Emanuel: Well that's what I feel. I feel that if you want to be a part of something you must follow better examples. You must, um, do the right thing.

Concepts central to democracy are the need for individuals to act responsibly and on behalf of the common good. Emanuel may lack the vocabulary to express his views in the context of these concepts, but he still holds them in high regard. On a deep level that extends beyond the memorization of qualities of a good citizen, Emanuel stated what he felt. He knew that membership in a community meant a responsibility to "do the right thing". When Emanuel spoke about the individuals who did not take the time to use trash cans his tone of voice suggested disdain for such actions. For Emanuel taking care of your community through simple actions such as throwing out the trash, was part of doing the right thing.

Attitudes, beliefs and behaviors displayed among the students were also considered in light of the National Standards for Civics, the NAEP Assessment, the NCSS themes and the NJ Core Content Standards in regard to civic dispositions. Table 6.3 represents the disposition or character traits that were identified based on these

sources. These traits were used as benchmarks to access student comments and actions during the study. Each of the items in Table 6.3 will be addressed first in this section. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of what the words and actions of the students revealed about the types of citizens they are becoming.

Table 6.3 Dispositions Associated with Effective Civic Engagement
1. Recognizing the need for individual's to take personal, political and economic responsibilities as citizens
2. Respecting individual worth and human dignity
3. Respect for and trust in institutions of authority; respect for the rule of law
4. Tolerance of divergent views and lifestyles
5. A sense of efficacy at being able to affect change in one's community
6. A sense of civic responsibility as seen by promoting the healthy functioning of American constitutional democracy and participating in civic affairs in an informed, thoughtful, and effective manner

Emanuel's understanding reflects the first trait listed on Table 6.3, the need for individuals to take personal, political and economic responsibilities as citizens. All of the students interviewed shared Emanuel's view that taking personal responsibility was important for members of society. This notion was presented in a variety of ways; as the necessity for individuals to follow laws, take care of their homes and communities, to vote, be able to financially support oneself and even watch the news to be informed.

Sometimes the students suggested that taking responsibility was in an individual's best interest such as the comments Elisabeth made explaining why everyone should watch the news. She explained, "Cause it's like their country, they should be aware of it. Like all these decisions, like they could affect you in some way." However, more often the students connected the actions, or inactions, of individuals to the potential impact on the community. Beatrice expressed this view as she explained,

> …like a family should have at least somebody working that can bring in, um, basic needs for the family, And school wise, everybody should be learning something, trying to get good grades so they can get into better schools which will help them in their, (pause) when it comes to their family and school.

The theme of individual responsibility in improving one's community was pronounced among the students; many telling me that unless everyone did their part, the community would suffer. When I asked Jenna why she thought it was important that everyone fulfills their responsibilities in a community she reflected this view by explaining, "Because that's how your community functions correctly. If it wasn't then there'd be a whole lot of mishaps." The need for individuals to take actions in order to improve their personal situation, and the situations of their family and community, was expressed repeatedly among the students during the interviews.

The observed interactions among the students throughout the study revealed that they generally conducted themselves in a manner consistent with their views on personal responsibility. Time and time again the students were observed working together and supporting one another in their effort to achieve a common goal. As detailed in chapter 5, students regularly acted as coaches and "critical friends" as they worked in small groups and pairs. Many times students took on responsibilities beyond the classroom to ensure the success of the project. This was seen among the incidents presented in chapter 5 of

students regularly staying after class or school to work on the project, or who sought out information for the project outside of class. The initiative and responsibility displayed among the students, as well as their willingness to work together suggests that they valued the ideals of personal responsibility and commitment to the common welfare of the group; traits considered necessary of citizens in a healthy democratic society.

Respect for Diversity, Individuals and Authority

Other characteristics presented in Table 6.3 were also demonstrated through the students' words and actions. In general, the students displayed high levels of acceptance and respect for people who were unlike them (# 2 & #4). It was common for a student to express the view that all people are equal and should be treated as such. Even in light of the discrimination that the students cited against minorities, this principle was maintained. As Malika explained to me when discussing segregation, "It wouldn't feel right if we did that to them [white people]." The students also felt strongly about equal protection under the law. As Jocelyn told me, "if the only reason you can't vote is because you don't own land, or because you're black, or whatever else, you know, that's not fair. It's not equal" Rights to a fair trial, to rent property and have access to quality health care and education were also cited as needing to be protected for all, regardless of race, ethnicity, or class.

The right for individuals to express divergent views was valued among the students as well. Most of the students spoke of free speech as essential to democracy so that different opinions could be heard. One student even linked the need to hear unpopular views as necessary to protect against discrimination. This sentiment was

practiced in the classroom as well. On several occasions I observed healthy discussions where students exchanged views and disagreed in a respectful manner.

The students did however make distinctions concerning circumstances when an individual's rights could be denied. Many of the students stated that individuals who were in the U.S. illegally should not be extended the same rights as citizens. Other appropriate abridgments of individual rights cited were in cases of criminals, minors or students in schools. In each of these instances the students' views are illustrative of a respect for the rule of law (#3). Whether it was the federal laws concerning immigration, state laws on education, or court rulings on the rights of students and minors, the students appeared to respect and accept authority. For many of the students the rule of law trumped even their basic conceptions of individual rights. This notion is heard in comments such as when Dawn affirmed that all citizens are entitled to equal rights, but then when asked if illegal immigrants should have these rights her response was a swift, "Nope…you're not a citizen and you're illegal in the state."

The respect and acceptance the students extended to me were also indicative of their views on diversity and respect for the individual. From the very beginning the students welcomed me, a white woman from outside their community. I was the only non-minority in the class and one of only a handful in the school, yet this never appeared to have any bearing on how the students spoke to me or viewed me. It is also possible that the students saw me as an authority figure, representing the power structure in the school. Whichever might have been the cause for their treatment of me, they clearly lived by their statements about individual worth and equal treatment.

Beliefs about Citizen Responsibility

> I think teachers could help, and then after that like take it to your parents just so like you can get an idea, and then after that just bring it up at a community, like have a community meeting or something. (Interview with Bree, 6/16/08)
> …the community should go to the Board of Education and like have uh, make them try to get a whatchamacallit, what's it called, like an afterschool program and like tutoring and stuff. (Interview with Jenna, 5/28/08)
> Cause like my block that I live on, I consider that a community because its like everybody is like, we have a watch like if I be looking outside the windows most of the time so I think, I think like that's my community (Interview with Deandre, 5/29/08)

Each of the young people cited above conceived of the role of a citizen as one that required active involvement in the improvement of one's community. They also expressed sentiments that moved beyond the notion that individuals are responsible for being "good" citizens by following laws and voting, to a vision that required citizens to be active in addressing community needs through more formal or organized approaches. For Bree addressing problems of violence in the community might be solved through support from teachers and parents in order to organize to address a community meeting. Although Bree did believe individuals should personally follow laws and treat others with respect, she recognized that this problem required more collective and organized action within the community. On the topic of poor academic performance and high drop-out rates among the students, Jenna also felt that formal action needed to be taken so that changes could be made by the Board of Education. In Deandre's case the community in his neighborhood came together to form a watch that he accepted responsibility to be part of. The view that individuals are responsible to become active participants in solving

community problems differs from the conception of individuals taking responsibility for their own actions as a means to serve themselves and the community.

The last characteristic presented in Table 6.3 calls for "A sense of civic responsibility as seen by promoting the healthy functioning of American constitutional democracy and participating in civic affairs in an informed, thoughtful, and effective manner." How one chooses to participate in civic affairs may differ greatly based on differing conceptions of a citizen's role. I sought to better understand how the views of citizen responsibility differed among the students and what this might mean for their future participation as citizens. I applied a framework for "Kinds of Citizens" developed by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) that offers three broad categories of citizenship: 1. the personally responsible citizen, 2. the participatory citizen, and 3. the justice-oriented citizen. According to Westheimer and Kahne, the personally responsible citizen serves his or her community through actions such as obeying laws, working, and volunteering in times of need. The ideas expressed among the students that individuals are responsible for taking care of their homes and communities by keeping them clean and obeying the laws reflect this model of citizenship. The participatory citizen is defined as an individual who believes that to solve and improve society individuals must be active participants who are willing and able to navigate established systems and community structures. The final classification of the justice-oriented citizen encompasses individuals who believe that improvement to society must come through questioning, challenging and ultimately changing established structures that perpetuate inequalities. These are individuals who seek to right injustices.

Each of the types of citizens identified by Westheimer and Kahne were represented among the students' notions of civic responsibility to varying degrees. Responses provided during interviews with the twelve students were identified as either currently reflecting one of the three types of citizenship or as "developing" towards a classification. Table 6.4 depicts the placement of students on this "spectrum" of citizenship evolution.

