

In Defiance of Childhood?
An Exploration of Children's Activism

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Abstract:

This thesis explores child activism and the barriers to it in contemporary Canadian society. Empirically the thesis is based on a textual analysis of news media accounts concerning two child activists and on interviews with 10 children who are committed to creating social change. Through these means it was found that, despite the growing recognition of children's capabilities and competencies, notions of children as vulnerable and incompetent beings remain a powerful force in our society. These particular ideas about childhood disempower children in their day-to-day lives as their need for protection is emphasized over other rights, and children are accordingly excluded from important decision-making practices. The process of gaining access to children for the purpose of research is itself a revealing source of data in this regard as the same conditions that restrict children's autonomy in society more generally also limit their ability to learn about and participate in research studies.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
From Rhetoric to Reality: Ensuring Children’s Rights as Outlined in the CRC	2
Setting the Stage: Identifying Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks	5
<i>Theoretical Foundations: Constructivist-Structuralism</i>	6
<i>What Constitutes Childhood? Who are Children?</i>	9
<i>Defining Activism</i>	11
Ambiguity and Anxiety: Constructing the Powerless Child	12
<i>Rights vs. Protections</i>	13
<i>Trouble vs. In Trouble (The Risk vs. At Risk)</i>	18
<i>Private vs. Public</i>	27
Children’s Competency, Power, Agency and the Demise of Childhood?	
Two Recent Trends	34
<i>Children as Social Actors</i>	34
<i>The Disappearance of Childhood</i>	46
Research Questions and Methodological Approach: The Use of Textual Analysis and Interviews	52
Exploring Cultural Constructions of Child Activists: A Textual Analysis of Media Reports	55
<i>General Findings of the Textual Analysis</i>	59
<i>Exploring the Trends: Media’s Role in Reproducing Dominant Cultural Constructions</i>	63
Listening to Children: The Perspectives of Child Activists Regarding Childhood, Activism and Cross-Generational Relationships	66
<i>Description of the Sample</i>	67
<i>Overview of Research Findings</i>	69
<i>Influence or Coercion? The Role of Parents and Other Adults in Children’s Activism</i>	70
<i>‘Age Sucks!’ Exploring the Similarities and Differences Between Children’s Activism and that of Adults</i>	81
<i>Children’s Power: Recognizing Challenges, Limitations and Abilities</i>	91
<i>Balancing Responsibility, Empathy and Play: What it Means to be a Child</i>	98

Table of Contents (Continued)

Power and Ethics: A Discussion of Research Procedures and Their Implications for Children's Autonomy	102
<i>The Role of Gatekeepers: Controlling the Research Agenda</i>	104
<i>Who Has the Power? Exploring the Research Relationship</i>	113
<i>Is There Need for Special Ethical Guidelines for Children?</i>	129
Conclusion	133
Appendix A ~ Original Consent Form	142
Appendix B ~ School Consent Form	146
Appendix C ~ Other Consent Form	151
Appendix D ~ Recruiting Methods	157
Appendix E ~ Recruitment Flyer	166
Appendix F ~ Interviewee Profiles	167
Appendix G ~ Interview Guide	174
Appendix H ~ Child Activism Web Page	175
Works Cited	183

Introduction

This thesis examines children's activism. Children's engagement with social and political issues in the public sphere has rarely caught the attention of academics, although numerous examples can be found in contemporary society and throughout history. In some areas of the globe there is a fairly long history of children's working groups that are created by children themselves and are aimed at bettering the conditions of children's employment. Another example of children's activism took place in 1976 when large numbers of African children participated in protests against the reigning apartheid regime. More recently, school children in the United Kingdom joined demonstrations that opposed the war in Iraq. Such activism is generally incongruous with our cultural ideals about what it means to be a child and thus challenges people's preconceptions about children and their capabilities. Children's political actions may simply be regarded as the outcome of adult manipulation. In other cases, their activist efforts are interpreted as 'bad behaviour' and children have accordingly been shamed and punished.

In this study, I will first review relevant academic literature. While this body of work provides a fairly thorough account of social constructions of childhood, there is little information directly pertaining to child activists and thus I am left with several questions. Firstly, what are common cultural understandings of child activists and how do these relate to more general ideas about childhood? To explore this issue, I will examine media accounts of two Canadian child activists. My second set of questions relate more broadly to the experiences of child activists and how society responds to them – how did these children become activists, and what resistances have they faced (if any)? I also want to learn how child activists define childhood and how this compares

with conventional, adult conceptions. To investigate these issues, I will analyze interviews that I have conducted with 10 child activists. Through these means I will address an important gap in the sociological literature related to childhood. Furthermore, by investigating whether children are able to effectively exercise their rights as set out in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* this research will also contribute to ongoing political discussion of this important issue.

From Rhetoric to Reality: Ensuring Children's Rights as Outlined in the CRC

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) is the most “universally accepted human rights instrument in history”, having been ratified by every nation in the world with only two exceptions, the United States and Somalia (CEE/CIS “Convention”). Drafted in the late 1980s, the *Convention* aimed to create a fixed standard of human rights for children, who were classified as all persons under the age of 18. While one prevailing theme of the document was an obligation for acceding parties to acknowledge children's need for special care and assistance in light of their “physical and mental immaturity” (United Nations 2003), in counterpoint to this, an enormously significant aspect of this document was its recognition of the abilities and rights of children to actively engage in their citizenship. Thus, article 12 demands that “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child” (United Nations 2003). This broad notion of participation is further reinforced by article 13 which specifically addresses the child's right to freedom of expression and article 15 which declares children's rights to freely associate and assemble peacefully (United Nations 2003). The acceptance of these articles represents a global recognition of the potential, ability and inalienable right of children to freely express their ideas and to act upon these

ideas in the public sphere. By ratifying the *Convention*, acceding governments have confirmed their commitment and obligation to support and encourage children's rights in this regard.

Despite this strong statement that children should be included in decision-making processes, there remains concern that many states have not sufficiently prioritized children's rights within their national agendas. Most recently, an all-party Senate committee on human rights in Canada found that "Canada is failing to live up to its international obligations by denying children their right to influence government decisions" (Thorne 2007). Based on their study that sought to explore whether the *CRC* had been appropriately implemented in Canada and whether children were benefiting from this international agreement (Andreychuck and Fraser 2007), the Senate committee concluded that children remain a "voiceless segment of Canadian society" (Thorne 2007). In large part, the committee attributed this reality to a lack of political will to implement the agreement which Canada ratified twenty-five years ago. This dilemma is compounded by the fact that Canadian citizens are generally unaware of children's rights as set out in the *Convention* (Thorne 2007). Thus it would seem that despite its important status as the first ever "legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights – civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights" (UNICEF "Introduction"), the *Convention's* potential has yet to be fully realized.

As nearly all nations in the world have at least symbolically acknowledged the capabilities and rights of children to actively engage in their citizenship, it is essential for researchers to explore what obstacles confront children who attempt to exercise these rights and how these difficulties can be overcome. Since significant barriers to the implementation of the *CRC* seem to be a lack of knowledge and political determination

both within government and within the general public, an important step in ensuring its success will be to disseminate knowledge regarding the extent to which children have the potential to make positive contributions to our social and political environment.

Accordingly, in this thesis I will explore the subject of child activism through a variety of means. The ultimate goal is to generate greater awareness and discussion in academic, public and government arenas about questions of children's participatory rights. Based on the literature review and data collected for this study, I will argue that social conditions in our modern, Western world disempower children. Despite growing recognition of children's capabilities and competencies, prevailing notions of children as vulnerable and incompetent beings remain a powerful force in sustaining the relationship that exists between children and adults that precludes children from having a voice. Thus children are excluded from important decision-making processes as their need for protection is emphasized over other rights.

The thesis will proceed as follows. I will begin by outlining broader theoretical perspectives regarding structure and agency that have guided this research initiative. Next, I will discuss how I will define two key concepts for the purposes of this study, 'children' and 'activism'. This will be followed by a review of the sociological literature pertaining to children and childhood. The socially-constructed nature of the terms 'children' and 'childhood' will be highlighted, and it will be illustrated how our modern perceptions of childhood render children relatively powerless in their day-to-day lives. Next, the methodological approaches utilized for this study will be summarized. Firstly, a textual analysis of media coverage relating to two Canadian child activists was employed to further clarify how civically engaged children are perceived and represented by adults. Secondly, interviews with 10 child activists were conducted in

order to explore how children define childhood and to learn about their experiences as activists.

Following this overview of methodology, I will explore the themes emerging from these two interlinked research strategies. The studies generally supported the notion that children's status in society is relatively powerless, and that little opportunity has been provided for children to voice their opinions or to make positive contributions in the (global) community. It was evident that prevailing ideas about childhood influence actions and reactions towards children in a manner that serves to limit their potential in this regard. Finally, this thesis will take a somewhat unusual turn as I discuss how the process of recruiting and gaining access to children as interviewees was itself revealing. In this respect, the dilemmas I encountered in attempting to access potential child interviewees exemplify how the same structural conditions that disempower children in our society are reproduced in limiting their participation in research methods of this kind.

Setting the Stage: Identifying Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

I begin by looking at the broad theoretical framework within which the thesis is situated. Within Sociology and other disciplines there is a marked tendency to juxtapose theoretical concepts such that one can only be defined in direct opposition to another. A key example of this tendency in social theory is the dichotomy between 'structure' and 'agency'. The dichotomization of theoretical concepts more generally tends to oversimplify complex social relations. The propensity to view structure and agency in opposition to one another precludes an exploration of their interconnections (Hays 1994). This situation becomes doubly cumbersome when the contrast between structure and agency

is mapped onto another set of dichotomies common in social theorizing and interpreted to mean, for instance, that structure is systematic and patterned, while agency is contingent and random; that structure is constraint, while agency is freedom; that structure is static, while agency is active; that structure is collective, while agency is individual (Hays 1994: 57).

In light of these concerns, some scholars have problematized the tendency for simple dichotomization of key concepts and have shifted their focus towards theories which propose more complex interactions. For instance, Anthony Giddens (1979) argues that agency and structure form part of a dialectical relationship and thus must be considered in relation, rather than opposition, to one another.

In line with Giddens' emphasis on the interconnectedness of these concepts, in this inquiry I will combine elements of two strains of thought which have traditionally been regarded as incompatible. Specifically, the theoretical foundations of this research endeavour are found in both constructionist (associated with agency) and structuralist theoretical paradigms.

Theoretical Foundations: Constructivist-Structuralism

As described by Bryman and Teevan (2005) constructionism “is an ontological position...asserting that social phenomena and their meanings are produced by social actors through their social interaction and that they are in a constant state of negotiation” (p. 13). Constructionist theory challenges the idea that there exists one objective Truth or Reality. Instead, it emphasizes the processes of creating meanings that individuals engage in through their interactions with others. In relation to children, this theory accordingly emphasizes “the child’s active role [in social life], arguing that children interpret, organize, and use information from the environment and, in the process, acquire adult skills and knowledge” (Corsaro and Eder 1990: 198). In line with this

assertion, constructionists contend that understandings of the world are contextually rooted in time and space, and are thus variable. Symbolic-interactionism, for instance, is one sociological paradigm that incorporates tenets of constructionist theory by focusing on the day-to-day actions of individuals and regarding society as a “mosaic of subjective meanings” (Macionis and Gerber 2002: 21).

On the other hand, structuralism (also referred to as objectivism) “is an ontological position that implies that social phenomena confront individuals as external facts beyond their reach or influence” (Bryman and Teevan 2005: 12). Structuralists assert there are indeed objective realities in the form of social structures which are independent of human consciousness and behaviour, but have the power to influence and shape them. This position was clearly articulated by Pierre Bourdieu (1990) who stated, “there exist, in the social world itself, and not merely in symbolic systems, language, myth etc., objective structures which are independent of the consciousness and desires of agents and are capable of guiding or constraining their practices or their representations” (p. 123). One prominent sociological example of this way of thinking is found in structural functionalism. This theory focuses on how social structures “work together to promote solidarity and stability” (Macionis and Gerber 2002: 17). Following this logic, Emile Durkheim famously argued that even crime, a social structure that exists in all societies, contributes to social cohesion.

There are direct implications of both these theoretical perspectives for my research questions and design. In accordance with the constructionist paradigm, the categories ‘children’ and ‘childhood’ will be regarded as social concepts that are both fluid and contextual. It is acknowledged that they vary over time and space. On the other hand, the ideas inherent in structuralist thought help avoid complete relativism – the idea

that there can be no one Truth because everything is socially created and there are multiple realities – by asserting there are some social phenomena (social structures) that exist beyond the influence of individuals. In this way of thinking, the notion that there are actual differences between children, youth and adults is readily accepted.

Accordingly, this research effort will be guided by what Bourdieu (1990) has labeled the constructivist-structuralism paradigm.

This theoretical underpinning is in line with the work of other academics who have increasingly noted the usefulness of combining tenets of constructionism and structuralism (see for example Devine 2002; Harden 2000; Harden et al. 2000b; James and Jenks 1996). For instance Pole, Mizen and Bolton (1999) emphasize the importance of contextualizing notions of children’s agency within the realities of our social world; “to recognize its limits and to acknowledge the constraints under which it is realized” (p. 52). In this regard, these scholars contend that age is a form of capital which “operates as a structural factor to limit agency” (Pole, Mizen and Bolton 1999: 52). In a similar vein, Scott, Jackson and Backett-Milburn (1998) assert that

Children themselves enter into the picture here as active social agents. However, children’s participation in constructing their own everyday world takes place within the constraints set by their subordinate location in relation to adults, where their own understanding of what it means to be a child has been shaped by their interaction with more powerful, adult, social actors with pre-existing, albeit renegotiable, ideas about childhood and children (p. 692).

Thus, while children are rightly regarded as active participants in the social world, it remains important to reflect upon the ways in which their agency is limited by factors outside of their control. One of the primary structural constraints impacting children’s everyday lives derives from their relatively powerless status in relation to adults. These themes of structure and agency, of power relations between children and adults, and of

conceptions of childhood in relation to the everyday realities of children's lives, will be the focus of this thesis.

What Constitutes Childhood? Who are Children?

As the child is the focus of this project it is extremely important to provide a working definition of exactly who is encompassed within this concept for the purposes of this study. This point was stressed by Morrow and Richards (1996) who emphasized how the methods “we use, the research populations and subjects that we study, and crucially the interpretation of the data collected, are all influenced by the view of children that we take...” (p. 99). Childhood is always a social construction and whom it encompasses varies depending on the particular context in which it is employed and who is doing the defining. For example, people concerned about social issues like ‘child pornography’ or ‘child soldiers’ may use a broad definition that incorporates teenagers, while airlines and cinemas charging half price to children restrict the definition to those who are not yet teens. Of course, ‘children’ can be defined in any number of ways related to age, maturity levels, rights and/or citizenship status and legal obligations.

For the purposes of this investigation, age will be used as the determining factor in deciding whom I will define as a ‘child activist’ for several reasons. In part age is used for its simplicity. Unlike other potential defining criteria, age is easily understood and identifiable. In counterpoint, it would be difficult and arbitrary to draw conclusions about the maturity levels of potential respondents and so impossible to use some kind of definition based on maturity or competence. Along these lines Alderson and Goodey (1996) rightly point out how “Defining, let alone assessing, competence...involves fundamental decisions about how we live our lives, and about what we want and choose to be competent ‘at’” (p. 110). Finally, social constructions of childhood are rooted in

particular ideas about children's competence, development, innocence, rationality, and so on. As a major motivation of this thesis is to explore modern conceptions of childhood and their potential implications, it is necessary to avoid defining children in these terms.