Table 6.4

Classifications of Student Responses Regarding Civic Responsibility

Personally Responsible	Developing Participatory	Participatory	Developing Justice-Oriented	Justice Oriented
(N = 12)	(N = 12)	(N = 12)	(N = 12)	(N = 12)
12	5	5	5	0

As seen in Table 6.4, most of the students interviewed realized that some degree of citizen action is needed in order to bring about changes and improvements in society. Students who expressed these views were characterized as either participatory citizens or as developing participatory. Students who were identified as "Developing Participatory" expressed views that citizens should take actions but were not clear on what steps might be taken. As an understanding of process of community organizing and government channels are key traits for this type of citizen, students who were unable to discuss these components were viewed as developing. Examples of this were Elisabeth telling me that " you have to volunteer and stuff," or Jenna stating, "only if the few people are doing it, the job won't get done, instead of everybody doing it like together, teamwork," but

neither girl elaborated on how volunteer actions or individuals working together could be integral parts to organized or formal changes. The students classified as "Participatory" offered several concrete ways that citizens can take actions to bring about formal changes. In addition to the actions of attending Board of Education, community meetings, or participating in community groups, students also saw joining community organizations such as the PTA, speaking to the Mayor or Chief of Police, and lobbying for laws as means of participatory citizen action aimed at improving their community.

Although none of the student statements explicitly identified them as "Justice-oriented", several were categorized as developing in this manner. To these students, problems of violence, lack of safety in the community, gangs, and inadequate healthcare and educational opportunities, were all viewed as threats to individual's rights. As Jocelyn told me, "Everyone should have healthcare". Although the students did not analyze the underlying structural causes of these problems, they were beginning to frame the issues in terms of equality and individual rights. Eradicating these problems was not just to improve living conditions but as Elisabeth expressed, "everybody has to feel safe".

Beyond statements made in interviews, the students demonstrated throughout the course of the study their growing understandings of their roles as citizens. The very nature of the class project, trying to improve the academic performance of the students at their school, speaks to an effort to address a pressing community problem through engaged, collective action. In fact the plan of action outlined in the students' portfolio project directly stated the students' intention to, "attend the next school board meeting…to strongly request they hire highly qualified teachers," (Project Citizen, Action Plan, p. 1). The students understood that change in their community was in part

likely to occur with improvements made to the schools. Bree reflected these points with her comments below:

> An education would get them a job. A nice job that pays good money, cause certain people that I know have like five children and then they'll have a job that only pays minimum wage and then it's like their living in this crappy apartment and then they can't have the necessities they need for their child, or something that they need for themselves to barely keep them living.

Bree's comments reveal her understanding of the causal nature of events. She understands that material changes for members in the community are linked to economic factors, which in turn are linked in part to one's education. She believes that improvements made to the schools will enable individuals to compete for higher paying jobs and therefore be in position to better provide for their families. This demonstrates a concern for the welfare of others in the community.

What is perhaps most telling about the students' collective understanding of citizenship, is that most of these students did not plan on attending the high school in Evettston or living in the community when they were older, yet they still felt compelled to work towards improving the schools. This was a group of young people who felt that many of their city and school leaders had not delivered the educational system they deserved. It would probably be understandable if the students felt victimized by their circumstances. However the spirit that I observed among these students over the course of six months was a feeling that they had to become agents for change in their community and tackle these tough issues head on. The emphasis the class placed on improving the schools suggests that they held a view of mutual obligation among citizens and their government. The students called for the government to provide better schools, so that individuals could avail themselves of better educational opportunities in order to provide

for themselves and their families. Ultimately the students hoped this would bring about positive changes for the city. This represents an appreciation for the balance between individual rights and desires, and the common good. This is complex understanding reflects the final disposition noted in table 6.4, "A sense of civic responsibility as seen by promoting the healthy functioning of American constitutional democracy and participating in civic affairs in an informed, thoughtful, and effective manner." The students were showing themselves to be democratic citizens.

Conclusion

The degree to which an individual becomes an active citizen is influenced by many factors. While political and social scientists have correlated income and educational attainment to civic participation, the attainment of necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions are also viewed as necessary components. The findings of this chapter suggest that a curriculum that enables students to make connections to their own lives and challenges them to think critically, can greatly assist in the development of civic knowledge, skills and dispositions.

The students did not demonstrate a strong knowledge base in some areas of content associated with civic engagement such as U.S. History, Constitutional structures, process and practices, however they did develop knowledge of public policy-making and issues related to their class project. This strongly suggests that the students have the capacity to develop a deep knowledge base in other areas as well. The implications of this finding will be discussed in depth in the next chapter. In terms of skills and dispositions associated with civic engagement the students appeared to be meeting and exceeding the expectations set forth for their grade level. How these results can be

understood in relation to the achievement gap and standardized test scores is also an area of major focus in the next chapter. In spite of many challenges, the data indicates that these students were on a path to become reasoned, responsible actors in their communities and the American democratic society.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The primary goal of this study was to explore the experiences of students from historically marginalized backgrounds as they engaged in a study of citizenship, community and policy-making through an inquiry-based, problem solving curriculum. Through this study I hoped to contribute to understandings in two areas. The study aimed to expand our understanding of the interactions and impact of different, and even contrary, contextual experiences on the development of students' civic identities. Next, the study was designed to better gauge the potential of the *Project Citizen* curriculum as a vehicle to aid in the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions associated with civic engagement for historically marginalized students. Adjacent to these goals was a desire to better understand the factors leading to or inhibiting the academic success of students attending urban schools. This study sheds light on each of these areas. In this chapter I will discuss the implications of these findings.

The focal class in this study was selected for students' and community demographic characteristics, as well as the school's status as "failing," and in danger of sanctions under NCLB. As a healthy democracy requires a populace that is informed, skilled and desirous of participating in the processes and monitoring of government, it is important to all members of American society that quality civic education programs exist in our schools that can further these goals. For populations that have been historically underrepresented in American society, politically, socially and economically, civic education has the potential to cultivate a generation able and willing to advocate for their

communities. Populaces that understand the workings of government and possess intellectual and advocacy skills, are better positioned to obtain resources for economic and social betterment for their communities.

Based on many indictors, the students in this study lived in a community that had been largely shut out of the American Dream. Conditions that many Americans view to be basic rights, such as the ability to feel safe, were elusive for many of the students. High crime rates, poverty and gangs were visible problems plaguing the city and impacting the students' daily experiences. Data on the educational levels in the community, and the students own accounts, suggested the community was not rich in role models who possessed the type of human and social capital associated with academic, economic and political success in America (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987, Hart & Atkins, 2001). Research on civic engagement indicates that such factors can negatively influence one's level of participation, (Hart & Atkins, 2001; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002).

The students' school in the study represented many of the challenges facing urban schools across America. Among these were; low standardized test scores; a seeming lack of commitment to standards of excellence among many of the students, teachers, staff and administrators; a school that spoke of physical neglect and abuse; and a disruptive environment that often left students without a sense of emotional, academic or physical security. These are daunting challenges indeed, but classrooms such as the one presented in this study offer insight into a different set of possibilities for students within this school and schools with similar challenges. The factors that led to success in this classroom have broad implications for the field of education, with specific lessons for

urban education and civic education among historically marginalized populations. These implications will be discussed in this chapter in regard to several different audiences; pre-service educators, in-service teachers and administrators, curriculum designers, and policy-makers. Each of these audiences plays a part in the educational experiences of young people and all must be active in reforming existing conditions that allow for a substandard quality of education and the inadequate preparation of our next generation of citizens.

Implications for School and Classroom Practices

There are many lessons from this study for classroom teachers in all settings, but particularly for teachers of urban students and students from historically marginalized populations. Primary among the implications is the impact that a class culture can have on students' learning. Other significant implications are that students can meet challenging academic standards when afforded the opportunity; that students already possess many important skills and background knowledge that can be successfully incorporated into their learning; and that students crave an atmosphere that supports learning. Additionally the findings relevant to the development of student knowledge suggest that teachers need to provide conditions that allow students to develop in-depth understandings and make meaningful connections with content. Beyond the classroom, faculty, staff and administrators must be called upon to create and support a learning environment that allows all students to feel safe and flourish. Each of these areas will be elaborated on below.

Raise Standards

> I skip class sometimes. But sometimes I do it just because its stuff that we've been learning, and we have to learn it repeatedly over and over again and I feel like why should I have to learn this again?