Having chosen age as the defining characteristic of childhood for the purposes of this research initiative, the next step is to define what the limit of childhood should be for my purposes. In other words, it is essential to address the question: *at what age do children become something else?* This has been one of the most challenging methodological issues to attend to appropriately. When examining the sociological literature pertaining to childhood, children were often considered to be all persons aged 18 and under (see for example Alderson and Goodey 1996; Morrow and Richards 1996; Roche 1999; Stasiulis 2002). Again, this age category was also utilized in the United Nations (2003) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Significantly, even when the task of defining childhood was not directly tackled by the scholars reviewed here, this age limitation was frequently implied by the inclusion of individuals aged 18 and below in research designs aiming to study 'children' (see for instance Cuningham and Lavalette 2004; Mathews and Limb 2003). Despite this widespread trend of using age 18 as the bench mark between children and other individuals in society, I have chosen to limit my definition to those persons aged 14 and below. This decision is predicated on the fact that persons over the age of 14 ('adolescents,' 'youth' and 'young persons') have been studied much more vigorously than children with regards to their civic participation or activism (to list only a few of the many possible examples, Bundy 1985; Khoury-

Machool 2007; Lombardo, Zakus and Skinner 2002; Moller 1968; Yates and Youniss 1999; Youniss et al. 2002).¹

Defining Activism

The second concept that needs to be defined is that of activism. For the purposes of this study, the term activism will refer to ‘sustained action in the public sphere to bring about social change.’ In the work of other scholars, these endeavours have been referred to more generally as ‘enduring commitments to service work’ (Fischman, Schutte, Solomon and Wu Lam 2001), or as actions relating to a quality of ‘moral giftedness’ (Michaelson 2001). The definition I utilize in this thesis is purposefully broad as my research is inherently exploratory.

The definition of activism employed here is therefore more inclusive than those conceptions provided for within the tradition of social movement theory. In this regard, whereas social movement theorists limit their definition of activism to initiatives that are non-institutional, or located outside of mainstream political systems (Goodwin and Jasper 2003: 3; Marx and McAdam 1994: 73), my definition does not make this assumption. Thus, a child’s letter campaign to a political leader, for example, would be considered activism for my purposes. The second distinction relates to the nature of the actions in question. While social movement theorists generally emphasize the political nature of activism, the types of initiatives encompassed in my conception of the term are not necessarily political. Accordingly, the act of a child initiating a program that will provide teddy bears and other items of comfort to cancer patients in both local and

¹ It is important to note that while I have chosen to focus my study on persons aged 14 and below, some of the academic work that will be reviewed here did not use this same distinctive marker. Thus, although only children aged 14 and under qualified to participate in this study, the discussion of conceptions of childhood is not as solidly bounded.

international hospitals, though not inherently political, is considered activism in this study.

Finally, in an effort to explore various avenues of activism, I will differentiate between individual and organizational activism. For the purposes of this thesis, organizational activism will refer to political engagements that are initiated, organized and supported by two or more persons working towards the same goal. While this includes initiatives occurring in schools or in other institutional settings with the aid of adults, my definition of organizational activism makes no assumption of an adult presence. Alternatively, as the name implies, individual activism refers to projects that are initiated and organized primarily by one person. Though this person may recruit others to participate in the project, it remains his/her goal that drives the movement. In this way, the individual will pursue his/her goal with or without the aid of others.

Ambiguity and Anxiety: Constructing the Powerless Child

I will now turn to a review of the scholarly literature pertaining to children and childhood. As aforementioned, childhood is a socially constructed concept that fluctuates over time and space. In this sense the nature and meaning of childhood in North America today – how children live their lives and what we expect of them – is rooted in our specific cultural and historical era. In this regard, Alan Prout (2003) asserts that, “social changes in the last twenty-five years have shifted the conditions and experience of childhood, destabilising ideas of what it is and what it should be. These shifts are often complex, often contradictory, and not necessarily beneficial for children” (p. 11). According to Prout (2003), conceptions of childhood have thus become increasingly ambiguous and attitudes towards children themselves are “at best puzzled and anxious, and at worst hostile” (p. 12). More specifically, there is tension over

whether children should have rights or be protected. There is concern that children are either at risk or pose a risk. Lastly, there is a desire to produce civically engaged adults, yet there remains an unwillingness to allow children the liberty to enter and roam freely in the public sphere.

Earlier, I mentioned the unhelpful tendency to dichotomize reductively in relation to social theory. In fact, reductive dichotomization is a negative tendency in modernity more generally. In relation to the case at hand, dichotomies contribute to over-simplified conceptions of childhood that have implications for the lives of actual children. This latter point was articulated by Jenks (2005), who argued, “it is clear that the way we think about children and conceive of childhood has very practical consequences for children themselves” (p. 124). In particular, thinking about children in this way is not conducive to complex discussions of how children’s need for protection can be balanced with their right to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives. In other words, how their vulnerabilities can be addressed while, at the same time, their capabilities are acknowledged. These issues must be considered in order for the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* to be successfully implemented. In the following section of this thesis I will explore the reductive dichotomies in our thinking about childhood as they have been represented in sociological literature.

Rights vs. Protections

Again, the first of these inconsistencies results from the tendency to dichotomize children’s rights and protections. The basic premise here is that acknowledging children’s rights and capacities and protecting their safety and dignity are mutually exclusive acts. As Priscilla Alderson (1992) explains, “Defining someone as a ‘child’ introduces conflicting assumptions. Children’s immaturity is considered to entitle them

to extra resources (free health checks, schools, playgrounds). Yet their immaturity denies them other entitlements (the right to vote, to earn an income, and so on)” (p. 161-162). Other scholars have also noted the trend to use discourses of innocence, need and dependence in a manner that divorces children’s rights and protections. For instance, Michael Freeman (1998) has suggested that while dependency is actually a natural human condition, it is most frequently associated with the state of childhood. Since children are labeled dependent, they are forced to do what others perceive to be in their best interests (Freeman 1998: 440-441). This practice denies “children the right to participate in the structuring of their childhoods” as adults find it difficult to “take children seriously as contributors to social thinking and social policies” (Mayall 2000: 245).

Corroborating this line of thought, Michael Wyness (2002) highlighted the powerful differences between needs and interest discourses that operate within our present-day culture. According to Wyness, interest discourses suggest that children have a right to self-determination. This challenges adults’ dominance over children and the idea that adults always know what is in children’s best interests. Conversely, the language of need serves as a justification for adults to consume children’s responsibilities and powers, and to make decisions on behalf of children without their consultation. Importantly, Wyness contends that despite the growing prominence of interest discourses in relation to children, the politics of need remain a powerful force in contemporary society. In this regard, even within the language of children’s rights there exists “a strong tendency towards child saving with children’s...protection, having priority over their rights to participation” (Wyness 2002: 197). In practice, this contradiction has profound implications for the lived experiences of children.

In her article “The Active Child Citizen: Lessons From Canadian Policy and the Children’s Movement,” Daiva Stasiulis (2002) clearly illustrates this tension and its potentially harmful implications for children. Particularly relevant is her description of Canadian cases of child refugee claimants who had been smuggled into the country. In this analysis Stasiulis finds that those claimants who were thought to be in the possession of certain rights and powers, for instance those who were employed, were not viewed as needing protection and thus their claims were denied. This was evident in the language of adjudicators which functioned to reinforce the separation between rights and protections; the refused children were labeled economic migrants rather than viable refugees (Stasiulis 521-523). In essence, the possession of rights denied some persons the protections a ‘child’ would receive.

An analogous trend was highlighted by Jenny Kitzinger’s (1988) examination of depictions of child sexual abuse in the media. Kitzinger found an overwhelming emphasis on children’s youth, passivity and innocence. She critiqued this focus on innocence for several reasons, one key argument being that it functioned as an exclusionary and oppressive category. In this regard, child sexual abuse victims were typically categorized according to their perceived level of innocence. This continuum was then utilized to differentiate between children deserving protection and those who were somehow less-deserving. Thus, “A precocious child who appears flirtatious and sexually aware may forfeit her claims to protection because, if the violation of innocence is the criterion by which the act of sexual abuse is judged, violating a ‘knowing’ child is a lesser offence than violating an ‘innocent’ child” (Kitzinger 1988: 80). In this way it is culturally acceptable for ‘innocent’ children to be protected from acts of sexual violence, while those who have exercised their right to individual autonomy and to obtain

knowledge about sexual activity are more or less left to fend for themselves. Through the cultural emphasis placed on the importance of innocence to childhood then, children are denied access to knowledge and power as “adults repress children’s own expressions of sexuality, deny them control over their own bodies and ‘protect’ them from knowledge” (Kitzinger 1988: 80). The use of an ideological construction of innocence thus serves to dichotomize the rights of children with their potential need for protection.

A final example of this tension between children’s rights and securities can be found in laws that seek to eradicate child labour, rather than perhaps attempting to better the conditions in which children work. Invernizzi and Milne (2002) contend that opposition to child labour is most frequently expressed by Western adults or by “non-working and non-poor children” (p. 405, 411). As outsiders it is difficult for these groups and individuals to understand culturally-rooted labour practices that include children in the workforce. Thus a paternalistic, protectionist course of action is encouraged with the abolition of child labour the ultimate goal. Conversely, working children themselves generally seek better working conditions, fair pay and protection from exploitation rather than the elimination of their positions in the paid labour sector (Invernizzi and Milne 2002). As articulated by Ana Maria Catin Torrentes, a child worker from Nicaragua, “We say ‘yes’ to work, ‘no’ to exploitation; ‘yes’ to work, ‘no’ to ill-treatment; ‘yes’ to work, ‘no’ to abuses; ‘yes’ to work, ‘no’ to social exclusion” (Swift 1997). In order to articulate and address these concerns, some children have formed working children’s groups that aim to defend their right to work as well as to fight against their political marginalization. Working children’s groups have argued that in order to combat exploitation they must be enabled to participate in decision-making processes that relate to their work. Unfortunately, the voices of these children are seldom

sought after by outsiders who seek to impose their vision of an ideal (protected) childhood (Invernizzi and Milne 2002).

This tendency to ignore the rights, needs and desires of child workers has had disastrous ramifications. Children who have been forced out of overt forms of work in the public sector have frequently been thrust into “more menial, demeaning or disreputable work...” (Invernizzi and Milne 2002: 425). Such was the situation in Bangladesh when pressure was exerted by the United States and Senator Tom Harkin in particular to boycott goods made by child labourers. In very little time thousands of children occupied in local garment and carpet industries lost their jobs. As children and their families were dependent on these incomes to survive, many were thrust into the dangerous world of prostitution (Invernizzi and Milne 2002), while others relegated themselves to stone-crushing or street hustling which were “more hazardous and exploitative activities than their factory jobs” (Alam 1997). In yet other cases, children were permitted to maintain their employment in factories but have been forced to hide from the gaze of visiting foreign buyers. Saleha, a child worker from Bangladesh, recounts how she “has hidden under tables, been locked up in the toilet, or been sent to the roof in the scorching sun for two or three hours” (Alam 1997). Despite these tragedies and the growing international cooperation between children’s working groups who have provided persistent and well-articulated arguments in favour of children’s work (Swift 1997), the desire to eliminate child labour remains a prevalent force in the modern, Western world. Regrettably, in an effort to protect children without recognizing their potential need for autonomy, child labour laws may be creating more harm than good.

These examples illustrate how both over-protecting children as well as providing them with many rights but no securities can render children relatively vulnerable and powerless within our society. On one hand, viewing children as helpless innocents without rights assumes they are incapable of meaningful political action. In this vein, childhood “[i]nnocence takes on a negative valence, defined as the absence of qualities such as strength, knowledge and agency” (Stasiulis 2002: 512). On the other hand, the vulnerability of children must be recognized in order to ensure their mental and physical development occurs in a healthy and safe environment.

Trouble vs. In Trouble (The Risk vs. At Risk)

An intimately related tension in contemporary conceptions of childhood is the inclination to view children as either trouble or in trouble. In other words, they are characterized as either rational delinquents or innocents in need of protection. This phenomenon was well-articulated by Sharon Stephens (1995) who wrote, “There is a growing consciousness of children *at risk*. But there is also a growing sense of children themselves as *the risk* – and thus of some children as people out of place and excess populations to be eliminated, while others must be controlled, reshaped, and harnessed to changing social trends” [emphasis in original] (p. 13). Several scholars have pointed to the socially constructed nature of these classifications. In a general sense, Joel Best (1990) has examined how social problems can be typified in numerous ways; thus alcoholism can be thought of as a crime, a sin or an illness. In a similar fashion, adults concerned about the well-being of children have invoked a vast array of differing images to support their claims. Children have been depicted as rebellious individuals who are incapable of forming wise or ‘good’ decisions, as depraved persons forced to cope with “poverty, disability, family problems, or other constraints on their lives,” as suffering

from medical illnesses, or simply as victims of “harms intentionally inflicted by others” (Best 1990: 4-5). These varying classifications of children either at risk or as the risk have been employed for strategic, political purposes.

With regard to the child in trouble, Sally Lubeck and Patricia Garrett (1990) examined the educational system where there has been increasing anxiety about populations of children who are perceived to be at risk of academic failure. Drawing attention to the constructed nature of the at risk classification, Lubeck and Garrett assert that children can be labeled as vulnerable for either individualistic or social reasons. Thus, analogous to the argument made by Best, Lubeck and Garrett assert that children may be perceived as suffering from risky psychological or emotional states, or they may be regarded as the victims of poor socioeconomic or health-related conditions that restrict their life chances. Interestingly, the authors found that although the nature and definition of the at risk child has shifted over time in the American landscape (for instance, moving from a concern about new immigrants to the poor), a common trend within the educational organization has been to emphasize individualistic vulnerabilities of children and their families, thereby allowing child savers to evade any socio-structural reform of the system itself. As articulated by Lubeck and Garrett (1990), “The current language of children at risk orients the expression of outrage against individuals rather than against the conditions that constrain their lives and the life chances of their children” (p. 338). Accordingly, parents (and in particular mothers), people of colour and the poor have been personally blamed for the apparent failures of children who are unsuccessful in meeting ‘normal’ educational standards (Lubeck and Garrett 1990).

This example provided by Lubeck and Garrett suggests that, since categories of at risk and risky children are created in the social realm, the prominence of specific

typifications shift over time and space and are associated with broad political, structural and/or cultural trends. Moreover, it demonstrates how the definition of a social problem inevitably supports certain forms of responses over others. Presently, in the modern, Western world, the child-victim classification is a dominant social theme (Best 1990). As a result, there exists an increased concern about threatened children and, in particular, fear of child abductions and abuse. As well, this is linked to the notion of 'stranger danger,' which will be discussed at length in a later section of this thesis.

The term child abuse has a long history through which its definition has increasingly expanded to include various sorts of conduct and ways of treating children. The first major discussion of child abuse occurred after an article related to the newly coined 'Battered-Child Syndrome' was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1962. At this time, 'child battering' was concerned with the most extreme types of "physical violence against very young children" (Best 1990: 67). Only a decade later, however, the term battered child was largely abandoned in favour of the term 'child abuse' which included more general mistreatment and neglect. The phenomenon of sexual abuse was also brought to the public's attention during the 1970's and was quickly aligned with the domain of child abuse. Over time this definition too expanded from its original conception as incest or molestation to include child pornography, adolescent prostitution and other related behaviours (Best 1990: 66-73).

As the category of abuse proliferated, so too did the perception that there has been startling increases in actual instances of child abuse in its various forms – physical, sexual, psychological and emotional (Jenks 2005: 91). This heightened anxiety about at-risk children was evidenced in the news media, popular culture and public opinion, as well as in the growth of social movements dedicated to child saving. In an examination

of how child victims were portrayed in network news from the period of 1969-1987 Joel Best (1990) found that the most horrifying and/or violent scenarios of threats to children dominated this coverage and were frequently accompanied by estimates or statistics that exaggerated the problem's magnitude. At the same time, relevant claims-makers (members of various child-saving organizations and social movements) insisted that threats to children were growing exponentially. These groups characterized children as powerless innocents who could easily fall victim to individual, adult deviants. Within the domain of popular culture, urban legends also portrayed children as inherently innocent, vulnerable and threatened by adults. One particularly popular myth asserted that Halloween sadists attacked small children by tampering with candy, making it dangerous, or even lethal, to consume. While there is very little evidence of any such incidents ever having occurred, annual warnings to parents about potential threats to children remain part of the Halloween experience. These few examples illustrate how information presented by the news media, claims-makers and popular culture more generally has been inclined to emphasize the randomness of threats to children, thereby insinuating that all children are at risk (Joel Best 1990).

It is important to point out that despite this heightened alarm about child abuse in recent years, the phenomenon is actually a long-standing feature of human relationships. In this vein, age-old myths depict characters such as Medea who killed her own children to enact revenge on their father (Jenks 2005: 92-93), and historical evidence dating back to the earliest of times outlines the prevalence of practices such as infanticide and abandonment (Cunningham 1995). Since child abuse is not a new occurrence, the question remains as to why there has been such an increase in concern about this issue in the last several decades. Attempting to address this question, both Joel Best (1990) and

Christopher Jenks (2005) point to broad cultural and sociological shifts as the cause for the mounting anxiety over threatened children. As articulated by Jenks (2005), childhood

emerges from a particular structuring of social relationships and...its various meanings derive from the forms of discourse that accompany those relationships. Childhood appears in different forms in different cultures in relation to structural variables such as rates of mortality and life expectancy, organizations of family life and structure, kinship patterns, and different ideologies of care and philosophies of need and dependency (p. 61)

Accordingly, Jenks suggests that socio-structural conditions of modernity have altered the way we think about childhood and have made abuse recognizable in new ways. One significant factor in this regard has been the shift from traditionally overt and coercive uses of power to the prevalence of disciplinary techniques and covert, panoptic control. In our modern regime of social control, power predominantly operates in subtle ways such that brute, physical exertions of coercive force like abuse are no longer socially acceptable (Foucault 1995). In relation to shifting conceptions of childhood, Jenks notes that children's status as a symbol of our individual and societal futures has been strengthened in modernity. In this regard, "children are seen as dependable and permanent, in a manner to which no other person or persons can possibly aspire" (Jenks 2005: 112). Adults invest their own dreams and promises in children such that they are taught to "reach for the stars, to control more and more of the wantonness of the cosmos and to produce human culture as the triumph of finitude over infinity;" it is believed that "what could not be achieved today could be set in train for tomorrow" (Jenks 2005: 107). Thus, by protecting and investing in children, we believe we are defending and investing in our future. In contrast, high child mortality rates in past historical eras precluded this association between childhood and longevity. With this enormous weight

upon the shoulders of children, our threshold of tolerance towards their abuse has diminished (Jenks 2005).

A related explanation for the heightened concern over child abuse is that children not only represent the future, but also symbolize social vulnerability. As mentioned previously in this thesis, children are perceived as “small, innocent, weak, inexperienced; they need protection” (Best 1990: 171). Best (1990) argues that these characteristics have become ever more familiar to adult Westerners who, in the latter half of the twentieth century, have been confronted with war, numerous political scandals, the potential use of nuclear weapons, ecological disasters and warnings about the destruction of our environment, as well as horrific medical epidemics such as AIDS and cancer. This notion that people experience greater fear of risk in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries fits with the work of other prominent social thinkers (see for example Beck 1992, 1999, 2002; Giddens 1990, 2002). Thus, it is argued that adults themselves feel small, innocent, weak and in need of protection. Further, this perceptual loss of control over events in the life course has been accompanied by a growing pessimism about the future. Yet, as nothing is to be gained from talking about, or even thinking about these awful circumstances and their negative implications for the future, individuals turn their attention to more readily solvable problems. As expressed by Best (1990),

For some people, displacing their worries to threatened children might offer a means of coping with such anxiety. These adults might feel vulnerable, but children were even more vulnerable. The future might seem uncertain and threatening, but there were even clearer threats to the children who embodied the future. In this way, focusing on kidnappers, molesters, and other terrible threats to children offered a way of deflecting more frightening, less manageable fears (p. 174).

The image of children as our future, a future which appears uncertain at best and at worst highly vulnerable to events outside our control, is thus extremely powerful. By concentrating attention on threatened children, by exerting control over them in the name of their best interests and protecting them from sinister deviants, adults achieve a greater sense of control over their own futures. In this way the child at risk serves as a means of coping with the anxiety and unpredictability of modern life.

In stark contrast to their portrayal as helpless, at-risk innocents, children are also defined as a threat. As explained by Alan Prout (2003), this image of children as trouble “is concerned with contemporary children as a threat to themselves, to others and to society at large. In it children are identified as personifying the supposed ills of contemporary society, such as crime, moral decay, consumerism and economic failure” (p. 13). Despite Prout’s emphasis on the contemporary nature of the troubling child, historical analysis suggests that, analogous to the notion of children at risk, the perception of children as being risky is far from a modern creation. In this regard, Jenks (2005) asserts that contemporary ideas about childhood have descended from two dominant historical and cross-cultural ways of thinking about children, from the mythology of the Dionysian and Apollonian child. Whereas the Apollonian child is depicted as angelic, innocent and naturally good (corresponding with the characteristics of the child at risk), the Dionysian child was assumed to be inherently corrupt or evil. This child, who would do anything to satiate its need for pleasure and self-gratification, was to be strictly controlled and socialized by the adult population (Jenks 2005: 64-65).

Again, the belief that some children are trouble and in need of adult management remains widespread today. On an international scale, Third World children have been portrayed as the cause of global environmental problems. More narrowly, street children

in industrialized nations have been targeted as the driving force behind urban crime and decay (Stephens 1995: 13). Young persons are frequently perceived as dangerous “simply by virtue of being teenagers” (Harden et al 2000b: 7). Research suggests that many parents are concerned about the possibility that their own children might become teenage deviants (Harden et al 2000b). In the Canadian context, Bernard Schissel (1997) argues, “Despite the hollow political rhetoric to the contrary, Canadians scarcely consider children a valuable resource. In fact, we consider them to be one of our most dangerous threats” (p. 84). Similar to the aftermath of current fears about childhood vulnerability, the anxiety over troublesome children has also resulted in increased pressure to control them. While parental supervision is inevitably implicated in this process (Cahill 1990: 393; Kitzinger 1988: 81), there has also been a growing trend to use the power and coercive forces of the state to deal with children. Significantly, Canada’s youth justice system is known worldwide for its harshness in dealing with young offenders. In fact, as recently as 2003, Canada incarcerated more youth per capita than any other country in the world, including the United States (Artz, Nicholson and Rodriguez 2005: 290-291).

Another consequence of regarding children as a threat is the tendency to forgo their rights. In their examination of legislation in the UK, Tisdall, Brown and Docherty (1998) found that newly emerging laws are granting children some civil liberties while at the same time creating ways to ignore them, frequently in the name of public safety. In this regard, there have been several legislative amendments enacted in recent decades that recognize the child’s welfare as paramount and that provide a place for children’s voices to be heard in various civic arenas. However, these general principles have been qualified by an emphasis on children’s age and maturity. Moreover, in the case of

children under the care of the state, authorities are able to abolish children's right to be heard completely, all in the name of public protection. As a result, Tisdall et al. (1998) conclude that current legislative practices in the UK contravene the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* which asserts children's right to participate in all matters affecting their lives, without qualification.

The preceding analysis has illustrated the great tension between the perception of children at risk and the idea that they might pose a risk. In this sense, the historical images of the Dionysian and Apollonian child appear to have remained "immensely powerful; they live on and give force to the different discourses that we have about children..." (Jenks 2005: 65). In accordance with these historical mythologies, "Children are often characterised in everyday talk as little devils in one breath and little angels in the next" (Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn 1998: 695). It thus appears that we are unsure about what it means to be a child, or what the true nature of childhood is. Analogous to the tension between rights and protections, the problem presented by this propensity to regard children as either trouble or in trouble is that it leaves little room to appreciate their capabilities. As noted by Devine (2002), "Discourses related to deviance, dysfunction and deficit...as well as innocence and vulnerability...have dominated adult images of children, precluding any consideration of children as social actors with a voice of their own" (p. 305). Moreover, this conceptual ambiguity about childhood has shaped how we think about certain social spaces (Holloway and Valentine 2000: 776) and has increasingly supported the marginalization of children from the public sphere. Due to their depiction as either vulnerable, innocent angels or corrupt and threatening devils, it is widely accepted that children are non-adults who should

therefore be excluded from the adult world (Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn 1998: 695-696).

Private vs. Public

Accordingly, the final ambiguity in modern conceptions of childhood I will discuss relates to children's perceived role within the private rather than public sphere, and the corresponding tension between prevalent desires for children to learn about civic engagement and efforts to restrict such participation until they reach adulthood.

Historically, children worked alongside their parents in both producing goods for sale as well as ensuring the family acquired its basic subsistence needs. They also participated in community events and work located outside the home (Corsaro 2005: 34, 69, 74-79).

More recently children have been confined to the private sphere, relegated to participating in social life solely via the institutions of school and the family.² This privatization of childhood is inherently linked to traditional ideas about the proper place of men and women in society and was historically "reinforced by the newly emerged childrearing experts, who increasingly warned of the perils to children's mental health if they were separated from their mothers for too long" (Holloway and Valentine 2000: 774).³ Along these lines, the private sphere has been idealized as the perfect (and only)

² In fact, the privatization of childhood generally relates to the industrialized world. Elsewhere, the majority of children live in poverty and do undertake paid employment in the public sphere. The number of children in our world whose lives revolve around work and school actually outnumber the amount of children who go to school, play and do not work. In this sense, it is ironic that the working child is regarded by Westerners as abnormal or atypical (Punch 2003).

³ In recent years, this trend of privatizing childhood has been complicated by the reality that a growing number of mothers continue to work after having children. This means that increasingly more children are being cared for away from the home in daycare facilities. For some, daycare is considered an extension of the educational system and thus a semi or quasi-private domain that is regarded as an acceptable place to foster children's development. Others, however, claim that the phenomenon of the working mother contributes to the demise of childhood. It is argued that this occurs because busy, stressed-out mothers place greater responsibility on their children. Further, 'hurried childhood theorists' claim that, in these contexts, children become "confidants of their working parents, listening to their work and personal

“appropriate place for children to be raised, facilitating their physical and moral protection from the outside world” (Harden 2000: 47). In part, this idealization of the private is due to the relatively greater ability of adults to control this environment as compared to public spaces. The physical nature of homes (walls, doors and locks) enable adults to manage who enters their private domain (Harden 2004). This is contrasted with the perception that public places are home to sinister strangers, vigorously awaiting the chance to prey on innocent and vulnerable children.

The anxiety over strangers has been a powerful force in contemporary society. Discourses of ‘stranger danger’ associate threats to children – particularly abductions, sexual violence and other forms of abuse – with the public sphere, despite the fact that most violence towards children actually occurs within the home (Holloway and Valentine 2000: 774; Jenks 2005; Kitzinger 1988: 81; Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn 1998: 693). As noted by Spencer Cahill (1990),

Since approximately 1979, popular concern about children’s safety in public places has mushroomed... Televised dramas, documentaries, and Congressional hearings helped to foster the impression that there was a virtual army of villainous adults stalking and preying upon children who dared to venture outside the protective fortresses of home and school (p. 393).

In response to this perceived threat, children are taught not to trust the unknown person through the use of stranger danger education. In particular, children are firmly instructed never to talk to strangers, a trend that steers them away from public, social interactions ‘for their own good.’ Interestingly, research suggests that children find this rule problematic, indicating that not being permitted to speak with anyone in public settings precludes them from helping those in need, for instance. One thirteen year-old child

problems” (Lynott and Logue 1993: 473), a process that emotionally ‘overloads’ children. I will discuss this concern regarding childhood’s disappearance in greater detail in a subsequent section of this thesis.

asserted, “If I saw someone that was in trouble, like he’d fallen out of a wheelchair...then I’d stop and help him. But I wouldn’t stop and help a guy try and pump his car tyre or clean his car” (Harden et al 2000b: 6). Thus, although instructed to regard all unknown persons in public settings as strangers, children made their own judgments about the risks a specific individual might pose based on characteristics such as appearance, gender and relative vulnerability (Harden 2000: 53). Another significant finding of scholarly research examining stranger danger was that while parents emphasized and feared the sexual nature of stranger attacks, children themselves were more concerned with being kidnapped, suffering physical violence or even being forced to commit crimes. In this regard, children were generally unaware of any looming sexual threat (Harden et al 2000b: 6). This trend suggests that parents attempt to protect their children not only by shielding them from stranger attacks, but also by keeping certain ‘adult’ information from them, thereby defending their (sexual) innocence.

Again, the significance of the stranger danger discourse is that it reinforces the apparent separation between the private and public domains and encourages the marginalization and exclusion of children from the latter. In fact, Harden and her colleagues (2000b) found that “Even when parents are aware that threats such as stranger danger are only rarely manifested the fact that such things happen at all is sufficient to make them fear for their own children and thus to constrain their children’s lives in the interests of both safety and anxiety reduction” (p. 9). These findings support the assertions of other scholars that in order to manage risk anxiety in contemporary society individuals focus their attention on specific problems that are considered solvable. Thus, there is the “impression that if only ‘evil strangers’ could be banished then the sun would shine on childhood once more” (Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn

1998: 690). Unfortunately, research indicates that parents generally feel the problem is getting worse – that there are fewer safe places for children today than there were historically (Harden et al 2000b: 4; Valentine 1997b: 70). As a result, they feel compelled to restrict their children's participation in the public sphere by endorsing home-based or adult-organized and supervised activities rather than free play (Holloway and Valentine 2000: 777; Valentine 1997a: 143).

This restricted access to the public sphere was the chief finding of Spencer Cahill's (1990) research investigation into children's participation in public life, which he argued shed light on contemporary constructions of childhood. Cahill began his article by noting the role played by media, myth and urban legends in heightening fears about children in social spaces. These cultural elements place all children who venture outside the safety of school or family within an at risk category. Corroborating the tension between risky and at risk children, Cahill also asserted that children are regarded as a threat to the public order as they have not been fully socialized to know and adhere to the many cultural codes that operate in public places. Because of this widespread anxiety about at risk and risky children, Cahill argued that young persons are highly controlled, surveyed and managed in social spaces, or are removed from them altogether. In this way, biographical divisions between childhood and adulthood are reaffirmed (Cahill 1990).