Rihanna's statement speaks of the boredom and lack of significance that so many of the students experienced regarding their education. As other studies have demonstrated, urban education is often characterized by teacher directed lessons focused on rote learning (Anyon, 1997; Lipman, 2004). Accounts of the students in this study show that this type of educational experience was common place. Even worse were the number of stories students shared of teachers who did not even try to engage students, but rather resorted to movies, or in-class book work and worksheets that focused only on low cognitive level tasks, (this is not to suggest that movies can not be used in meaningful ways to enhance student learning, however the descriptions from the students suggested that movies were used as a form of "filler" or a reward for good behavior and not connected to the curriculum or presented in conjunction with a student assignment). Based on the expectations and student results in the class under study, it is clear that students can rise to meet higher standards of behavior and academics. This was true even in a school where the larger culture did not regularly ask the students to meet these standards and where disruptions to the learning environment were commonplace.

The type of instruction that students receive can also significantly develop one's abilities and attitudes regarding civic engagement. Lessons that only focus students on mastery of concepts and facts will not provide the development of skills needed for effective civic engagement, (Engle & Ochoa, 1986; Kahne, et al, 2000; Parker, 1996).

The findings of this study demonstrated that when students are confronted with learning opportunities that incorporate critical thinking, inquiry, problem-solving, advocacy, and independent and collaborative learning, they are able to demonstrate and develop skills and attitudes consistent with democratic participation.

These findings also extend the work of Rubin (2008) in determining that even when students experience disjuncture of civic ideals and practices in many areas of their lives, as did the students in this study, the type of civics instruction they receive can greatly impact the development of one's civic identity. Inquiry driven, student-centered and academically challenging lessons need to be the norm. Such practices should be used in the education of all students however this study suggests that such practices are of paramount importance in shaping the civic identities of marginalized student populations.

Empower Students

In addition to raising expectations there are many other implications for classroom teachers. The students responded positively to the inquiry-based, student-centered curriculum that allowed for them to direct much of their own learning experience. Focusing on problems that were important to them enabled the students to make connections to their learning by drawing on personal experiences and knowledge of their community. Constructivist learning is dependent on students' ability to develop meaning, (Brown, 2004; Wiggins and McTighe, 1998) yet classroom instruction often does not take into account the context of students' lives, particularly minority children. Topics within the field of social studies are most often presented to students from the majority perspective with emphasis on the memorization of discreet, decontextualized

facts, (Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith and Thiede, 2000). For students who are not represented by the majority, such experiences may add to feelings of disconnect, alienation and even withdrawal from the learning process. Thus teachers need to find ways to integrate the students' lives into the learning process. The students in this class were routinely able to draw on their prior knowledge and experiences in the school and community. As they were the "experts" on their school and community, the knowledge they brought to the class project was important and valued, thus helping the students to become invested and active in the learning process.

The learning environment also encouraged students to use skills that they possessed but were not often called upon to use in the classroom. These included the ability to work cooperatively and support one another in their learning; to present and defend their opinions on topics affecting their lives; to critically assess situations and problem solve; and to network with adults in their community. Successfully drawing upon these skills enabled the students to be active participants in their learning and build confidence in their ability to do so. Such practices help empower students from marginalized groups and develop their sense of agency, (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lipman, 2004).

Build In-depth Knowledge

Teachers need to provide students with the time and resources to build in-depth understandings of topics. As Wiggens and McTiegh suggest in their model for backward design, teachers need to ask themselves what is the content that all students truly need to know? The extended period of time that the class in this study was engaged with the

Project Citizen curriculum allowed for in-depth study of the topic. This enabled the students to develop a sufficient knowledge base so that they were able to meaningfully apply the knowledge to authentic tasks, such as crafting a proposal for the school board on how to increase academic achievement at their school.

Teachers also need to become accustomed to conducting on-going, formative assessments to determine the developing knowledge base of the students and then tailoring instruction to support students based on their current understandings, (Popham, 2008; Tomlinson, 1999). Ms. Prince routinely assessed student progress and responded accordingly by refocusing students or even revisiting concepts. Less is truly more when students are able to build rich understandings of important material.

Support and Accountability

The students in the study expressed the need for classroom experiences that would push them to achieve academically. Although classroom teachers ultimately must be the ones to provide rich learning opportunities and maintain high expectations for the students, teachers may need support from administrators and colleagues when implementing new teaching strategies. Many teachers feel constrained based on real or assumed demands by the administration. This is particularly true in this era of test prep and high stakes accountability, (Apple, 2009). Teachers need to know that they can implement student based strategies and inquiry based learning without the threat of administrative reprisals. Teachers should also be afforded time to learn from one another, flesh out ideas and co-plan. Although the teacher in this study had a record of success with implementing *Project Citizen*, she was not called upon to share with or support other

teachers in the school. Just as learning occurs in a social context for students, it does so also for adults. Collaboration among teachers should be focused around best practices and supported by the administration.

Enforcement of School Policies

The students in this study also made it clear they want a safe environment that is conducive to learning. However they acknowledged, as did I, that enforcement of discipline policies and codes of conduct were not consistent. Although school discipline procedures was not an area of focus in this study, as it was an integral part of the school climate and shaped the students daily experiences, some discussion of school practices and implications are addressed here. The climate of the classroom studied clearly demonstrated that when practices of structure and accountability are employed, disciplinary issues can be minimized and a productive learning environment can flourish.

A general shift in the school climate needs to occur to achieve an optimal learning environment. All of the teachers must see the need to maintain discipline within their own classrooms, the hallways and the school at large as an integral part of their job. When students are able to disrupt classrooms, all of the students in the room become victims. As one student in the study explained, “If you have a couple of bad kids in the class they could like, they could distract the other students that are willing to learn,” (Field notes, February 25, 2008). The administration must also take an active role in the supervision of support security staff. As related in chapter 4, security guards often appear to be part of the problem by not enforcing school discipline policies. Better training,

closer supervision and consequences for failure to perform one's duties should all become routine in regard to the security staff.

Bringing changes to schools is a slow process that requires action among many constituencies. In-service teachers and administrators are engaged in the direct, daily education of young people and therefore are essential players in reform efforts. The findings of this study have direct implications for classroom and school practices and the implementation of school policies. The suggestions outlined above are by no means the cure all for the multi-faceted problems facing urban schools today. However, what this study has revealed is that promising civic education and successful academic experiences can take place at the classroom level when the necessary elements of pedagogy, curriculum and content come together.

Implications for Citizenship Education

America's schools are charged with preparing the next generation of citizens to sustain and lead this country. However what is necessary in this preparation is an area of controversy among all educators, but particularly among those who engage in citizenship education. Implications for conceptions of knowledge, curricula approaches, the preparation of teacher candidates, and discourses of citizenship are discussed in this section.

Conceptions of knowledge

Conceptions of requisite knowledge for civic engagement are challenged by the findings of this study. Though the findings presented in chapter 6 revealed that the

students' knowledge of U.S. History and Constitutional rights and processes were limited and often below expectations set by state and national standards, the students none the less displayed democratic citizenship in action. The students' personal and community knowledge served as a starting point for them to build a deep understanding of the issue at hand. Through the guidance of Ms. Prince the students were able to apply their knowledge and skills to research the problem, propose and analyze alternative policy solutions, select a policy plan and craft a plan to gain support for their policy proposals. These are clearly acts of democratic participation.

Many educators and scholars criticize the current state of today's social studies programs for a lack of emphasis on the teaching of history. In an essay, *The Training of Idiots*, J. Martin Rochester exclaims that in order to "fix" social studies, and specifically civic education, educators,

> …need to reaffirm the importance of students studying American history—*their* history—in its own right, and not merely as part of some "integrated" world history. Moreover we need to provide an accurate rendering of American history. While acknowledging the contributions of the Grimke sisters and of "ordinary" people and people of color, we also need to give proper space to Washington, Jefferson, and the true heroes of the American story. (2003, pp. 26-27)

According then to Rochester, the knowledge displayed among the students in this study would not be considered as important as the necessity for them to learn "their" history, particularly the history of the "true heroes" of America. (This view does not take into account that while Washington and Jefferson are certainly important figures in America's history, neither man advocated for equality for the ancestors of these students. Therefore these men may not be "heroes" to these students.) Rochester is not alone in his views. Educational scholar Diane Ravitch pines for a day when schools focused on the teaching

of chronological history and the study of heroes so that students "arrived at the study of Greece and Rome in high school with a well-stocked vocabulary of important figures and classical myths." (2003, p. 2) It appears that Ravitch would have preferred that the students in this study had spent time learning more about the past than the current circumstances impacting their lives and community. Each of these views negates the value of the students' experience in building knowledge that had meaning to them as they learned about their roles as citizens in a democratic society, clearly a worthy objective.

Traditional notions of citizenship education claim that knowledge of the history of the United States is needed in order for individuals to become competent democratic actors. This view is reflected in state and national standards for social studies education, as the NJ Core Content Standard 6.1 for Social Studies (2009) demonstrates below:

> All students will acquire the knowledge and skills to think analytically about how past and present interactions of people, cultures, and the environment shape the American heritage. Such knowledge and skills enable students to make informed decisions that reflect fundamental rights and core democratic values as productive citizens in local, national, and global communities.

As stated, it is through the acquisition of knowledge about, "how past and present interactions of people, cultures, and the environment shape the American heritage," that will enable young people to make "informed decisions that reflect fundamental rights and core democratic values as productive citizens". However the students in the study demonstrated their ability to make informed decisions about the problems they identified in their school even though they displayed gaps in their knowledge of American History and Government. Additionally, the students in this study demonstrated core democratic values in their concern for the welfare of the community, their emphasis on individual

responsibility, and in the level of cooperation and support they showed one another. The implications of these findings are that traditional conceptions of *what* knowledge is needed to become competent actors in our democratic society may need reframing.

Curricular approaches

The findings of this study suggest that curriculum developers need to be aware of their diverse audiences and create materials that allow students to make connections to the content. Materials and lessons must also seek to build on the knowledge, skills and resources that children bring to their learning experience. The findings from this study support the notion that culturally relevant curricula effectively support learning among diverse populations.

Selection of curricula materials may be particularly important for students from historically marginalized populations. Terrie Epstein's (2003) work with African American adolescents revealed that students have different interpretations of historical events and differing levels of trust of historical sources based on racial and family experiences. Thus the background experiences of students cannot be separated from their study of American government, practices and principles. Programs that allow students to learn concepts and practices within a context that has meaning to them are more likely to enable students to make meaningful and lasting connections with the content. As was seen in this study, the students responded positively to an opportunity to apply principles of American republicanism and policy-making while exploring content that had meaning to them.

Curriculum developers need to be cognizant that a “one-size fits all” or “color blind” approach advocated by individuals like Hirsch, (1999) and Ravitch, (1990) are not adequate in the development of civic knowledge and identities among historically marginalized populations. Epstein found that African American students, “did not construct—a relationship between the concept of individual rights and their own and others’ contemporary civic identities,” (p. 406, 1998) largely due to a presentation of history as two separate themes of evolving democracy and oppression. Epstein argues that students need to see connections between these forces. If students from historically marginalized groups are to build conceptions of civic identity built around beliefs that they have agency in the American system, they first need to relate to the study of government and societal issues. The findings in this study support that students’ connections to the content are deeper when they are able to draw on personal and community experiences as they study American processes and principles. Thus curriculum developers need to offer material that present minority students with opportunities to make these connections. This may be done through inclusion of relevant supplemental materials or through the learning experiences embedded in the curriculum.

Conversely the findings of this study do not support the view that for minority students to make meaningful connections to content the material must be presented through an ethnic-centered approach, (Asanta, 1991; Murrell, 1993l). Although the students explored issues that were relevant to lower-income communities, they did not focus on the challenges or history of African Americans or Hispanics specifically. Providing the students with a culturally relevant learning experience appeared effective in helping the students build bridges between their own cultural and community

backgrounds and the narrative of an American government built on principles of equality, justice, fairness and citizen responsibility.

Preparation of Social Studies Candidates

The findings of this study have direct implications for teacher education programs as they prepare candidates to take on the task of citizenship education. Teacher candidates need to develop content and pedagogical knowledge, as well as an understanding of the historical, philosophical, and practical reasons for providing quality civic education to all students. In-depth study of these features needs to be integrated into the preparation of teachers, particularly social studies candidates.

Future teachers of social studies need to become well-versed and trained in the use of an array of civic education curricula that have been found to be effective vehicles of democratic citizenship education. Engaging teacher candidates in analyses of curricula, facilitation of student projects, attendance at professional development programs and first hand experiences with curricula, all offer potential to achieve these goals. Specific attention should be paid to the nature of the programs and pedagogy advanced when selecting such experiences. Guidance in selecting such programs may come from the work of Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith and Theide. The team of researchers analyzed teaching practices based on five criteria associated with effective practices to enhance civic participation. The criteria were: 1. Promotion of higher order thinking; 2. Deep and disciplined inquiry; 3. Participation in civic life; 4. Respect for diversity; 5. Ability to analyze the social problems.

Throughout this study the educational experiences observed rose to the standards set by Kahne and his colleagues. In the discussion of student knowledge and skills presented in chapter six it was established that through the use of the curriculum and the style of the teacher, the students were able to build a deep base of knowledge associated with their project. Additionally students then applied higher order thinking skills of analysis, evaluation and synthesis as they researched the problem and crafted their proposal. During the course of the study students frequently experienced democracy as a way of life as they made collective decisions, took on personal responsibilities that served the group, and supported one another in their collective effort. Lastly, the students' project enabled them to identify and explore a social issue with enough depth that many underlying reasons become apparent and they were able to propose thoughtful policy solutions. For all of these reasons it is recommended that future teachers of social studies are exposed to the *Project Citizen* curriculum as one model for democratic citizenship development.

Conceptions of Citizenship and the Project Citizen Curriculum

A final area of citizenship education that is relevant to this study is the mainstream conception of proper citizenship preparation. Most texts used in schools today promote forms of citizenship that embrace Enlightenment ideals of civic republicanism and liberalism (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). The civic republican discourse promotes adherence to laws, respect for authority, promotion of the common good and unity under the umbrella of patriotic citizenship. Liberalism on the other hand promotes respect for the rights of the individual. Most civic education texts present a conception of American

citizenship as a balancing act between these two philosophies. *Project Citizen*, the text used by the class in this study, illustrates this dynamic. Students are encouraged to work for the common good in their policy proposal, while also respecting the rule of law by following the prescribed process for policy changes. Students are also required to ensure that no one's rights will be violated by assessing their policy proposal in light of the state and U.S. Constitution. Through this process students are prepared to take up their role as "good" citizens in the American Democracy.

Conceptions of citizenship directly relate to the promise and limits of the *Project Citizen* curriculum. As demonstrated through the students' experiences and project, use of the curriculum did enable students to have many valuable learning experiences while fostering a spirit of civic republicanism. As the students noted during interviews, the problem-solving nature of the curriculum and the necessity to actively participate in the project offered them opportunities to build skills they can utilize in their academic, civic and personal lives. The curriculum also served as a vehicle for students to build upon knowledge of their community, explore their role in creating change and learn about policy-making at the local level. These outcomes are clearly positive benefits. However, the process did not allow for other expressions and realities of what it might be to be a "good" citizen in one's community.

While the civic republican and liberal discourses are an important part of American civics education, sole focus on these conceptions limits understandings of how

individuals express citizenship. Knight Abowitz and Hirsch (2006) offer a third category for citizenship conceptions, a "critical citizenship". They explain that,

> Critical discourses have in common the agenda of challenging liberal and civic republican notions of civic membership, civic identity, and forms of civic engagement. Attempting to broaden and deepen the liberal agendas of human freedom, these discourses focus specifically on exclusions based on gender, culture, ethnicity, nationality, race, sexuality, or socioeconomic class. (p. 666)

Among the four critical discourses Knight Abowitz and Harish offer the "reconstructionist discourse" has the most significance to this study. Based on this construction of citizenship, individuals should be encouraged to critically assess society and seek changes to bring about social justice. This conception is grounded in the belief that, "reconstructing U.S. political, economic, and social institutions and systems would be the only way to see democracy achieved." (2006, pp. 670-671). The students in this study were greatly impacted by circumstances of political, economic and social injustice. The crisis of urban schools is directly linked to economic and social policies that have left urban centers bereft of adequate housing, employment opportunities, health care and recreational facilities, (Anyon, 1997; Gephart, 2000; Masey & Denton, 1993). Therefore a reconstructionist discourse of citizenship would encourage the students to research existing and historical circumstances that created these conditions and ultimately call on the students to challenge existing structures while seeking improvements in their educational experience.

Without consideration of critical citizenship as a viable and worthwhile construction of what it means to be a "good" citizen, historically marginalized students

are limited in their ability to act and form complete understandings of their circumstances. The structure of the *Project Citizen* curriculum calls on students to identify a current problem and work forward in an attempt to improve the situation. Without looking back at the root causes of the situation students are left to fill in blanks and may arrive at erroneous conclusions that may actually have a negative impact. The students in the study were able to clearly and passionately articulate the problems that plagued their city. However, at no time were they asked to research historical circumstances that led to the high concentration of poverty in the city, or the long standing history of inequity of funding schools in the state. Without this information the students were left with an incomplete picture of a city that most of the students did not characterize as a functioning community. Some of the students arrived at conclusions that suggested that the people of the city were themselves flawed and thus responsible for the circumstances. Students' discussion of their city was filled with disturbing comparisons to other communities. The students perceived the people of neighboring affluent communities as making better choices and living more peacefully. Without a consideration of the deeper historical and social forces that contributed to the condition of their city most of the students where left feeling that the situation was hopeless and their only option was to leave the community behind.