As one example of how this process functions, Cahill (1990) explored the operation of *mana*, or respect, in the social sphere. According to the author, *mana* is an essential part of social existence since people honour one another's rights based on the perceived apportionment of their *mana*. Cahill argued that through his investigation of public actions towards children, it was revealed they were imbued with less respect than

adults. In other words, they were not viewed or treated as complete persons. For instance, adults tended to speak over children to other adults rather than listening to them. They also frequently reprimanded children, including ones that they did not personally know. Along these lines, supervision was increased in the presence of groups of children who were viewed with suspicion and skepticism rather than trust. Accordingly, Cahill (1990) concluded that the entire category 'children' has not acquired a sufficient quota of mana, and thus individual children receive a 'nonperson treatment' in public places, regardless of their maturity or behaviour (p. 397-398).

Cahill's assertion that limitations placed on children's participation in the public sphere reflect socially-contrived conceptions of childhood has also been supported by other scholars. In this regard, Sharon Stephens (1995) highlighted the prevalent belief that "Modern children are supposed to be segregated from the harsh realities of the adult world and to inhabit a safe, protected world of play, fantasy, and innocence" (p. 14). She also asserted that dominant modes of thought imply that properly "loved children should ideally be protected from the arduous tasks and instrumentalized relationships of the productive sphere" (Stephens: 1995 14). The work of these academics illustrate how current cultural conceptions of childhood have forced children out of the public domain and confined them to the private or family sphere where it is thought that they should be seen and not heard. This exclusion from public life ignores children's ability and current efforts to exert agency within their neighbourhoods and the international community. It limits children's experiences, restricts their autonomy, increases their dependence on adults and may impede children's "opportunities to develop the necessary skills to cope with the world" (Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn 1998: 701). Furthermore, this practice results in a tension between learning and praxis such that children are deprived

of the opportunity to put what they learn into practice. For instance, citizenship classes have become an integral and mandated part of some school curriculums in recent years in an effort to address the perceived apathetic nature of students. Such was the situation in the UK where children who had been taking these classes participated in large-scale protests during school hours in opposition to the war in Iraq. As a result of their actions many of those involved were severely reprimanded, often being suspended from school for lengthy periods of time (Cunningham and Lavelette 2004). Instead of recognizing the power and agency exerted by children, society in this instance chose to control their public actions through shaming tactics and punitive measures. Notably, treating children in this manner appears to be a prevalent phenomenon within Western educational systems.

In this regard, Michael Wyness (1999) argues that, “The school reflects, if not amplifies, the child’s lack of social status” (p. 356) in a myriad of ways. He notes that children have relatively no voice in deciding what and how they will learn; these decisions about the curriculum are made by adults. There are no formal mechanisms through which children can contribute to or challenge these decisions. Furthermore, though the rights of parents have increased, with parents’ wishes becoming ever more influential within the educational system, the bargaining position of children themselves has diminished. Adults, parents, the community and teachers are regarded as responsible for students’ learning and behaviour. As such, there are no “trilateral relations between parent, child and school. Home/school contracts are explicitly bilateral involving parents and teachers where courses of action on the pupil’s welfare are agreed between consenting adults” (Wyness 1999: 360). This typical mode of action illustrates the

exclusion of children from decision-making processes, even from those which directly relate to their everyday lives at school.

The physical setting and hidden curriculum of the educational system also support children's subordinate social position at school. As opposed to intentional and overt lesson plans, the hidden curriculum refers to latent expressions "of political or cultural ideas in the classroom" (Macionis and Gerber 2002: 511). Premised on her examination of the Irish school system Devine (2002) contended that, "Through the organization of the timetable, for example, children formed distinct views on what was valued in education (logical mathematical thinking and linguistic skills) as well as the primacy of work over play in the organization of their school lives" (p. 309). Children understood that school was as much about learning curricula materials as it was about acquiring the traits of self-discipline and a positive work ethic. In this sense, they were taught to adhere to adult values and learned how to appropriately operate in an adult-run world. In terms of the physical setting of schools, Devine found that space operated as a form of symbolic power. Children recognized and were critical of the fact that teachers had both larger and better-kept facilities than students. This was unequivocally equated with teacher's superior status in the minds of children who spoke of their social interactions with teachers using the discursive framework of subordination (Devine 2002).

The obvious problem with children's relatively powerless role within the educational system is that it contradicts efforts to regard children as competent social actors with corresponding civic rights and responsibilities. It is meaningless for children to learn about the importance of an active citizenship through course material if they are at the same time treated as something less than citizens. The only way to ensure

children's political literacy is to complement citizenship courses with the encouragement and facilitation of children's participation in decision-making processes within the educational system and the larger public sector (Devine 2002: 318), measures which are guaranteed within the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

In sum, the debate over whether children should have rights or be protected, the concerns about risky and at risk children, and the anxiety over children's participation in the public sphere clearly illustrate an ambiguity over the status of childhood in contemporary, Western society. Significantly, this ambivalence has been accompanied by increasing efforts to exert control over children, a tendency that precludes children from having voice. In recent years, notions of childhood have been rendered even more complex due to the emergence of two contradictory cultural trends. On one hand, there has been a growing recognition of children's competency, power and agency, which has been well-supported by research findings in the newly developing sociology of childhood. On the other, there is a growing fear that childhood is disappearing. It is to these recent trends that I now turn.

Children's Competency, Power, Agency and the Demise of Childhood? Two Recent Trends

Children as Social Actors

As previously mentioned, North American society has undergone many complex changes in recent years that have "shifted the conditions and experiences of childhood" (Prout 2003: 11). One powerful trend has been the growing recognition of the need to incorporate children's voices in decision-making processes at all levels. This inclination gradually developed within the context of broad social shifts that have placed increasing emphasis on flexibility and individualization. A sense of rapid social change has resulted

in a perceptual urgency for institutions to reflexively consider their practices (for instance, by asking consumers, voters, citizens, patients and so on to evaluate them) and be sufficiently malleable to meet varying demands. Allied with this trend is the idea that each person is unique, important, and in control of his/her destiny. Combining these two phenomena, we see that a venue has been created to hear and respond to multiple voices, each of which is regarded as important in its own right (Prout 2003: 17-18). It is within this socio-historical context that questions about children's rights and capacity for meaningful action as social agents were brought to the forefront of public attention.

Though it is unlikely that the emergence of thinking about children's agency can be pinpointed to any one historical moment, the ratification of the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* by almost every nation in the world in the late 1980s and early 1990s had undeniably profound implications for this process. Again, one particularly significant aspect of this document was its recognition of the abilities and rights of children to actively engage in their citizenship. The *Convention* articulated children's right to participate in decision-making processes in all matters that affect their lives (Article 12). It also acknowledged their rights to assemble peacefully (Article 15), to freedom of expression (noted in several Articles, eg. 12, 13), and to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds" (United Nations 2003: Article 13). Though Article 12 in particular "remains far more controversial than the articles dealing with protection and provision precisely because it touches upon the question of citizenship" (Prout 2003: 20), its inclusion in the most universally accepted human rights declaration ever was a profound step forward in the struggle to acknowledge children's agency.⁴

⁴ While the importance of the *Convention* in establishing children's rights must not be undervalued, it is worthy to note that it is not without flaw. For instance, Article 12 qualifies children's right to be heard by

In line with this international convention, some nation-states have provided new regulations and guidelines concerning children's participation in civic life. For instance, the United Kingdom passed legislative amendments "that require that children's voices be heard and their opinions sought in matters that affect them" (Morrow 1999a: 204). There have also been legal shifts in how competency is to be measured in order that capable children may participate in decision-making processes (Morrow 1999a: 204).

Aside from these burgeoning national and international assurances of children's rights, another factor which is both indicative and supportive of the growing cultural trend to recognize children's power and agency is the developing sociology of childhood. The sociology of childhood is a relatively new field within our discipline, one which "has been slow to develop" (Pole, Mizen and Bolton 1999: 40). Ann Oakley shed light on this situation more than a decade ago when she compared the status of children within social research at that time "to that of women prior to the impact of women's studies on sociology during the 1970/80s" (Pole, Mizen and Bolton 1999: 40). In fact, the few investigations into the lives of children that took place before the 1990s were primarily conducted by psychologists. As such, research was dominated by theories of

suggesting that the weight given to a particular child's opinion be based on his/her age, maturity and competence. This inevitably means that adults get to decide which children are able to speak and be heard (those deemed competent) and those who are not. As noted by Wyness (2002), "Parents, teachers and other adults with authority are to make judgments on the child's abilities before children can make any claims" (p. 198). This is a severe qualification that limits children's potential for participation in public life. Another significant problem with the *CRC* is that it was created solely by adults. Children were excluded from the process of drafting the *Convention*; there is no evidence to suggest that they were able to consult with drafters or that they meaningfully participated in preliminary discussions. "The *Convention* thus encodes a set of rights and takes an image of childhood from the perspective of the adult world looking in almost as an external observer on the world(s) of children" (Freeman 1998: 439). Since the *Convention* does not take into account the position and opinions of children, its Articles may neglect important issues and are not necessarily deemed as relevant by real children (Freeman 1998: 439). This marginalization and exclusion of children from the *CRC* is a prime example of the ambiguity that remains part of current conceptions of childhood. While this document's primary aim was to outline children's rights in the international landscape (including the establishment of venues for children's voices and participation), adults involved neglected children's competency, agency and power, choosing to make decisions on behalf of, rather than with, children.

universal childhood development, focusing on “children’s activities like language, play, and social interactions [which] have been considered as significant symbolic markers of children’s progress” (Sandbaek 1999: 192). Within this development framework, children were regarded as human becomings rather than beings, valued for their future social contributions as adults rather than their immediate potential as children.

Adulthood was conceptualized as the norm, leaving childhood to be negatively defined as everything non-adult (Mayall 2000: 245; Valentine 1997b: 67). Children were thus portrayed as inexperienced, inadequate, immature and irrational. As articulated by Freeman (1998), within the developmental paradigm ideas about childhood are “‘measured’ against an unexplained, unproblematic rational adult world, which is (of course) both complete and desirable, and, in contrast to childhood, is also static” (p. 434). Essentially, the developmental paradigm constructs children “not as different from adults but as less than adults” (Valentine 1997b: 67).

Even those research agendas involving children that were located outside the realm of psychology and its assumptions about development have been severely limited in their scope, both in terms of what questions were asked, and how answers were sought. For example, two prominent areas of study that have frequently included children are education and the family. Within these fields, it was common for children to be incorporated in a limited manner, almost by proxy. In other words, “In both of these areas children may be seen to have a legitimate role as subjects of research not necessarily in their own terms, but as part of wider educational or social issues” (Pole, Mizen and Bolton 1999: 39). In a similar vein, Morrow (1999a) noted that childhood studies have tended to focus on “problem children and children’s problems” and that “relatively few studies have been based on children’s accounts of their experiences” (p.

204). Accordingly, investigations into the lives of children have tended to be homogenizing and adultist. Traditional practices of academic research have created a unified portrait of children, disregarding even the most blatant differences such as those based on gender, race, ethnicity and class (Pole, Mizen and Bolton 1999: 41). Furthermore, this conception of childhood has largely been predicated on Western assumptions, values and experiences (Punch 2003: 277).

This situation began to shift, however, with the emergence of childhood sociologists who sought to include children within the research process from which they had traditionally been excluded. One profound example of this trend was the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) 'Children 5-16: Growing Up in the Twenty-First Century' programme (ESRC "Introduction to the Programme"). The ESRC Children 5-16 programme was an extensive endeavour, encompassing 22 networked research efforts, "each looking at a different aspect of children's social lives, living conditions, experiences and perspectives" (Prout 2002: 67). All research took place in the United Kingdom over a five year period from 1996-2001 (for a list of the various projects' summaries visit www.hull.ac.uk/children5to16programme/briefings.htm). Importantly, the emphasis of this programme was for scholars to treat children as social actors, and thus as "research subjects and participants, rather than objects of enquiry" (Prout 2002: 68). This emphasis on children's status as social actors was supported by children's own willingness and ability to participate meaningfully in research and broader social issues, despite their recognition that there were relatively few avenues provided for them to do so (Morrow 1999b; Pole, Mizen and Bolton 1999; Prout 2001). Children within the programme contributed to research projects not only by providing the data to be analyzed, but also by aiding in the structuring and implementation of some research

designs. In this regard, the initiative was able to successfully document “children’s standpoint across a range of issues, primarily by approaching children as their main respondents or informants and treating them as competent commentators on their own lives” (Prout 2002: 68). The result was a rich set of data that encompassed a range of children’s opinions on issues that might have remained invisible had research been focused on adults (Prout 2002: 72, 68).

Through these innovative research practices it has become clear that children are social actors who can (and do) exert agency in their relationships with others. Power fluctuates between children and adults (Punch 2003) who are both implicated in the formation of the social world; the construction of our social reality(ies) is a relational process. One significant means through which children exert power is through their peer cultures. As noted by Corsaro and Eder (1990), “By peer culture, we mean a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (p. 197). Though research has revealed many distinctive facets of children’s peer cultures, two predominant trends have emerged: “children make persistent attempts to gain control of their lives and to share that control with each other” (Corsaro and Eder 1990: 202). From an early age children develop a strong group identity and, alongside their peers, challenge adult authority in a variety of ways. This includes blatant confrontations whereby children strengthen their peer relations by testing or mocking their adult counterparts, as well as more latent circumventions of adult rules and regulations (Corsaro and Eder 1990).

Within the educational system, for instance, Corsaro and Eder documented how children evaded a policy that barred them from bringing toys and personal objects to school. The rule had originally been created in response to teachers’ frustrations with

having to settle disputes between students who were reluctant to share their personal belongings. The reaction of children, however, was to bring smaller toys from home which could more easily be concealed from the gaze of adults. More importantly, children responded by readily sharing their toys with others so as to avoid disruptive quarrels that would inevitably draw the teacher's attention. In turn, teachers were inclined to overlook this rule-breaking as the children's shift in behaviour had eliminated the original problem (Corsaro and Eder 1990: 205). In this way, the children actively changed their social surroundings.

Another example of children's agency in school was outlined by Holloway and Valentine (2000). These scholars sought to examine how global processes shaped the lives of children aged 11-16 in Britain. More broadly, they desired to deconstruct several ideological dichotomies that have traditionally been used in childhood studies (voluntarism, agency and difference are opposed to identity, structure and determinism; particularism, local and change are opposed to universalism, global and continuity). To this end, Holloway and Valentine investigated children's experiences with information technology (IT) both at school and at home, and concluded that children "are active in the construction of their own lifeworlds, interpreting and making sense of ICT within 'local' cultures of computing" (p. 769). For instance, boys in some IT classes boycotted the imposed lesson plan altogether, choosing instead to surf the Internet in search of photographs of their favorite female celebrities. This served to reinforce boys' masculinity as well as their image as academic underachievers amongst their peers. While both these elements were important to the boys' local culture, their connections to broader social norms are also apparent. As another example, Holloway and Valentine noted that students took advantage of their right to choose whom they would sit with in

IT classes by forming gender-segregated groups. When interviewed about these particular configurations of social space, girls suggested they felt safer with their girlfriends; they felt they could make mistakes without being harassed by their male counterparts. In one school, boys had attempted to dominate the IT facilities by hogging all of the computer terminals. The girls responded by forming a girls-only computer club that was supported by a teacher (Holloway and Valentine 2000). These various examples illustrate how children are able to exert power and agency even within the highly adult-structured school system. In this way, children actively participate in the structuring of social realities.