In many respects, by virtue of living in the Evettston community students were disadvantaged. Changes in the educational system may lead to improvements in academic opportunities, but issues of poverty and violence in the community will still exist. Many more changes need to occur in how individuals and the community gains access to resources such as adequate and affordable housing, economically viable employment,

better drug and alcohol treatment programs, and gang intervention and prevention programs, to name a few. When it is societal structures that need to be transformed in order to bring about social justice, the *Project Citizen* curriculum alone may not be adequate. *Project Citizen* offers a pathway for active citizenship when changes sought can be achieved by working within the current economic, political and social structures but when the changes sought require a critical assessment and overhaul of existing mechanisms, the curriculum falls short. Supplemental experiences should be included that encourage students from historically marginalized populations to explore and question the current and historical dynamics in a quest for structural reforms. Actions of this nature may contribute more to the common welfare of the students' socioeconomic and ethnic communities.

Implications for Policy-makers

In the last few decades policy-makers have extended their influence into the daily happenings of the classroom on a level perhaps never seen before. In New Jersey policy changes impacting the schooling experiences of the students in this study came from the local Board of Education, the State Legislature, the State Department of Education and the NJ Supreme Court. Policies implemented have impacted everything from the curriculum, per student expenditures, public pre-K, teacher certification requirements and the level of security afforded a school. Additionally, federal policies have played a big part in shaping the education of all students, but with specific consequences for students attending schools as the one in this study. The findings of this study present implications

for policy-makers at the local and state levels of government, as well as at the federal level.

Local and State Policy-makers

At the local level there are several actions that the school board should consider in light of the findings of this study. More support for professional development among faculty is essential. As discussed, teachers need training in curricula and methodologies that have been shown to be effective in addressing minority and low-income students and in citizenship preparation. Local school boards play a pivotal role in defining and allowing for professional development among the faculty and are therefore urged to facilitate quality opportunities for faculty whenever possible.

A second recommendation for the school board relates to the findings on student knowledge building. The study clearly revealed that students need prolonged opportunities to engage in the study of topics so that an adequate depth of knowledge may be obtained. School boards can address this finding by supporting restructuring of curriculum to eliminate superfluous information and identify key topics to be explored in depth. The school day can also be restructured to provide for in-depth learning opportunities through measures such as block scheduling. Additional actions can be pursued at either the school board level or though the state level, as will be discussed next.

Both the local Board of Education and the State Legislature have the authority to craft policies and make decisions affecting the nature of the education received by the

students of Evettston. Within the authority of these agencies are decisions over course and graduation requirements. Current NJ curriculum standards mandate the study of U.S. History and Civics at all grades, however the nature of this study is relatively open to interpretation. Kahne, et. al. (2000) describe tensions that exist between those who view the primary goal of the social studies to be to build knowledge and develop skills of critical thinking and those who embrace more broad goals of citizenship education to include opportunities to participate in civic life and identify, analyze and address social problems. The findings of this study indicate that these goals can be compatible.

The students in this study built knowledge of policy-making and the identified problem, developed tools of inquiry, exercised critical thinking, analyzed social problems, and all while engaged in practices that fostered democracy as a way of life. However a shortcoming was that the students were not adding to their knowledge of U.S. History. Therefore two primary recommendations are offered to policy-makers at either, or both, the local and state level. First, civics should be required as a stand alone course in both middle school and high school, following and building upon a study of U.S. history and government. Second, required civics courses should adopt curricula such as *Project Citizen* that aid students in the development of authentic citizenship skills. N.J. has already recognized the need for active citizenship experiences for students with the inclusion of a new standard that requires:

> All students will acquire the skills needed to be active, informed citizens who value diversity and promote cultural understanding by working collaboratively to address the challenges that are inherent in living in an interconnected world. (NJ Core Content Curriculum Standards, 2009)

School districts in N.J. must now be guided in the selection of curricula that will effectively fulfill this standard. *Project Citizen* holds promise for all students in meeting the new standard, but is particularly relevant to districts within settings of economic, social and political isolation.

An additional area that is within the jurisdiction of state and local policy-makers deals with assessment requirements. Assessment measures designed to test students knowledge through primarily objective methods of assessment fall short are not adequate to capture the wealth of knowledge and skills students may possess. The students in this study demonstrated that they possessed many skills associated with civic engagement, such as the ability to work cooperatively with others to achieve a goal, provide leadership and problem solve. However these are not skills measured by the N.J. state tests. The students also built a strong base of knowledge related to their topic through investigation of numerous sources, yet the students were not called upon to demonstrate this knowledge when they took the NJ Grade Eight Assessment. Instead the students were constantly told that they were attending a school where students failed to meet AYP and the school was in “need of improvement”. Perhaps if students were assessed through more authentic means that allowed them to exhibit the knowledge and skills they possessed, such pronouncements of their education would not occur.

The potential impact of how these students might perceive themselves can not be overestimated. As the findings of this study revealed, the students were painfully aware of the “inadequacies” of their education and the poor test scores and ranking of their school compared to other schools in the state. Policy-makers need to recognize that true

assessments of student proficiencies must come in varied forms that provide means for students to display knowledge they hold. At both the local and state level, assessment measures should be revised in light of the recommendations and findings of this study.

Federal Policy-makers

While local and state agencies have tremendous influence over the education of these students, the policy initiative that may have had the most significance to this study did not come from the local or state level, but from the federal government in the form of NCLB. Since the passage of NCLB in 2002, all states have been required to adopt accountability measures to ensure that adequate yearly progress toward student proficiency of state curriculum standards is occurring. Under the legislation, schools that do not make "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) are identified as "needing improvement" and are subject to both financial support and sanctions. Sanctions are increased with each year that a school fails to meet AYP and may lead to the "reconstitution" of a school, the removal and/or transfer of administrators and faculty. Additionally test scores and progress towards AYP are made public for every school district. For all of these reasons, schools have a vested interest in meeting AYP.

The emphasis on state testing has negatively affected social studies education across the nation, but this scenario has created potentially devastating consequences for urban schools. Not only has the quantity of time spent on civics and social studies education been diminished but so has the quality. Kahne et al. (2000) found that when teachers are engaged in preparing students for state tests, they provide significantly fewer opportunities for students to develop skills and dispositions associated with democratic

citizenship. Larry Cuban has also found that schools feel pressure to cut back on or eliminate programs that do not directly prepare students for high stakes tests, (as cited in Willis, 2002).

Schools such as the one in this study that have failed to meet AYP for several years are at risk of responding to these pressures. I have personally seen social studies programs put on hold in failing urban schools for several months prior to state testing. During the time of this study, other teachers in the social studies department at the school were enlisted in test preparation, even though currently there is not a state social studies assessment in N.J. Time for social studies instruction was being utilized to prep students for the state Language Arts assessment. The only reason the class under investigation was allowed to proceed was because it was an elective course that students took in addition to their regular social studies class. Policy makers need to recognize and address the adverse impact high stakes testing is having on citizenship preparation in urban schools. Remedies must create conditions that allow schools to support effective democracy education.

As education in NJ is shaped by policy at three levels of government, the findings of the study have implications for policy-makers at the local, state and federal level. Support of professional development and a restructuring of curricula or the school day to allow time for in-depth investigation of topics are the province of the local board of education. Changes in course requirements to include a mandatory course in civics can come from either the local or state level, as can adjustments to assessment measure to allow for authentic demonstrations of students knowledge and skills. Lastly, only the

federal government can bring reforms to NCLB so that teachers and school districts do not feel so confined to teach to the test, even at the exclusion of importance citizenship education.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The structure of this study offered insights into many aspects of urban and citizenship education. In many respects the findings of this study are generalizeable to similar populations. The characteristics of the school are shared by many schools serving lower-income students in urban areas. Challenges and opportunities afforded to the students in the study are also similar to those experienced by lower-income, minority children dwelling in urban areas across America. However, although some of the findings from this study have broad implications, as outlined above, in other respects the structure of the study may make replication in other classes difficult. Additionally, the structure also limited the potential for other areas to be explored. In this final section I will explore some of these limitations and offer suggestions for future research.

The success of this classroom was attributed to two main factors, the implementation of the *Project Citizen* curriculum and the teaching style and practices of the teacher. Assumptions can not be made that the implementation of *Project Citizen* at other urban sites with similar populations would produce the same results. While *Project Citizen* has design elements that foster inquiry, collaboration, critical thinking, and the use of skills associated with democratic participation and engagement in one's community, in the hands of an unskilled teacher the results could be very different. The teacher in this study was herself an African American woman, who is a dynamic educator

with many years of experience teaching in the school district prior to implementing this curriculum. The teacher also attended a full-year civics education training program that focused on content and methodologies based on best practices in social studies education. In order to better understand the value of implementing this curriculum among minority, urban students, future research projects should take into consideration the role of a teacher's race, a teacher's pedagogical style, the professional experience of a teacher, and the extent of prior training a teacher has in the use of the curriculum. Studying several teachers who differ on the above mentioned characteristics as they implement the curriculum would allow for a basis of comparison and aid in the identification of common themes across classrooms, as well as identifying factors that may account for differences.