Children also exert agency and help to shape life at home. In her ethnographic study of rural childhoods in the southern part of Bolivia, Samantha Punch (2003) found that children “move in and out of adult and child-centred worlds in different contexts with different people” (p. 282). Punch outlined how one ten year old girl, Marianela, frequently shifted between her roles as a dependent child and a caretaker of her younger siblings. On the way home from school, for instance, Marianela and her siblings busied themselves by making dresses out of leaves for their dolls. Upon entering the temporarily vacant home, however, Marianela asserted her role as caretaker by ensuring her siblings changed out of their school clothes and fulfilled their other obligations. Punch noted how Marianela’s mannerisms and tone of voice shifted to accommodate this new role. Yet Marianela’s siblings also sought to assert their agency by not complying with her demands. As noted by Punch (2003), “Marianela’s example shows how children both respond to power and use it themselves, so they are at once receivers and givers of power” (p. 283). Another significant finding of Punch’s study was that, contrary to dominant Western conceptions, working children actively participated in and

created their own culture by integrating play with work and school. While outsiders generally feel that working children have no time for free play, Punch observed how children working in traditionally adult domains manipulated their surrounding environments to create recreational materials and settings. By negotiating their time and space, children rendered their tasks more enjoyable, for instance stopping to catch or chase birds on the way to fetch water, by “going fishing after taking the cows out to pasture, playing marbles with friends in the community square before running an errand to the local shop and playing with siblings while taking animals out to pasture” (Punch 2003: 288). Thus, while particular life circumstances forced these children to work, they actively changed the terms and conditions of their labour in order to accommodate their own desires.

Scholarly research has also outlined the ways in which non-working children actively contribute to the social setting of the family. As noted previously, a major concern of parents today is how to manage and control their children’s participation in the public sphere. Feeling anxious about children’s safety, adults restrict their offspring’s liberties “in order to prevent them playing in public space without adult supervision” (Valentine 1997b: 72). Yet, while research suggests that parental anxiety is imparted on children – children admittedly fear for their personal safety in public settings (Harden et al 2000b; Valentine 1997b: 76) – it also outlines how children actively cope with this apprehension and attempt to shift or even break the boundaries set before them by adults. In direct contrast to their feelings of unease, scholars note that “children of both sexes [also] have a strong sense of invulnerability” (Valentine 1997b: 78) which is frequently augmented by the presence of peers (Harden 2000: 52). Though regarded by adults as having too little knowledge and experience to successfully operate

in the public domain, children themselves “are often experts in their own lives, making more use of their own detailed local knowledge than their parents’ blanket bans or warnings when negotiating public space” (Valentine 1997b: 78). In other words, children interpret and implement parental rules about space in their own terms.

According to recent research, numerous children feel that safeguarding their personhood is their responsibility rather than their parents’. To this end, children employ characteristics such as experience and age to determine their own spatial boundaries and to make judgments about those of their peers. Based on these assessments, children resist the control of adults in a variety of manners. “One of the most common strategies used by the children to win extensions to their spatial ranges is to demonstrate their competence to parents before asking for permission to change their boundaries” (Valentine 1997b: 79). Noting the pressure on adults to adhere to local parenting norms, another tactic employed by children is to manipulate adults by playing their parents off one another, or off the parents of their peers. For example in Valentine’s (1997b) study, a group of girls confessed that in order to stay out late, they would call home and indicate to their parents that they were at the home of a familiar friend (p. 79). In yet other instances, children purposefully refrained from telling their parents about dangerous situations or experiences they had encountered in order to shield adults from increased anxiety as well as to ensure that further limitations would not be placed on their spatial boundaries (Valentine 1997b: 82). Corroborating this data, Harden (2000) found that children negotiate parentally-created boundaries through outright lies, “withholding information from parents; breaking rules; collusion with friends or siblings to deceive parents; persistence in asking parents; being moody with parents; earning the right to go out by demonstrating responsibility; [and] playing parents off against each

other” (p. 56). These various tactics are illustrative of the numerous ways in which children resist the control of adults and actively participate in the particular formation of their lifeworlds.

Finally, the most profound indication of children’s agency is their active participation in the public sphere. Examples of child activism are at once historical and contemporary as well as cross-cultural. A fairly well-known historical instance of child activism occurred in the late nineteenth century. At this time, the circulation of newspapers in North America was on the rise. To meet growing demands in a time when people came to the newspaper rather than vice versa, major publishers and circulation managers contracted out work to young boys, later dubbed ‘Newsies’. The Newsies paid fifty cents for a hundred copies of the daily paper and sold them on the street to consumers at a slightly higher price. To make a profit, therefore, they had to distribute all the papers they had contracted for. This system worked well for all parties involved as the Newsies autonomously controlled their work environment, choosing when, where and how long to work, while newspaper owners were able to increase sales and keep up with the expanding market (Corsaro 2005: 77-78). The process was interrupted, however, during the Spanish-American War when the distribution price paid by Newsies was increased rather dramatically to sixty cents per hundred copies. In response to this increase, on July 21st, 1899 the Newsies of Manhattan took to the streets. While New York publishers Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst did not originally take the strike seriously, the young activists were persistent in their claims. On August 2nd, after a two-week strike by the young boys, the publishers conceded and the strike ended with the papers agreeing to fully refund Newsies for all unsold papers from then on (Anonymous “The Newsboy Strike of 1899”).

Another profound example of child activism took place in the late 1970s in the South African township of Soweto. During this period, the apartheid regime decided to rigidly enforce an outdated policy which stipulated that secondary school proceedings must be in the language of Afrikaans, rather than English or native African languages. Teachers and students alike largely ignored the imposition, however, as they resented this assimilation effort on the part of their oppressors. As time wore on, tensions grew. Teachers chose to resign or were fired for not instructing in Afrikaans and students who refused to complete assignments in this language were expelled. The situation culminated in a massive protest march in 1976, which was attended by more than 20,000 students. Unfortunately, it was not long before police began firing tear gas, and then bullets, into the crowd of children (Anonymous "The Soweto Riots, 1976"). As noted by Stephens (1995)

[t]his was the beginning of waves of arrests, torture, and 'disappearances' of black young people. As level after level of the black political leadership was killed, imprisoned, or driven into exile, younger and younger political activists stepped in to fill the vacuum. Ultimately, the targets of systematic government action were as young as eight years old (p. 22).

More than 360 persons were killed during the Soweto riots. Many of the fallen were black school children, bravely attempting to protect their culture from the apartheid regime. Today, in Soweto and surrounding communities it has been recognized that the 1976 riots were the beginning of the end of the apartheid system and children were a significant part of this process (Anonymous "The Soweto Riots, 1976"). Accordingly, memorials have been set up to commemorate the children and praise their bravery (Damer 2003).

Though countless other examples of children's activism could be cited, and indeed the experiences of 10 activist children will be explored in detail below, the point is clear: children in various times and places invariably exert agency in their families, at school and in the broader community. Fortunately, these efforts have increasingly been recognized by international bodies, national legislative assemblies, individual community members and academics – particularly those within the field of sociology.

The Disappearance of Childhood

Surfacing at roughly the same time as this recognition of children's capabilities and the sociology of childhood has been a concern that conditions of modern society are somehow eroding the nature of childhood. Patricia Lynott and Barbara Logue (1993) provide an excellent overview of this trend as it has been articulated in academic literature. According to the authors, many elements of contemporary society have been implicated in the disappearance of childhood. In this regard, 'hurried childhood' theorists point to increasing stress levels experienced by today's children who are "forced to grow up too fast" in light of broad socio-structural changes in the family, school, work and media (Lynott and Logue 1992: 472). Concerning the family, the proliferation of working mothers, coupled with a growing divorce rate and increases in single parenting, are thought to thrust children into an early adulthood. These processes have been accompanied by shifts in the educational system that place ever more emphasis on structured learning "and the acquisition of skills such as reading and mathematics" over free play and games (Lynott and Logue 1992: 474). Once out of school, it is argued that progressively more children are either choosing or being pressured into work outside the home, thereby foregoing their 'right' to a protected state of innocence within the private domain. Finally, Lynott and Logue highlight the

emphasis many scholars have placed on the role of media in the modern erosion of childhood.

A particularly influential piece in this regard was Neil Postman's 1982 work *The Disappearance of Childhood*, through which Postman relates both the appearance and disappearance of childhood to media. The book commences with an overview of childhood's place in history. Postman (1994) contends that through their emphasis on education the "Greeks gave us a foreshadowing of the idea of childhood" (p. 8). This idea was reinforced by the Romans who developed the notion of shame as a distinctive marker separating adults and children. The idea of protecting children from 'shameful' adult secrets is central to Postman's conception of childhood, as he asserts that "*without a well-developed idea of shame, childhood cannot exist*" [emphasis in original] (Postman 1994: 9). In particular Postman stresses the importance of keeping sexuality from children through shaming tactics. In fact, he argues it was due to the open culture and sharing of sexual secrets during the Middle Ages that any notion of childhood that had previously developed was destroyed. This blurring of lines between adult and children's cultures was related to the fact that styles of writing and alphabets were rapidly multiplying both in number and complexity which significantly decreased literacy rates. As a result, the school system all but collapsed and oral traditions and face-to-face interactions became the cultural norm. Children were no longer shielded from adult (sexual) acts or discussions and thus, for Postman, childhood was lost (Postman 1994).

This situation was reversed, however, with the invention and popularization of the printing press in the second half of the 15th century. In essence, Postman argues that childhood as a separate stage in the life course was brought about by this invention

because it replaced more accessible oral traditions (Jenks 2005: 117). As literacy became an increasingly valued social commodity, one that children had to be taught over time, childhood and adulthood were compartmentalized into developmentally separate stages. In Postman's (1994) words, "From print onward, adulthood had to be earned. It became a symbolic, not a biological, achievement. From print onward, the young would have to become adults, and they would have to do it by learning to read, by entering the world of typography" (p. 36). Though broad structural forces have threatened childhood since this time – for instance during industrialization when many children participated in the paid labour sector rather than attending school, thereby side-stepping traditional adult/child distinctions and a more gradual transition between these life stages through literacy development – Postman contends that childhood as an idea has remained relatively stable, that is, until the 20th century when media underwent another revolution.

According to Postman (1994), new communication technologies such as "the rotary press, the camera, the telephone, the phonograph, the movies, the radio, [and] television" have "represented an uncoordinated but powerful assault on language and literacy, a recasting of the world of ideas into speed-of-light icons and images" (p. 72-73). Postman argues there is a significant difference between language (which is symbolic) and graphic representations of ideas (which 'show things') and he asserts that while language is for the mind, graphics dull it. Most importantly, Postman contends that as the emphasis on visual culture increases, children no longer need to learn special skills in order to be indoctrinated into the broader culture. Instead, they can simply turn on the television or play video games (Cunningham 1995: 178-180). Essentially, the argument is that media undermine the intellectual hierarchies that make childhood

possible as children are un-shamefully exposed to adult secrets. The line between adulthood and childhood is once again blurred (Postman 1994).

Postman's beliefs about children prematurely entering the traditionally adult-only world of culture via new media technologies are echoed in public sentiment and in the work of other academics. One prominent concern in this regard has been the relationship between children, advertising and consumerism. In their examination of parents' and children's construction of risk, Harden and her colleagues (2000b) found that a common feeling amongst adults is that children today are under greater pressure to consume than in the past (p. 4), an assumption that finds support in recent research. In this vein Vanobbergen (2004) remarks that, "In the last couple of decades childhood has also become a consumer childhood. Retailers have become more child oriented in their sales techniques and there has been an increase in promotional activities aimed at children" (p. 161). To this argument O'Sullivan (2005) adds that children are receiving increasing levels of resources to consume, and that from an early age children utilize consumption as a means to work on the 'project of the self'. This process contradicts traditional notions of the innocent child who is defined largely in terms of play and protection in the private sphere (O'Sullivan 2005).

A further concern involving children being exposed to adult secrets and culture via the media derives from its programming content. To begin with, it is feared that images of violence and sexuality could harm children or that children could attempt to imitate the adult behaviours they witness in the media. Almost paradoxically, other anxieties revolve around educational programming that is thought to pressure children away from creative, active play towards more skills-oriented tasks (Lynott and Logue 1992: 476). All of these anxieties stem from a perceived media-induced blurring of

traditional boundaries between childhood and adulthood. Significantly, Harden et al. (2000b) found that while their data did not “bear out the ‘end of childhood’ thesis...many parents had accepted this received wisdom that childhood itself was under threat” (p. 9). For some, this fear has been substantiated by the recent violent criminal actions of a few children.

One of the most notorious instances of child criminality occurred in 1993 when two twelve year-old children in the United Kingdom kidnapped and murdered James Bulger, an infant approaching his third birthday. While the response to this crime was complex with “calls for retribution and revenge at least matched [by] those for compassion and understanding” (James and Jenks 1996: 316), a common theme in the response of both the media and general public was a questioning of the state of childhood in our modern society. For many people the Bulger child-murderers effectively shattered the conventional adult/child distinction of innocence. In the wake of this crime, society feared not only the loss of the two children’s lives that were on trial for murder, but the destruction of childhood itself (James and Jenks 1996: 321).

Analogous to the trends discussed earlier in this thesis – ambiguity in ideas about children’s rights and protections, the risky and at risk child, and the increasing privatization of childhood – the recognition of children as social actors, their growing participation in the public sphere, and the anxiety over childhood’s disappearance have all resulted in greater attempts to control children and maintain boundaries between childhood and adulthood. While this occurs in a multitude of manners, from parents keeping adult (sexual) information from their children to restricting their use of certain spaces, one prominent means through which this is accomplished is by conceptually removing atypical children from the category of childhood. As noted by Scott, Jackson

and Backett-Milburn (1998) “One way of dealing with the unruly child, with the spectre of the demonic child, is to declare that child not a child” (p. 697). While these authors outline how criminal or disruptive children defy conventional ideas about childhood’s innocence and are thus removed from its protective boundaries, it is possible that the activist child is also a transgressor of this characterization and thus may also be ignored or cast out in order to preserve idyllic conceptions. In this manner, as Freeman (1998) suggests, “it is more than a striking coincidence, perhaps even a paradox, that with the growing institutional recognition that children have rights has come the assertion that childhood is a disappearing phenomenon” (p. 438). For as children’s rights are recognized and, more importantly, as children increasingly exercise these rights in a political, public manner, traditional assumptions about children’s passivity or incompetence no longer apply. As a result, we are left with an idea about childhood and few, if any, actual children who fit the mold.

Research Questions and Methodological Approach: The use of Textual Analysis and Interviews

Although the academic literature reviewed here provided a fairly thorough account of our socially constructed conceptions of childhood and the ambiguities and tensions that lie therein, many areas of children’s everyday lives have yet to be explored. In this regard, the phenomenon of child activism has largely evaded the gaze of sociologists.⁵ As a result, it is unclear how child activists are perceived by adults and whether these depictions fit (or do not fit) within our broader, cultural ideas about what it means to be a child. In order to explore this issue, I decided to conduct a textual

⁵ In some cases children’s activism has been explored as part of broader debates about active citizenship (see, for instance, Cunningham and Lavelette 2004; Stasiulis 2002).

analysis of newspaper articles pertaining to two Canadian child activists. This particular method was selected as news media are a very accessible means of examining dominant cultural ideas. As asserted by Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1987, 1989, 1991), dominant cultural constructions tend to be produced and reproduced by the mainstream news media. This occurs because “news articulates current sensibilities about collective life and the basis of social order” (Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1987: 59). In other words, journalists attempt to create stories which resonate with everyday common sense ideas in order to make their reports accessible to an expansive, general audience. In doing so, journalists reproduce common sense views of reality, including dominant ideologies about children and their appropriate place in society.