A second limitation of the study was the fact that this class was offered to the students as an elective course. This meant that many of the students chose to participate in the experience, an opportunity that is relatively novel for eighth graders. Other students were identified by the teacher and invited to join the class. Students who fell into this category were identified by the teacher as having potential and needing a push. Other students were instructed by their parents to participate in the class and a few students were assigned to the class by the administration for scheduling reasons or because they were new to the district. These varied reasons did produce a diverse student population in terms of skill, ability, interest and motivation levels, but none the less, this was a special class not available to the rest of the eighth grade. Conducting a similar study among a required, heterogeneously mixed class would help control for the influence this factor may have had on the students' performance.

Another aspect to consider is that the study was conducted among a relatively homogenous population in terms of the students' minority and socio-economic status. Thus the cooperation exhibited among the students may in part have come from a common group consciousness. Research of ethnically and/or socio-economically diverse classes would allow for researchers to observe to what extent ethnic and class identity played a role in the students' experience. The study also only provided a "snap shot" of the students' educational experience. A follow-up to the study would be useful to better understand the process of civic identity and the significance this class experience may have had for the students. Longitudinal studies would also provide insight into this process.

A final suggestion for future research is to conduct a similar study among a high school population. As was noted, the students in this study exhibited a strong inclination to be civically disposed and were actively engaged in this academic experience. Studying an older population would offer insight to those students' experiences and attitudes as they mature and move through the educational system. This research is particularly important as many students in this demographic do not complete high school and the gap in standardized test scores widens among white and minority students at the high school level.

Conclusion

The students in the study experienced distinctly different contexts that shaped their lives. Many of the students' daily experiences were characterized by threats to their security, disruptions to their learning, and disappointments in their peers and many of the

adults in their lives. Many of the students shared their belief that a brighter future was possible only by leaving the city. In spite of experiences that would seemingly challenge anyone's sense of optimism and civic spirit, the students maintained qualities such as these. However, if the students follow national trends, they are not likely to engage in the type of activities, (i.e. membership formal community organizations, holding public office, lobbying government, etc.), as adults that help to bring substantial and fundamental changes to their communities. Trends also suggest that some of the students are not likely to complete their high school education or pursue higher education. Therefore the final implications of the study lies in a question; given that students from historically marginalized populations, who attended a failing school, willingly pursued a journey of high academic standards and civic engagement, how can this be transformed into an on-going pursuit and not just an anomaly along their educational and civic path?

This is a question that should be of significance to all who are concerned with or engaged in the preparation of our nation's next generation of citizens or with the welfare of lower-income and historically marginalized populations. These students were ready, willing and able to embark upon responsible and active citizenship, and to participate in an academically challenging class. The challenge now is to help them maintain this course. Viewing the students' experience in light of the critical frame outlined in chapter two, I offer that the classroom experience was an intervening force in the lives of these students. Such an experience has the potential to mediate the effects of Bourdieu's notion of a circular relationship where structural forces "produce structured subjective dispositions that produce structured actions which, in turn, tend to reproduce objective structure," (as quoted in MacLeod, 1995, p. 15). In this instance the students' experience

may have offered them the potential to develop subjective dispositions inclined towards academic and civic achievement. I hope the findings drawn from the study may inform all interested parties of the potential to provide such experiences for students.

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Web Resources:

Core Knowledge Foundation, http://www.coreknowledge.org/CK/index.htm

Great Schools Website http://www.greatschools.net/

National Center for Learning and Citizenship, http://servicelearning.org/static/link/pages/669.htm

NonprofitVote.org, (http://www.nonprofitvote.org/Voter-Turnout-2008.html)

Sperling's Best Places, http://www.bestplaces.net/

United States Census Bureau (2000) www.census.gov

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1) Tell me about something that has happened at Jackson or in Evettston that has concerned you. (If student needs more prompting – prompting questions 1A)

    - Why did this concern you?
    - Did you speak to other people about it? If so who?
    - Did you try to learn more about this issue?

        If YES:
        - Were you able to get more information?
        - If yes, how did you learn more?
        - What did you do with the information you got?
        - How did you know who to get info from or where to go to get more information?

        If NO:
        - Why do you think you didn't try to learn more?
        - Do you think if you had known where to go or who to go to you would have tried to learn more?
        - Do you have any ideas now of who you could speak to or where you could go to find out more information about the issue?

1A) Prompting questions
- Do you think everything is fine the way it is?
- What if you could change something, what might it be?
    - Why would you choose that issue?
- How would you try to learn more about the issue?
    - Who would you speak to or where would you go to learn more?
    - If no ideas – would you like to learn more about who or where to go to get help with school or community issues?
    - Why or why not?
    - How could you learn more?

2) I know you have discussed the idea of community in class, can you tell me how you would explain what a community is?

3) Now can you tell me what it means to you to be a citizen in a community?

4) Do you think it is important for individuals to fulfill responsibilities to their communities?
    - Why or why not?
    - If needed – what happens when people don't fulfill their responsibilities?

5) What rights do you believe you have as an American?
   - Can you give me an example of how these rights impact our daily lives. Maybe you have an example from your own life?
     - If needed ask, Well, do you have a right to privacy? Where do you have this right?
   - Where do our rights come from?
   - What can one do if they believe their rights are being violated?
   - Can you give me an example(s) in history where individuals took action when they felt their rights were not being upheld?
   - Do you believe that all people are entitled to equal rights? Why?
   - Can you think of any instances when it is okay to violate laws because they are unjust?

6) Tell me about your experience with Project Citizen
   - What did you like about the program?
   - What didn't you like?
   - How has this experience been different from your other classes?

Appendix B

Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group # 1 – The students' views of their school and community. Discussion of how students think others perceive their community, what factors contribute to these perceptions and how these views make them feel.

Focus Group # 2 – The students' understandings of their right to an education, the source of this right and how far the states' obligation to the student should go to ensure they receive their education. (Low test scores at Evettston schools and the general quality of education is the focus of the students' project).

Focus Group # 3 – The students' responsibility in complying with school and community rules and laws, and in improving their school and community. As well as students reflections on what power they might have or not have to affect change. Where do they get this power? What limits their power?

Focus Group # 4 – Continuation of previous topics, or new topics drawn from the students' experiences in the classroom and/or with their project.

Appendix C

The Students' Project

The following pages are exact copies of the students' textual portion of their *Project Citizen* portfolio. The text is divided into the four sections as required by the curriculum. The sections are: The Problem, Alternative Policies, Class Policy and Action Plan.

The Problem

In 2007 the test scores at Maxson dropped slightly in Language Arts from 2006, which put the school at risk. The scores were as follows: Partial Proficient 55.1%, Proficient 42.7%, and Advanced Proficient score stayed the same 2.2%. Mathematics scores slightly improved: Partial Proficient was 57.1%, Proficient 40.3%, and Advanced was 2.6%. Ironically the same year, Maxson Middle School was in the 25.4 percent of New Jersey's total schools that did not make the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), while 74.6% of New Jersey's total 2,430 schools made the AYP In 2006, 73.5% of the total schools made the AYP, an increase from 2005, in which 66% of schools did not fulfill the AYP requirements. ***Maxson's test score in 2006 in Language Arts 50.4% Partial Proficient, 47.4% Proficient, and 2.2% Advanced Proficient. In mathematics the scores were a bit worse: Partial Proficient grade was 64.6%, Proficient 32.9 and Advance Proficient 2.5%.*** Internationally, according to the best education world/ wide the United States is ranked number 18 out of 24 nations, which places our, nation in the bottom third. New Jersey is recognized and ranked as one of the top five (5) states according to the Smartest State Award report of 2006-2007 that ranked New Jersey as the fourth state in the nation. This award, assesses students according to how each state stacks up against / compares to the national average.

Plainfield's education rating is based on its public schools' test results, "10" being rated the best. In the state of New Jersey, Plainfield's city rating is a "2", according to GreatSchools.com graph and review, while both Maxson and Hubbard Middle Schools have a rating of "1". This simply means that our school test score results were and still are extremely poor / low and are not making the grade. These statements from our

research provide evidence that low-test scores are a serious problem in our community, city, state and nation. Even though this is so, this problem is not severely widespread throughout the state of New Jersey. However, as a nation this is a problem because we are lacking all together. The proof is that we rank 18 out of 24 nations as already mentioned.