Accordingly, newspaper articles related to Craig Kielburger and Hannah Taylor will be examined.⁶ The articles under review span the first two years of each child’s ‘media career’, quite literally beginning from the first newspaper accounts of their activities. Thus, sources utilized for media accounts of Craig range from 1995-96, while the Hannah texts were taken from the 2004-05 period. The logic behind this selection was to create a manageable sample size of articles to utilize for this investigation. The articles were located via an online database, *Lexis Nexis*, which provides full-text access to news content. To find appropriate articles, two separate searches were conducted using each child’s name as the ‘key word’. Both searches were narrowed using the date ranges specified above. Through these means, six articles related to Hannah and 29 pertaining to Craig were found. Since one of the Hannah stories was actually a letter to the editor, it was excluded from the analysis, leaving five articles for review. In order to

⁶ Although neither of these activists was personally known to me at the time of this textual analysis, Hannah would eventually participate in an interview.

create a more workable sample size of Craig's coverage, articles with fewer than 300 words were omitted (eight texts), as were stories that were duplicated in various newspapers (three texts). Out of the remaining 18 articles, 10 were randomly selected for analysis. The majority of the articles under review were published in major North American newspapers which included the *Toronto Sun* (3), *The Toronto Star* (7), *The Boston Herald*, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Washington Post*. The sole exception to this was one journalistic piece related to Craig that appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, an international and daily publication.

Aside from the exploration of cultural conceptions of child activists, a further issue that has largely been unaddressed in sociological literature is how these constructions interact with the ideas, opinions and experiences of actual children. Having reviewed the existing body of sociological work pertaining to childhood, I wondered whether child activists' experiences fit within our characterization of what it means to be a child. In a similar vein, I wanted to learn how child activists define childhood and how this characterization compares with dominant social constructions of the term. More generally, I also sought to discover why these children became activists and how society has responded to their activism.

In order to address these questions, as a second stage of the research, I opted to conduct interviews with activist children. This method was preferred as it enabled children to directly convey their experiences and opinions regarding these issues. Similarly to other scholars, I have taken the view that children are experts in their own lives. In this regard, though the general themes and topic areas of the study were pre-determined, interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix G ~ Interview Guide for a

detailed list of my interview questions). This format allowed respondents to have greater flexibility in determining what issues would be discussed. Importantly, all participants were clearly informed prior to the commencement of the interview that it was their stories which interested me, and that they could tell me anything they wished, even if it did not relate directly to the questions posed. At the end of each interview, the children were asked if there were additional comments they would like to make, if there were any further questions I should have asked, or if I had missed a significant issue during the conversation.⁷ Again, these efforts were meant to ensure children had ample opportunity to voice their own opinions and raise unique topics of discussion.

The next section of this thesis will explore the themes that emerged from the textual analysis and interview data, which will be contextualized by the academic literature outlined previously. Again, these studies demonstrate how prevailing ideas about childhood influence treatment towards children in a manner that limits their ability to meaningfully contribute to our social and political environment. The final portion of this thesis takes an unusual further step and reviews in detail the process through which child interviewees were accessed and recruited for this study. I decided this process itself provided very revealing data for the thesis as the dilemmas I encountered in accessing interviewees demonstrated how the same structural conditions that disempower children in our society are reproduced in limiting their participation in social science research of this kind.

⁷ It is important to note that while children were the primary focus of this research, when parents, teachers and other adults associated with participants expressed a desire to share their thoughts about child activism they were given the opportunity to do so. Although these conversations were less formal and organized than those with children, the perspectives of adults were taken into account in the proceeding analysis.

Exploring Cultural Constructions of Child Activists: A Textual Analysis of Media Reports

News media provide one means through which dominant cultural constructions can be explored. There is a great deal of scholarly research that suggests mainstream news media produce and reproduce dominant cultural constructions, thereby supporting the status quo. This occurs for both organizational and cultural reasons. On one hand, there is a strong tendency for journalists to rely on official sources. As noted by Baylor (1996), this “dependence on routine sources could reflect issues of expediency, lack of initiative, or simply the absence of other sources” (p. 243). Official sources generally have at their disposal financial (and other) resources that far outweigh those of the average person. In many cases these are directly allocated to the ‘symbolic contest’ which takes place in the media (Gamson and Stuart 1992: 57). Thus, news stories frequently originate with a press release that provides journalists with up-to-date and inexpensive information (Kruse 2001). Journalists also rely on these types of individuals precisely because they are official. In this sense, “prominent actors such as government spokespersons” are “more politically relevant than others, whether the media like it or not” (Koopmans 2004: 37-8). Because they rely so heavily on a relatively small proportion of the population for information, the news media’s coverage of events is generally limited “to more or less conventional positions” such that more radical or ‘challenger’ views are omitted from the debate (Kruse 2001: 69).

This tendency to support the status quo is reinforced by the economic and class-based nature of the news industry. As owners “of the major print and electronic media generally enjoy close ties with other influential business and political leaders” it is unlikely that they would interfere with or challenge existing social norms in a manner

that would undermine the interests of the elite class (Baylor 1996: 243). Furthermore, since news outlets depend a great deal on revenue accrued from advertisements, there is a “substantial pressure to avoid coverage of some actions, or to report on events in a way that would result in the loss of advertising dollars” (Baylor 1996: 243).

News media also support the status quo because of their position within our cultural environment. As news stories are meant to be accessible to a diverse and expansive population, journalists use media frames that are easily understood and resonate well with audience members (as well as the journalists themselves). Media frames can be thought of as “a set of ideas that interpret, define and give meaning to social and cultural phenomena” (Baylor 1996: 242). Importantly, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) point out how some of these media ‘packages’ or frames resonate better than others. Generally, these authors assert that stories that successfully resonate with audience members are those which fit with broader, cultural themes. These resonances “increase the appeal of a package; they make it appear natural and familiar” (Gamson and Modigliani 1989: 5).

Thus, journalists incorporate dominant cultural beliefs into their stories for a variety of reasons. In doing so, the dominance of these beliefs is reproduced (Ericson et al. 1989: 204-208). In light of these circumstances, I will use a textual analysis of news media reports relating to Hannah Taylor and Craig Kielburger to explore prevailing cultural ideas about child activism. In this context, journalists’ efforts to make their stories fit with the common sense views of a mass audience likely played a greater role in the way these activists were portrayed than media ownership or reliance on official sources. Prior to investigating the ways in which Craig and Hannah were depicted in the

news articles reviewed here, some background information on each activist, their cause, and their accomplishments is needed.

Craig Kielburger and the Kids Can Free the Children organization that he co-founded are perhaps the most recognized contemporary illustration of child activism in Canada. In 1995, a 12 year-old Ontarian boy reached for the comic section of the newspaper while getting ready for school. Before he got to the comics, however, Craig Kielburger paused to read a front page story about a boy his age, Iqbal Masih, who had been murdered while on a campaign to raise awareness about child labour in his homeland of Pakistan. Not knowing exactly what to do, but knowing he had to do something, Craig spoke with a few of his classmates who, together, founded the Free the Children organization. As stated by the members of the group, their mission was “not only to free children from abuse and exploitation, but to free children from the idea that they are not old enough or smart enough or capable enough to help change the world” (Free the Children 2003). Today Free the Children is an international organization run by children and for children. Free the Children has a presence in more than 35 countries worldwide and more than one million children have been involved in its extensive projects over the years. The group’s feats include empowering children in various parts of the world to take action in issues they feel are important, succeeding in pressuring governments to change their laws in respect to child exploitation, building schools in developing countries, outfitting and shipping medical supplies to health centers and providing clean water systems for communities in need (Free the Children 2004).

The activist efforts of these children are nothing short of remarkable and inspirational, a fact that has been recognized by the group’s impressive three-time nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize (Schlein 2006a: 2). Since founding Free the

Children, Craig himself “has traveled to more than 40 countries, visiting underprivileged children and speaking out in defense of children’s rights” (Free the Children 2005). He has personally accepted numerous awards including the Nelson Mandela Human Rights Award (Free the Children 2005) and, most recently, the 2006 World Children’s Prize that has been affectionately referred to as the Children’s Nobel Prize. The receipt of this award was especially meaningful for Craig not only because he was selected by a global panel of children “consisting of former child soldiers, slaves, refugees and street children,” but also because “the first World Children’s Prize was awarded posthumously to Iqbal Masih” who was Craig’s inspiration for becoming a child rights activist (Schlein 2006b).

While Craig and Free the Children have a long history of activism spanning more than ten years, Hannah Taylor’s political engagement began much more recently. In the year 2000, when Hannah was 5 years old, she was struck by the issue of homelessness as she witnessed a person forced to search for nutritional sustenance from the trash. As she writes, “When I was 5 years old my mother and I saw a man eating out of a garbage can. I was very sad and felt sick about it. I asked my mother why he had to do that. I talked to my mother about homelessness a lot. Why, Why, Why I asked. If everybody shared what they had would that cure homelessness?” (Taylor “I Wish I Could Cure Homelessness”). Devastated by what she had observed, Hannah kept asking questions. In response to these, her mother eventually told her that “sometimes when you worry and feel sad about things, if you do something to change the problem, your heart won’t feel so sad” (Taylor “I Wish I Could Cure Homelessness”). It was this inspiration accompanied by her newly formed friendship with a homeless man named Rick Adams

that led Hannah to found the Ladybug Foundation in 2003 (Ladybug Foundation “Hannah’s Bio”).

As a non-profit organization dedicated to helping Canada’s homeless population, the aim of the Ladybug Foundation is to support “Hannah’s efforts to spread awareness and raise funds to assist operating charitable organizations which provide food, shelter, and other needs of the homeless and near homeless in Canada, without judgement, so they can find dignity, security, hope and refuge” (Ladybug Foundation “About Us”). As primarily a relationship-building and fundraising organization, the Ladybug Foundation employs unique techniques such as selling scarves or painting baby-food jars like ladybugs and placing them in various locations in order to collect donations. Hannah maintains that the ladybug theme is based on the fact that “ladybugs bring luck and homeless people need good luck” (Ladybug Foundation “Hannah’s Bio”). Through these efforts, Hannah and the Ladybug Foundation have raised in excess of half a million dollars in less than three years (Ladybug Foundation “Hannah’s Bio”).

General Findings of the Textual Analysis

Through the textual analysis of newspaper articles pertaining to these two Canadian activists several themes emerged. The most predominant was the emphasis placed on their age. In all five Hannah-related articles (Richard 2004; Stroble 2005a, 2005b; Taylor 2005a, 2005b), and all ten of the texts focused on Craig (Beckham 1996; Cannon 1996; Clayton 1996; Landsberg 1995; Orwen 1996; Puckett 1996; Scotton 1995; Speirs 1996; Thompson 1996; Trueheart 1996), the child’s age at the time of writing was noted. Furthermore, most journalists also drew attention to the young age at which these children initially became politically active (Beckham 1996; Cannon 1996;

Clayton 1996; Landsberg 1995; Pucket 1996; Richard 2004; Stroble 2005a; Stroble 2005b; Taylor 2005a; Trueheart 1996).

Aside from this direct mentioning of age, many articles emphasized various other childlike qualities of Hannah and Craig that served to differentiate them from adults. Generally, these took the form of references to the children's emotional, behavioural or physical immaturity. For instance, two out of the four Hannah articles noted her need to stand on a box while delivering a speech in order that audience members could see her. Both of these texts also referenced Hannah's need for an adult to cut her food (Stroble 2005b; Taylor 2005b). In regards to psychological characteristics, one journalist reported that Hannah's ideas were 'simple' (Stroble 2005b). Along these lines, it was suggested that it was easier for children to become politically engaged than their older counterparts, as adults have the tendency to "get overwhelmed by society's problems, [whereas] children like Hannah just want to go out and do something to make a difference" (Richard 2004). This remark would seem to imply that children are not burdened with the knowledge of complex social issues that adults are forced to deal with.

Further alluding to her intellectual and emotional immaturity, the fact that Hannah lost momentum in her speech for a moment was noted by one journalist who quoted her as saying "Sorry, I got mixed up" (Taylor 2005b), while others included commentary about her youthful giggling (Stroble 2005a; Taylor 2005a). Hannah was also quoted as declaring that, prior to her meeting with Prime Minister Paul Martin, she was "expecting a man with a crown and golden robes" (Stroble 2005b). When asked if she liked Martin, Hannah replied "Well, he likes soup. His laugh is very hearty. He's very nice" (Taylor 2005a). Both these statements allude to Hannah's perceived

intellectual immaturity. Finally, Hannah's hobbies were also pointed out, particularly in terms of her interest in animals and family pets (Stroble 2005a; Taylor 2005a), and she was frequently labeled a kid (Taylor 2005a, 2005b), child (Richard 2004) or little girl (Stroble 2005a; Taylor 2005a). Again, the inclusion of these remarks in journalistic accounts of Hannah's activist endeavors draw attention to the childlike characteristics that set her apart from adults. This same phenomenon also occurred in Craig's coverage, albeit to a lesser extent.

In the articles focusing on Craig, the sole reference to his physical immaturity indicated that he was a 'gangly adolescent' (Cannon 1996). In terms of other childlike characteristics pointed out, it was noted that Craig had to obtain his parents' permission before he could embark on his planned trip to Asia to meet with working children overseas (Cannon 1996; Clayton 1996; Trueheart 1996). In this respect, his mother was quoted as saying "The idea was utterly ridiculous at the time...I wouldn't even let him take the subway downtown" (Trueheart 1996). Similar to the Hannah coverage, Craig's hobbies also caught the attention of many journalists who reported his participation in the Boy Scouts (Cannon 1996; Landsberg 1995; Orwen 1996; Scotton 1995; Trueheart 1996), Tae Kwan Do (Cannon 1996; Orwen 1996; Trueheart 1996), and his youth church group (Landsberg 1995), as well as his love for outdoor sports such as camping, canoeing, swimming or skiing (Cannon 1996; Clayton 1996; Puckett 1996). Again analogously to the reporting of Hannah, Craig was frequently referred to as a schoolboy (Cannon 1996; Speirs 1996), kid (Beckham 1996; Landsberg 1995), or child (Orwen 1996).

Interestingly, several articles also made direct reference to other vulnerabilities experienced by these children that were not associated with age. Hannah's heart

condition was included in two articles (Stroble 2005b; Taylor 2005b), while Craig's speech impediment was referred to by one journalist (Cannon 1996). The fact that journalists chose to highlight the children's vulnerabilities despite their apparent lack of relevance to the central focus of the articles is significant as the portrayal of children as weak or vulnerable coheres with conventional ways of thinking about children. At the same time, referring to Craig's and Hannah's frailties makes their participation in the public sphere seemingly more exceptional.

Thus one prevalent theme in the selected newspaper articles referring to these child activists was an emphasis on their status as children. Through the reporting of their childlike qualities, immature physical features and their hobbies, Hannah and Craig were reported to be 'normal' children. This status was rendered ambiguous, however, by other statements that they were extraordinary, or somehow existing outside the category of childhood. Referring to Hannah, one article noted that while "Most 8-year-olds are creating homes for their super heroes or fashion dolls, Hannah Taylor is helping find shelter for the homeless" (Richard 2004). In other pieces Hannah was described as "a remarkable girl who inspires us all" (Kathryn Gallagher Morton as quoted in Richard 2004), or "a little girl with a rare combination of emotional and intellectual intelligence that surpasses most adults" (Hartley Richardson as quoted in Taylor 2005b). One journalist even went as far as to ask Hannah the question: "You're 9? Can I See some ID? Ever wished you'd never started this? That you were just a *regular little girl*?" [emphasis mine] (Stroble 2005b). Similar commentary was also found in the Craig-related articles. While one author proclaimed that "Craig Kielburger considers himself an ordinary person. But he's doing extraordinary things" (Beckham 1996), another quoted a representative of the Youth Action Network as saying "I've never met anyone

his age who has been able to accomplish what he has...he's amazing" (Uma Sarkar as quoted in Orwen 1996).

This tension between references to Craig and Hannah's status as 'normal' children and the recognition of their work in the public sphere frequently resulted in the use of ambiguous terms and phrases. For instance, Hannah was referred to as "a little giant of a person" (Hartley Richardson as quoted in Taylor 2005b) with a message that was "simple but not childish" (Taylor 2005b). Similarly, one author referring to Craig declared that "Bright and startlingly confident, the young child-labor activist is an adult trapped in a child's body" (Cannon 1996), while another stated "Though he is startlingly poised and articulate, and speaks without notes with terrific clarity and force, he is also an appealing unaffected kid" (Landsberg 1995).

Exploring the Trends: Media's Role in Reproducing Dominant Cultural Conceptions

Thus the prevailing themes in news reports of Craig and Hannah were, firstly, an emphasis on their age and status as normal children and, secondly, their exclusion from the category of childhood via comments about their exceptionalities and more ambivalent statements that blurred the lines between Craig, Hannah and adults. This tension both reflects and likely contributes to the enduring cultural ambiguities about childhood that were discussed at length previously in this thesis. Notably, both of these media trends cohere with the dominant cultural tendency noted by Cahill (1990) to create and maintain boundaries between children and adults, thereby addressing the mounting concern that childhood is increasingly hurried, disappearing or already lost.

In the first instance, the journalistic articles reviewed here reaffirmed traditional notions of childhood by referring to Hannah and Craig's age as well as their physical, emotional and intellectual immaturity. Furthermore, the children's vulnerabilities were

pointed out both in terms of Craig's speech impediment and Hannah's heart condition, as well as in regards to her need for adult assistance in cutting her food. In a similar fashion, the need for parental permission before he embarked on his overseas trip also articulated Craig's dependence on adults. Additional qualities that were highlighted confirming childhood's status included the emphasis on Craig's hobbies, his status as a schoolboy who liked to 'goof off' with his friends (Trueheart 1996), and a focus on Hannah's pets as well as the toy she brought on stage while giving a speech. In this way, articles presented Craig and Hannah in an ideal-type fashion, as children they were rightly innocent, immature, vulnerable, protected and distinct from adults.

Conversely, because the reason for their media coverage stemmed from their participation in the public (adult) sphere, journalists also pointed out differences between Craig, Hannah and normal children. For instance, while the average child was depicted as being predominantly self-interested, playing with action heroes or dolls, Craig and Hannah were referred to as amazing, emotionally and intellectually advanced, doing extraordinary things, and achieving startling accomplishments for social causes. In one instance Craig was even called an 'adult trapped in a kid's body,' while in another Hannah was labeled 'a giant of a little person.' These statements serve to further reinforce Hannah and Craig's apparent departure from childhood. The significance of this exclusion is that by removing exceptional, unique or simply 'unchildlike' persons from the category of childhood, its traditional boundaries and characteristics are maintained.

The findings of this textual analysis thus corroborate the existence of cultural ambiguity pertaining to both children and the category of childhood that was outlined in the scholarly literature reviewed previously in this thesis. Furthermore, it has provided a

clearer picture of how children, and in particular activist children, are perceived and portrayed in our contemporary, Western world. As children actively participating in the public sphere, Craig Kielburger and Hannah Taylor were at once portrayed as ‘normal’, passive, protected, playful children and as extraordinary, abnormally developed beings that resembled something closer to adults. Through this tension between their inclusion and exclusion from the category of childhood, culturally created boundaries between adults and children were preserved; in this way social fears about childhood’s disappearance were attended to. At the same time, and fitting with the cultural trend to recognize children’s power and agency, Craig and Hannah’s public actions for social justice were indeed recognized.

As an aside, though there were many commonalities between Craig and Hannah’s media coverage, a striking divergence was an emphasis on Hannah’s dress and appearance that was rarely found in the articles focused on Craig. This suggests there are gender differences in cultural conceptions of children as articulated by the media. In three out of the five articles under review here, Hannah’s appearance was mentioned. In one piece it was noted that “She wore a white blouse, red skirt and white knee-socks and carried a ladybug-motif backpack” (Taylor 2005b). This ‘ladybug plush toy’ was also noted by a second journalist (Stroble 2005b). The final reference to Hannah’s appearance noted that her hair was tied in ‘pig-tails’ (Taylor 2005a). Conversely, Craig’s appearance was only mentioned twice with the phrases: “T-shirt-clad student,” and “dressed in a dark blue T-shirt and running shoes” (Speirs 1996; Thompson 1996). On both of these occasions the reference was to Craig’s attire when he met with the Prime Minister Chrétien in Asia, rather than what he was wearing upon meeting with the press.

This tendency to focus on Hannah's appearance rather than her achievements fits with broader, gendered differences in media depictions of individuals. In their investigation of gender portrayals in women's sports magazines, Marie Harden and her colleagues (2005) noted the media's propensity to represent hegemonic cultural norms, including sexual differences between men and women. As a result, the media were found to "emphasize women's physical appearance more often than men's" (Harden, Lynn and Walsdorf 2005: 108). Even the appearances of highly successful and/or professional women were highlighted by the media. Consequently, the authors concluded that "Women can be independent, but they must also be attractive" (Harden, Lynn and Walsdorf 2005: 108). This finding was corroborated by Knight and Giuliano (2002) who also looked at the depiction of women athletes and found a strong tendency to emphasize not only their attractiveness, but also their "emotionality, femininity, and heterosexuality" (p. 219). They also contended that there was quantitatively less coverage of women's sports, shorter news stories and fewer photographs of women athletes in the media, even at the high school level (Knight and Giuliano 2002: 218). It is therefore arguable that Hannah's appearance was emphasized more than Craig's because she is female. Furthermore, the assertions of these authors also suggest that Hannah and her fight to end Canadian homelessness may have received less media attention because of her gender.

Listening to Children: The Perspectives of Child Activists Regarding Childhood, Activism and Cross-Generational Relationships

The academic literature reviewed in this thesis and the findings from my textual analysis point to the ambiguous nature of childhood in our contemporary culture. They both suggest that children occupy a marginal status in our society and, secondly, that

children who do not fit within the bounds of idyllic conceptions of childhood are excluded from the category of child. The textual analysis in particular illustrated how dominant cultural beliefs about children emphasize their differences from adults. This fits with the broader trend to create and maintain boundaries between children and adults, thereby addressing the mounting concern that childhood is increasingly hurried, disappearing or already lost. Though there appears to be strong evidence in support of these assertions, one important source of information has largely gone unexplored. Within the discipline of sociology, little work has been done to understand how children define childhood, how they feel about their relationships with adults, and whether they feel they are successfully able to exercise their rights as set out in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. In light of this gap in literature, one of the primary aims of this project was to provide a venue for children, and in particular activist children, to have their voices and opinions on these matters heard.

Description of the Sample:

Though recruiting children for this study proved to be a somewhat arduous task, as will be discussed in more detail in the final section of the thesis, ten children chose to participate by completing an interview. Six of these children were interviewed face-to-face while the other four were interviewed via telephone. The children's ages ranged from seven to fourteen (7, 10, 10, 11, 11, 12, 12, 12, 12, 14). Many of the children had been involved with activism for a number of years and several of them recalled becoming engaged in social and political issues as early as age five. There were six girls and four boys (for a brief profile of each child and his/her activist interests see Appendix F ~ Interviewee Profiles). Nine of the children were born in North America, while one emigrated from Libya. Four of the participants were second-generation immigrants as

their parents originated from nations outside of Canada and the United States. Aside from these four children, another participant who was born in North America had been adopted. While her adoptive parents were born in the US, her biological parents were native to Mexico.

Significantly, five of the children desired to have their actual names used in all writings associated with this study; these children were Hannah Taylor, Naomi Palmatier, Cody Clark, Charlotte Connolly and Calvin Mitchell. Two others desired to have their first names published with their last names omitted (Aiden and Danika). The final three respondents were recruited from the school board. In accordance with the board's wishes, these children were not allotted the option of having their real names utilized for the purposes of this study and thus their names have been changed (Manyara, Rahul and Aisha).

These three children also differed from the remaining respondents as they were involved in what I am calling organizational activism as their activist aims and initiatives were formulated and executed in a group setting. These children initially learned about global issues from a teacher in their school. Every year this teacher informs her students about current global issues and asks them if they would like to help make changes in our world. Each student can then choose whether he/she would like to participate (though it seems that the majority of the class do) and together the group decides on a name for their campaign, what activities they will engage in, and to what goal they will strive. In contrast, the remaining seven respondents engaged in more independent activist work and are thus classified as individual activists. These children took it upon themselves to learn about a particular issue that had sparked their interest and autonomously decided they wanted to act. Whether their goal was to raise money

and awareness for homelessness or to create programs to comfort cancer patients receiving treatment, each of these children formulated their own goals and largely organized the initiatives designed to reach those aims, though again they frequently welcomed support from external parties.

Overview of Research Findings:

During the interviews with these 10 activist children (and, in some instances, accompanying discussions with their parents or teachers) several important themes emerged. One interesting finding was that, contrary to popular concerns that child activists are somehow being manipulated or coerced into action by adults, most of the children who participated in this study recalled how their inspiration arose out of a significant life event. Furthermore, many children indicated that their parents were not actively involved in social and political issues prior to their own engagement.

Another important observation was that while child activists shared similar goals, employed analogous tactics and faced comparable challenges to their adult counterparts, there were several important differences between child and adult activists. Most significantly, many obstacles faced by child activists were directly related to their status as a child. Children's age served as a restrictive force that was used to justify their exclusion from certain organizations as well as their tokenistic roles in others. According to participants, their age also meant that adults did not take them seriously as activists. Notably, these challenges were experienced differently by children engaged in individual activism and those participating in organizational activism.

A third important theme emerging out of the interview process was that while children acknowledged several differences between themselves and adults, my interviewees strongly believed they were capable of making positive changes to our

world despite these differences. In this regard, the children outlined a variety of tactics they employed to overcome age-related challenges encountered in their activist careers. Furthermore, although children felt that having adult support would facilitate children's involvement in social and political issues, they also attributed to children themselves a great deal of power (and responsibility) to educate and motivate their peers.

Finally, for many of the children, the act of balancing responsibilities and a sense of empathy with the need to play and have fun was regarded as essential to 'being a child'. The children's inclusion of activism into their definition of childhood is extremely interesting as it contradicts prevailing ideas that the place of childhood is in the private sphere where children are protected from social responsibilities. In light of these various trends, children called for a greater role in decision-making processes. They expressed a desire to be heard and to have their opinions taken seriously. I will now turn to a more in-depth discussion of each of these important observations.

Influence or Coercion? The Role of Parents and other Adults in Children's Activism

Again, one of the key findings of this research was related to the role of parents and other adults in influencing children's activism. In our society there is a general concern that children engaging with social issues in the public sphere have been coerced or manipulated into doing so. These sentiments were clearly articulated to me in class settings, during a conference presentation, as well as in informal conversations regarding this project. Whenever I discussed my desire to explore the phenomenon of child activism, individuals either blatantly denied children's ability to participate in activism, claiming that their efforts were 'inevitably' dependent on adults, or questioned children's motives and competency in more indirect fashions.

This inclination in our society to assume children's activism is the outcome of adult coercion was also highlighted by Invernizzi and Milne (2002) in their discussion of working children's coalitions and the movement to abolish child labour. These authors argue that fears about the potential for children to be manipulated for political purposes arose out of Hannah Arendt's exploration of the origins of totalitarian regimes. In this work Arendt noted how "Children's and youth movements in the former Soviet Union, China and, earlier, National Socialist Germany have been used to underpin social control, penetrating into family and community" (Invernizzi and Milne 2002: 415). Within these specific socio-historical contexts, Arendt argued that children were manipulated; they were used by the ruling regime to gain access to social institutions, thereby extending the power of the establishment. More recently, Arendt's arguments have been extended to encompass additional situations. Social movements, for instance, are now routinely compared to the Nationalist endeavors Arendt investigated. The anxiety over children's potential to be coerced into political actions has thus remained prevalent. Notably, Invernizzi and Milne contend this fear is predicated on two assumptions. On one hand, children are regarded as vulnerable and incompetent, and thus easily exploited by adults. On the other, "it is assumed that children have no power to initiate or organise activities" (Invernizzi and Milne 2002: 416) and thus when children do engage in political or social issues in the public sphere it is assumed that their actions are dependent on adults. These beliefs clearly correspond with our modern notions about what it means to be a child.

Despite this common belief that activist children have been coerced or manipulated by adults, many of the children I interviewed recalled how a significant life event had inspired their activism. For instance, Hannah indicated that her conviction to

help homeless persons began a number of years ago when she and her mother Colleen visited a beauty salon. After leaving the salon, the two hopped in their car and headed home. While driving Colleen accidentally turned the wrong way and ended up in a strange alleyway. Looking out the car window Hannah was struck by the presence of a man eating out of a garbage can. As Hannah recalled, “when I was five years old I saw my first homeless person and it really made me sad, and it made me confused, and I wanted to do something about it.” She immediately began asking her mother questions about why the man would do this. Colleen explained to her then 5 year-old daughter that some people are hungry and do not have money to buy food so they are forced to find it in any way they can. The memory of that man stayed with Hannah, and as her mother later explained to me, for roughly a year “every time she would eat or she would sleep or she would be joyful she would say, ‘mother where is he?’” In time Colleen told Hannah that perhaps if she did something about this issue her heart would not be so sad. With this support, Hannah began devising various methods to raise money and awareness about homelessness. Though she started small, speaking to her first grade class and helping to organize a bake and art sale at school, she eventually created the Ladybug Foundation.

Cody’s inspiration for becoming an activist was much different than Hannah’s. At the age of 5 both of Cody’s parents were diagnosed with cancer. As his parents had immigrated to Canada from overseas and did not have any relatives nearby who could care for Cody while they received cancer treatments, Cody spent a significant amount of time in the Chemo Unit of a local hospital. During this time Cody realized just how many cancer patients there were. He also understood that this was a painful and scary time in their lives and he wanted to do something to help. Since then Cody has

successfully implemented two related projects in order to make cancer patients' hospital visits more comfortable; he provides 'Cuddlers' or teddy bears to soothe people in the Unit and also distributes 'Comfort Kits' which include blankets, books and other age-appropriate items (eg. rattles and toys for babies). While Cody's mother is now cancer free, sadly his father passed away in 2006. To honour his father's memory, in March of this year Cody took the first step towards making his Cuddlers an international initiative by bringing them to a hospital in New York.