This is a serious problem that federal, state, and the local governments are already addressing. As of today, Maxson Middle School is in danger of a state takeover, due to our low test scores and the fact that we haven't made the AYP in 7 years. There are parents, students, teachers, administrators, the board members and as well as the mayor and the interim superintendent that are concerned with this issue and should take part of the responsibility for solving the problem. According to the 225 surveys that we have conducted, these individuals also think and believe they should take part in ensuring that students living and attending Plainfield Middle and High schools should improve their attitude towards receiving a quality education because they deserve it, which will ultimately improve their test scores.

Currently there is an adequate law dealing with this educational issue, which is called the ***No Child Left Behind Act*** that was passed in 2002 and became the law that redefined the federal governments role in K-12 education, and is being enforced throughout the nation, however it has not made much of a difference in Plainfield, New Jersey.

The disagreement we identified with this problem is that many people in the community do understand the nature of it but many people do not want to confront it. Numerous people that disagree with Plainfield making the grade hold negative attitudes

towards the Plainfield's schools system. Several parents who want their child to have a better education will pay for their child to attend other schools while refusing to send their child to Plainfield's public middle and high schools. "Parents have a constitutional right to choose the type and character of education that they feel is best suited for their child." A parent we surveyed stated, "Some parents don't care [if the school makes the grade] because they know kids in Plainfield don't learn anything."

Teachers, administrators, board members and the superintendent as well as some students and parents agree with the problem and have taken an interest in solving the problem. They believe we should take action towards finding a solution to help improve our district's low tests scores. We had three grade level assembly programs with the administrators addressing students passing the NJASK standardized tests. New Jersey Ask mathematics and English workbooks were order this year for all the students to help them prepare for the test we took at the end of April 2008. If we satisfy and make the AYP there will not be a school takeover in our district. A benefit would be a much-needed increase in funding. The school climate will become less chaotic, more focus, and productive because learning would be taking place in the classes while teachers are teaching. These would be a few advantages for "making the grade." Plainfield would also be looked as a school where learning takes place. This would change the negative attitudes, people hold about the Plainfield School District.

There are also some individuals who do not agree with this problem. Some students and teachers do not even think this is a problem and do not want to confront it. The disadvantages would be that the state might have to provide funding for our school district. Teachers will also have to improve their attitudes and possibly have to receive a

higher education to be able to meet the districts new standards. Students will be pushed to excel in their academic studies, which may also be an advantage.

The government has already adopted the view of these individuals but it has not been adequately enforced. All government agencies at the federal, state, and local governments are responsible for dealing with this problem since the ***No Child Left Behind Act*** became a law in 2002. All schools are expected to meet the AYP. The state government is handling this problem by sending auditors to schools and assessing teachers, the learning environment and the students' abilities by performing the Special Review Assessment (SRA). They make recommendations on "major revisions" that schools have to make so they can "make the grade." For example, an audit reported, "Inadequate staffing and resources, organizational problems and a lack of training and communications could impair the department's ability to do its job."

Alternative Policies

The first alternative solution the class came up with is to issue parents a substantial monetary fine. If their child receives a grade of a "D" or lower in any subject they will have to pay a fine of $100.00. If a student receives a "D" because they are not doing the work and / or fooling around, the parent will be fined $150.00. If the child receives an "F" because of the aforementioned reasons the parents will be fined $300.00 - $350.00. If the student receives a grade below 40 percent, the parents will receive a fine of $500.00. If in any case the parent is unable to pay the fine, they would be expected and mandated to come to school and sit in the failing subjects / classes with their child. This will either both inconvience the parent's and/ or hurt their pockets. This policy will ensure all students are coming to school to work and not to play. Any child that receives a Disciplinary Case Report (DCR) for misbehavior will be fined from $150.00 to $ 1000.00 based on the infraction and repeated offenses.

The advantages of this proposed policy is: it forces parents to be more involved with their child's learning and education. The parent will become more aware of how their child is performing in school as well as an increase in their parental and teacher contact time. The students' behavior walking the halls and as well in classes will change in school. Students will become more serious about their learning, increase their study time and put more effort in their schoolwork. Collected fine monies would be added to the school's budget to help with school supplies expenses. Lastly, this policy will reduce school suspensions while simultaneously improving student's behavior throughout the school.

The disadvantages of this alternative policy is that parents would have to pay the fine using household money that could be used to pay for their child's food, shelter, and clothing. Working parents would have to work overtime to replace the household money to pay this expense. Working parents that would have to spend time at school will possibly jeopardize their jobs and lose money from their paycheck. Parents receiving government assistance would be expected to come to school to sit with their child in class during school hours. The state will reduce the fine monies from their monthly government checks / stipends. Board members and the Administrators will support this policy because the money will be going into the district and pressuring students to behave and academically perform better in school.

The people who are most likely to oppose this policy are the low-income parents and parents who receive government assistance. They will not be able to pay the fine since they barely make enough to provide for their basic needs. Therefore they would not have any extra money to pay the fine. Another person who will not support this policy is the mayor because if she supports this, it may interfere with her campaign of getting re-elected. The students who are doing badly in school would also oppose this policy because it will put pressure on them to do work and they may not be able to perform on grade level or do work.

Our second alternative policy is to have a Saturday Tutorial Program. Teachers that will receive extra pay for teaching and some of the funds from endorsing the first alternative policy using the fine money to help pay the tutors. A Saturday tutorial session will give students additional assistance in the subjects that they have trouble with. It will also give them extra learning time to make better grades. Students will have the time to

become more confident in their schoolwork. The Saturday program will also help get students off the streets and causing mischief.

The disadvantages of the said policy would have the funds from the school budget to pay for the teachers' overtime. Since the Plainfield School District is already experiencing budget cuts, the district may not have enough funds to pay the teachers for their overtime work. This year Plainfield is six million dollars over the budget. They have rift teachers, secretaries, and other staff positions to cut cost. Another disadvantage is that it will take students' personal time away and disrupt teachers' private time. The individuals' that support this policy are the Mayor, since kids would be kept off the streets early in the morning, many teachers that are looking for different programs to earn extra cash, teachers, and the parents that cannot afford to pay for private tutorial sessions.

Primarily students and some teachers would oppose this policy are because both feel weekends are their time to do no work. "Why Saturdays?" Would be their rallying cry.

Our third alternative proposed policy is for students to receive private tutoring sessions or attend either the Huntington Learning Center or Sylvan. A special budget is set up for Maxson Middle School children to go to the Huntington Learning Center or Sylvan Learning Center. Students that are eligible for either program today are free or reduced lunch schedule where they attend schools that have not made the AYP, according to the NCLB Law.

The advantages of this policy are that the student will have more one on one time with a teacher. Tutors get to verify and focus on the student's problems with their school subjects. The students will become more confident in their schoolwork and their grades

will improve. Thus students' attitudes about school and learning will change by becoming positive since they can now do the schoolwork.

The disadvantages of this policy are that some students will not qualify for attending either program but need the extra assistance. However, they may be able to afford receiving extra help due to their economical status. The students that do not qualify to attend the programs free will have to pay. Another disadvantage would be that the students may not have time go for tutoring sessions after school or their parents simply cannot afford it.

The individuals that support this policy are the tutoring programs, the parents that can afford the payments, and the teachers. The individuals that wouldn't support this policy would be the parents that are unable to afford the payments.

Class Policy

Reconstructing the Plainfield school district is the policy our class feels would best address the issue of our school not making the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) grade. This process consists of enforcing the No Child Left Behind (NCLB), revising the curriculum, creating homogenous classes, correcting student teacher ratio in the class, reducing class sizes, managing, redirecting the budget and complying with the law. As a class, we reviewed numerous solutions and felt this is the best possible policy. Although we believe the NCLB needs to be revised, this document only confronts the local issues we have identified, and are currently experiencing.

Section 1119. A1 of the NCLB clearly states, "Each local educational agency receiving assistance under this part shall ensure that all teachers hired after such day and teaching in a program supported with funds under this part are highly qualified". However 10% of the teachers in Plainfield, New Jersey 2005-2006 were not highly qualified in the content areas they were teaching, partly because of the overall budget in Plainfield. Often, the teachers in the Plainfield School District are required to teach more than one academic subject. Under the highly qualified teacher provisions of the NCLB, teachers in eligible, districts who are highly qualified in at least one subject will have three years to become highly qualified in the additional subjects they teach. In Plainfield we can not afford to allow teachers three years to get their credentials. This flexibility does not benefit the students; it puts students at a mental disadvantage for three consecutive years, by preventing them from gaining the required knowledge needed to past the state test so the school could make the grade (AYP) in that given subject.

The Plainfield school district is not entirely at fault. We understand that the district does not have sufficient funds to hire highly qualified teachers, because they are not receiving enough money from the state; however they are still held liable, and should not take this as a sign to give up on making future progress. Congress sets the funding for NCLB each year, however since the enactment; they have yet to fulfill their promises. While President Bush's Financial Year 2008 budget would increase NCLB funding by $1 billion, the President's budget still shortchanges NCLB by a total of $70.9 billion. "The American Foundation of Teachers (AFT) research estimates that a 70.9 million short change could provide enough money to improve, more than 1,700 secondary schools that are struggling to meet the standards by creating smaller school settings and providing after school tutoring programs. The money could also help improve more than 7,000 of the elementary schools that are struggling and not meeting high standards and the AYP; lowering class size and hiring specialists in reading and math instruction to provide model lessons for teachers and provide in-class training to up and coming new teachers instructional and classroom management techniques." Since there is a financial burden, we clearly understand why more funds at this time cannot be sent to the Plainfield School District.

Studies have shown and proven that smaller class sizes and homogenous groupings of students in a class can improve test scores exponentially. With students separated according to their academic level, teachers better directing their lessons and challenging the students will provide Plainfield with a better opportunity to make the grade / AYP. It would also give students the chance to work with other students on their level, strengthen their self-esteem, and feel more confident about their work, instead of it being compared to students performing on a higher academic level. Gradually students will develop the necessary skills to progress and perform at or above the standards.

Another contributing factor why students are not making the grade is because the Plainfield school district curriculum does not align with the state standards. The curriculum has been changed every year, and there has not been a consistent plan of action. Students are not learning the necessary information to acquire the needed knowledge to pass the state test. Absenteeism of teachers and having long term substitutes that are not teaching the students, contribute to the students missing the work they should have received over time, again, to pass the test. Students are taken state tests based on the revised curriculum, and not on the previous curriculum; they are not properly or efficiently prepared to complete the work.

We feel The Broad of Education should be responsible for carrying out our suggested policy. Collectively the Board of Education has legal responsibility for the operation of the entire district and the people living in Plainfield. The Board establishes the policies under which the school district is operated. What's being asked of the Board of Education is not too much. Overall we are just asking that student rights be ensured because they are governed under the New Jersey State Constitution. Article 8 section 4 of the state Constitution states: "Students have a right to a thorough and efficient education". This means highly qualified teachers should be teaching the students at Maxson Middle School and preparing them to have a successful future career.

Action Plan

Reconstructing the district by revising the curriculum, reducing class sizes, creating homo-genius classes, hiring highly qualified content area teachers, managing/ redirecting the budget and utilizing all classrooms during the school day at all times is the main activity/ purpose of our plan. We believe this plan would solve the problem because the building would be fully utilized 98% of the time and highly qualified teachers are teaching. Students would be expected to learn, so as a district we will make the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) grade. When this plan is fully implemented it would create a better learning environment for all the students attending Plainfield Public School District.

Our class is looking to attend the next school board meeting to present our information to the board members, community members, teachers and the media in attendance. We are going to strongly request they hire highly qualified teachers that have the proper credentials. It is a mental disadvantage for the students in Plainfield to continue to have classes taught by teachers that are not certified and qualified to teach in the content they are not highly qualified in. Over the past three years, some classes were / are taught by teachers that are not highly qualified in the content area. At the same time, it is unfortunate that the curriculum is not currently aligning with the state standards; when the test is administered students have not been properly prepared to take the test. As a result the school will continue not to meet the state standards if we continue to operate at this level. We are asking that we fix this problem immediately.

During the hiring of new highly qualified teachers parents should be included in the process. Many parents should be involved because they are concerned about who is teaching their child; they should want their child to have a quality education. Before a new teacher is hired, they should do a model lesson during the school day so they would know what the

students are like before they start working at the school. New teachers will not have any surprises about the behavior of the students they are expected to teach. We would also like to recommend the school district offer comparable salaries to competing urban districts that are recruiting the highly qualified teachers, so they could work here ate Plainfield.

We would also like to see all the rooms in every building fully utilized at least 98% of the time with the teachers teaching in their qualified subjects. This would prevent students from roaming the hallways and vandalizing empty unlocked classrooms. If students are focused on learning and getting quality work done, they will not have time to destroy the classes. By doing this, we could be better prepared for the state test earlier in the school year.

Reducing class sizes so there are fewer distractions during the class time. Currently there are 33 students to one teacher in some of the classes; when the state average clearly states that there should be 18-22 students to one teacher in a classroom. In the larger classrooms there are far too many distractions and quality learning hardly takes place. Teachers should hold a certain attendance to maintain their jobs.

Many community members that are involved in the school system are aware of the extremely low, and constant declining test scores over the past four years. Eight elementary schools, the two middle schools and the high schools are just not making the AYP grade. Immediate changes need to go into affect, according to the test results. It appears that students are not learning therefore the district is in danger of a state takeover.

Some influential individuals and groups that will support our proposed policy are parents, most students, teachers, and administrators. Out of the 340 conducted surveys, all the teachers and administrators that we spoke to agreed that the low-test scores prevent us from making the AYP grade and this is a district wide problem. After reading the surveys, we believe student

performance is affected due to over crowded classrooms and class disruptions. We also know many teachers agreed the district curriculum needs improvement in many areas, especially in science and math departments since we do not have a solid curriculum in these two content areas since 2001.

To win support of the parents, students, teachers, administrators, members of the board, and the superintendent is to have the school make the grade, raise test scores and make the AYP. It is essential that we hire highly qualified teachers without allowing them three years to receive their credentials to teach in a core content area. We have lost valuable teaching time by having students learning information that is not on the test. It is also important that Plainfield offer salaries comparable to other urban districts like East Orange and Newark, New Jersey. Their first year teacher's salary starts at $48,000 or more; and the top of their pay scale is $94,000 which is ultimately $10,000 more then what Plainfield pays their teachers. According to the salary guide it does not give teachers an incentive to further their education because there is only a $1,000 increase in pay between each degree.

Influential individuals and groups who might oppose our proposed policy are very few students are teachers that are not highly qualified in their teaching content. This is due to the many changes the school district is looking to implement year-round. This can be very frustrating for those students that would have to adjust to the new learning community / environment and / or possibly make a new start. The few students who oppose may feel we are placing a burden on their ability to come to school to hang out with their friends and / or roam the hallways.

We may be able to win the support of these people by explaining how important it is for them to make the AYP. We feel the district is wasting money / funds on students who do not

pass the tests. Low-test scores suggest that students are not learning. Why should home owners / taxpayers waste their money for non-sense? We believe these are the same thoughts that are put into consideration by the state. Again, the Plainfield Public School District is in danger of a state takeover. This means that the state will control the school district with no help from any of the board members. Governor Corzine agreed to budget cuts. This means that money will be taken from the district. In a current newspaper article, it stated, "that schools making the AYP will receive more funds. Schools not making the AYP will not receive additional assistance." Therefore it is pertinent that our Plainfield School District get our act together. We can do this if we make the necessary changes to make the grade (AYP). We definitely need the funds, a solid curriculum plan, and highly qualified teachers to complete our task. We must make the grade!

Influential government officials or agencies that are willing to support our proposed policy are the state officials, the mayor, city legislatures and board members of Plainfield Board of Education. Every one would feel it is critical for the Plainfield Public Schools to make the AYP because no one wants the state to come in and take over the school. This will clearly indicate that the superintendent, administrators, teachers and parents are not looking for ways to improve the academics in the buildings to provide sufficient support to teach the students.

We can gain every ones support by consistently and continuously improving the test scores anywhere between five – ten percent so the schools will remain in safe harbor. Growth and better test scores shows and indicate that the grades are consistently improving and the appropriate action is taking place in the schools to enhance the quality of educations of the students.

Influential government officials or agencies that might oppose our policy are the state officials, the governor, superintendent, administrators, and teachers because we may ask them to

do something illegal or inappropriate. Since state officials come to audit schools making sure polices and practices are aligned with state content standards and practices it is important that we do what appropriate. Just today in the Star Ledger newspaper, the expected superintendent Plainfield Board of Education Board members hired lost his placement because he did not have the proper credentials for the assignment. Governor Corzine stepped in and took serious action. "Abbott district superintendents were asked to provide their contracts to be reviewed," said Corzine, who said it is the first phase of a broader review that will be conducted by the newly installed executive county superintendents the Legislature created last year." "Wednesday, May 28, 2008 state officials rejected a Plainfield superintendent's pending contract and demanded details of the contracts in place for superintendents in the other so-called Abbott districts." This is just one example of what state officials would do if they do not like the plans the district made.

We can gain state officials support by making sure our plan again is aligned to state and local policies and guidelines. As the article stated, "under regulations, the state monitors schools spending, legislatures need to be mindful in how taxpayers dollars are spent, and state executives county superintendents will be held accountable for every contract made." Not only are people concerned about hiring highly qualified teachers it appears there is great concern about hiring qualified superintendents to run the schools. Students **must consistently** improve their test scores every year to prevent a state take over and to make sure everyone responsible is doing their job for our schools in Plainfield to make the AYP grade.