Calvin also became interested in social issues at a young age and was involved in various volunteering programs during his elementary schooling. In our conversation, he recalled being inspired by figures he had come to know through the media such as Nelson Mandela and Oprah Winfrey, who were actively trying to change the world for the better. The work of these individuals helped Calvin to realize that he enjoyed a very privileged life compared to other children in the world. He became particularly interested in the plight of Africa as he was inspired by the courage and attitudes of its inhabitants who seemed so happy to him, despite the often extreme and tragic conditions in which they lived. Notwithstanding this early interest in activism, Calvin felt that his commitment and passion for helping others was accelerated by two events: a speech given by Craig Kielburger at his school and the death of his Oma (grandmother) in December of last year.

While Calvin knew early on that he wanted to do something to alleviate the world's inequalities, at first he was not quite sure what to do. This changed when Craig Kielburger spoke at his school. Calvin believes that this speech "was the trigger. Right after his presentation I said 'I want to start this' and I started two days later." Speaking to his family and friends about his goal to raise the necessary funds to build a school in

Kenya, Africa, Calvin quickly garnered the support and interest of his loving Oma. He was extremely close to her and was devastated when she passed away a short while after he had begun this project. However, he decided to turn this painful and difficult time in his life into something positive; he decided that he would name the school in Kenya after his Oma and dedicate it to her honour. Calvin originally gave himself four years to raise the \$10,000 which would be used to build the school. Only several months later, he has already raised more than \$6,500. He now believes that work will begin on the school in Kenya within the year.

Like Calvin, Charlotte became an activist in part due to issues and events that were presented to her via the media. In particular, she recalled viewing the movie *Rent* with her sister. This was the first time Charlotte learned about HIV and AIDS. She was struck by this issue and immediately wanted to learn more. In order to do so, she decided to write about HIV and AIDS for her school speech. Though events in the movie *Rent* took place in North America, when Charlotte began researching HIV and AIDS she quickly realized that the issue was closely related to Africa. Thus her passion to raise awareness and alleviate suffering caused by this disease was particularly focused on the plight of Africans. Since becoming aware of this issue, Charlotte has participated in the Stephen Lewis Foundation by organizing local events to raise funds for this cause, she has attended various protest marches, she has started a group at her school that focuses on learning about HIV and AIDS with a particular interest in how it impacts the lives of women, and she has begun to write a speech, in French, about AIDS and how it connects with Global Warming – both of these issues have drastic implications for the developing world.

Aside from being inspired by significant life events, in other contexts, children learned about social or political issues at school or at home and, when provided with the opportunity, were eager to help create positive changes in our world. The primary example of this trend was that of the three children, Manyara, Rahul and Aisha, who participated in activist endeavours at school. These children explained to me how each year Ms. Ryan⁸ informs her students about significant events occurring around the globe. In recent years this has included discussion about issues such as the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, Hurricane Katrina, droughts in Somalia, the Pakistan earthquake, Hurricane Mitch in Haiti, food shortages in refugee camps in Fatheraab, Kenya, and Hurricane Stan and the corresponding mudslides in Guatemala. Having been introduced to these issues, the children are asked if they would like to help; participation is completely voluntary. Willing children are then asked what they would like their group to be named, what issue they would like to address, and how they would like to do so. In this way the children have considerable decision-making power over their activist efforts.

A similar situation was outlined by Naomi who also indicated that she had learned about social and political issues from an educator. However, since Naomi is schooled at home, her teacher is also her mother. In this regard, Naomi recalled how she has learned a lot about animals and their treatment from her mother. In fact, upon being adopted Naomi was required to accept a vegetarian lifestyle at an early age (though she was able to eat meat while dining out) as her entire family was vegan. As Naomi continued to learn about the treatment of animals in our society, her passion for improving their life circumstances grew. By age eight Naomi had decided that she

⁸ This name has been changed.

wished to become a vegan. She also chose to get involved in other efforts to protect animals. She felt this was important as there were numerous stray and mistreated animals in the area where she lived. As she recalled, “I’m involved in animal rescue because where we are there are so many animals around here. Like some in the road that aren’t really alive and then there are some walking around near the road. And it’s just so sad because they are all running around and some of them don’t even have homes.” Thus Naomi began small efforts to save individual animals, for example rescuing and adopting a kitten that had been abandoned in a parking garage, and soon joined larger initiatives such as protests against cruelty to animals.

Another passion of Naomi’s is to help the poor population of Mexico where her biological parents reside. Learning about her Mexican heritage and about the amount of people living in poverty in this nation from her mother, Naomi decided that for her ninth birthday she would request that her friends and family offer small donations rather than gifts. Children’s vitamins and other items were collected and sent via a third party organization to Mexico’s poor. At her birthday party, Naomi and her guests wore traditional Mexican fiesta attire, ate Mexican food and had a traditional piñata. In our conversation Naomi acknowledged her mother’s role in her life as a great inspiration and source of information, yet she maintained that it was her passion for the issues that encouraged her to do something.

Apart from the reality that many child activists located the source of their inspiration within significant life events and/or personal drives, another factor which contradicts the idea that these children were somehow manipulated into action by parents or other adults is that many of the children interviewed noted how they were the first person in their family to become involved in these social issues, a sentiment that

was reiterated by many of their parents. For instance Hannah's mother Colleen described how their family's lifestyle has changed since Hannah became involved in raising money and awareness for homeless persons. As Colleen remarked,

My family knew nothing about homelessness, hunger and poverty. Really! We thought we did, and I think that we had this big huge house, and we had this life. And in one breath we said to our kids, we are not about our stuff and then we just had this gads of stuff (...) I wish I could say we were missionaries and that we had this perfect home and that it was by good example that she is doing this. But the truth is that maybe she just did it in spite of us.

To clarify this point Colleen recalled how when Hannah first saw a homeless man eating out of a garbage can, they were actually driving home from a Christmas manicure, which, at the time, was an annual tradition for the pair. Today Colleen notes, "We live in a house half the size, we no longer have, you know, 12 pairs of skis. We still have a wonderful life, but this has changed us." In this regard Colleen emphasized the reality that Hannah leads the family regarding the issue of homelessness, while her other children lead in different ways.

This assertion that Hannah guides her family in terms of activist causes was also expressed by other parents. For instance, while Aiden is very interested in the environment and is trying to implement a composting program in Ottawa, his mother noted how their family does not even compost. She admitted that she had no idea where Aiden's passion for the environment came from (Aiden himself also could not remember), and in fact at times she felt as though she was holding him back from reaching his goals. In this regard Aiden's mother tried to persuade him to enjoy life as a child, to go outside and play with friends rather than spend his time sitting indoors planning his next activist endeavour.

Cody's mother Jan also attested to the reality that she was no activist prior to her son's engagement with social issues. In her words, "when adults hear that your kids do things they automatically assume that it's the parent who's doing it. I can tell you right now, I would not have the conviction that he has to carry on." In fact, when Cody desired to raise funds in order to buy Cuddlers and other items that would be used in his Comfort Kits, Jan required Cody to demonstrate his commitment to the cause by sitting outside of a local store in order to collect small-change donations. Jan told her son that if he remained at the store for one entire day, she would fully support him in his quest to bring comfort to cancer patients during their treatment. As Cody was only 7 years-old at the time, Jan did not believe Cody would have the determination to follow through with his plan. However, Cody proved her wrong. Since that day Jan has helped Cody in numerous ways, for instance, by driving him to the hospital to drop off his Cuddlers and Comfort Kits, or by helping to manage the money he fundraises, yet both Jan and Cody maintain that it is Cody's dream they are pursuing.

While most of the children interviewed were the first activists in their family, there were two exceptions to this rule; both Naomi and Calvin indicated their parents were involved in social initiatives prior to their own engagement. Importantly, both of these children, and their parents, maintained that it was Calvin and Naomi's choice to engage in activism. Interestingly, Naomi's mother Kelly recognized that since both she and her daughter actively participate in the public sphere, there is added pressure on her to ensure that Naomi receives credit for her actions. In other words, she recognized the need to debunk ideas that she may be pressuring Naomi. As Kelly explained,

It [Naomi's activism] makes me proud. It makes me feel like she is a reflection of what I am doing because I am very much in the public eye. I am in the front page of the paper today, trying to get a spay/neuter

ordinance passed in our county. So I am very much in the public eye and she sees that I am very active in making a difference in the world and she wants to be just like her mother. So it's very flattering to me. One thing that I'm careful of is that I have to tread that line of letting it be known when she is in the public eye, what she gets credit for, for herself, and not having it be mother's pushing her to do it.

Aside from ensuring Naomi gets due acknowledgement for her own ideas and efforts, Kelly also noted how she is careful about how she speaks to Naomi about activist issues. In this regard Kelly feels that it is important to discuss with her children social and political issues. Rather than presenting solutions during these conversations, Kelly leaves the children with questions such as 'Do you want to help?' 'What could we do?' and 'What do you think might be a good solution?' In this way the decisions about what issues to engage in, and how this will be done is left to Naomi (as well as her younger sibling who is also an activist).

Thus the children interviewed for this study, as well as many of their parents, indicated that engaging in activism was a personal choice rather than the outcome of manipulation. Though the sample was small and this research was inherently exploratory, this suggests that anxiety about the potential for children to be coerced into public, political action is over-exaggerated. The reality that these fears remain prevalent in our society is thus interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, this anxiety implies that people are unwilling to accept the idea that children are competent social agents. It similarly suggests that children are vulnerable and easily manipulated. Clearly these fears are intimately related to our ideas about childhood as there is little worry that adults engaging in similar issues and activities have been coerced into doing so. This was noted by Invernizzi and Milne (2002) who wrote,

Because it is embedded in other questions, children's manipulation and competence is evaluated very differently from adult. Many trade union

members probably lack communication skills with which to describe problems, nonetheless we do not limit their participation as a consequence of their inability to be articulate. An adult delegate may well be highly dependent on the abilities of a charismatic leadership to get the real message across, although this does not invalidate his choice of expression and the message conveyed when he or she does take the opportunity to stand up and speak (p. 417).

Our ideas about children's (in)competence and vulnerability are thus implicated in how their public actions are evaluated. A factor which supports this assertion is that adult activists frequently contend that their parents played a significant role in shaping their political agendas (McAdam 2003: 60). Moreover, many academics have recognized the important role of social networks of integration (Della Porta and Diani 1999), affective ties (Hirsch 2003), and social relationships (McAdam 2003) in determining whether an individual will join a social movement and remain committed to its cause. Yet when these influential relations between adults are recognized, they are not accompanied by skepticism and concern that the activists have been coerced. I would argue that this is because adults are viewed as complete and rational beings that are capable of making their own choices; they are perceived as strong enough to withstand external pressures. Alternatively, children are regarded as vulnerable and incompetent and it is therefore assumed they cannot participate meaningfully and independently in the public (adult) sphere.

As a result, rather than listening to children's messages and supporting their activist initiatives, adults remain skeptical of children's participation in the public sphere. While "it would be absurd to imagine that political views are forged (by adults or children) without any external influence" (Invernizzi and Milne 2002: 416), the focus of concern regarding the potential for individuals to be coerced into such actions remains on children because of their perceived incompetence, vulnerability and dependence on

adults. Notably, the identification of children's activism as the outcome of adult manipulation allows current conceptions of childhood as a time of innocence, play, vulnerability and passivity in the private sphere to remain intact. In this sense it reinforces conceptions of the biographical divisions between children and adults.

"Age Sucks!" Exploring the Similarities and Differences between Children's Activism and that of Adults

Another important theme emerging from interview data was that while child activists shared similar goals, employed analogous tactics and faced comparable challenges to their adult counterparts, there were several important differences between these cohorts. These differences were most obvious in terms of the obstacles confronting child activists that were directly related to their age as well as to broader ideas about childhood. Before exploring these differences in more detail, it is important to briefly outline some of the similarities in the activist efforts of children and adults.

Analogous to the multitude of issues addressed by adult-led social movements, the social and political dilemmas that these children were concerned with varied greatly and included issues such as environmental degradation, climate change and pollution, and their implications for humans. For instance, the lack of clean water supply in the developing world was mentioned as was the increase in air quality-related illnesses such as asthma. The children interviewed were also worried about homelessness, HIV and AIDS (particularly in Africa), a lack of educational resources in impoverished nations (again, with an emphasis on Africa) as well as in the Western world, the treatment and care of hospital patients (with a focus on those battling cancer) and, finally, animal welfare. Generally children sought to raise both awareness and funding for these issues.

To this end, a multitude of tactics were employed. To name a few specific examples, children held raffles, bake and art sales, and other fundraisers. They wrote speeches, spoke to their friends and family, communicated with students in other classes or schools as well as politicians and the media. The children aided in building schools overseas, they visited homeless shelters and befriended strangers on the streets. In one case a vow of silence was held to remind people of those impoverished individuals whose voices are commonly unheard. In other contexts children joined already-formed activist organizations and/or participated in protests and marches. Another significant method utilized was to reflect on their behaviours in everyday life in order to change them for the better, whether by composting, rescuing lost, abandoned or injured animals, picking up garbage on the street, or simply by lending a helping hand to those in need.

Aside from their similar interests, aspirations and repertoires of action, child and adult activists also face comparable challenges and to a certain extent share a dependence on other individuals to successfully reach their goals. In regards to this latter point, as was articulated in the review of academic literature, dependency is a natural human condition (Freeman 1998). In terms of political action children and adults share a “dependence on others to organise their travel, documentation, administration and such matters” (Invernizzi and Milne 2002: 417). One specific example of this dependency occurs when activists, both children and adults, rely on third party organizations to disseminate the funds they have raised. While collecting money for social causes is a fairly straight-forward task, it is sometimes challenging for an individual to ensure the funds raised are actually received by those in need. In this study, for instance, Calvin found it was best to align himself with third party organizations such as Free the Children or World Vision who could facilitate this process. Similarly, when Naomi

wanted to provide relief to Mexico's poor population, her mother helped her find an organization that was not only able to help with the transportation and dissemination of Naomi's donations, but was also able to suggest a list of items that were most needed by impoverished families in the region. Notwithstanding this commonality, it is clear that children have greater dependencies than adults. Many of the participants of this study, for instance, relied on adults to drive them to speeches, protests and other events. In this vein Cody noted how his mother frequently escorts him to the hospital in order that he can drop off his Cuddlers and Comfort Kits.

Shifting focus back to the similarities between children and adult activists, both these groups also face practical challenges in reaching their goals. As is the case with adult social movements, the issues that children are confronting are often controversial and thus child activists inevitably face resistance from those who disagree with their cause or chosen tactics. In this study, for instance, Naomi recalled how people reacted negatively to her decision to dress as a tiger and sit in a cage at a protest against animal cruelty in circus acts;

(...) at one of our circus protests I wore a tiger costume and sat in a cage. All of these people came up. A few of them agreed with it, but then some of them, they just got really angry and like started saying how the animals like performing. But if you really get in there and see how the animals are treated, you can tell that they don't like performing.

Naomi noted that while some people calmly approached her to express their concerns, others reacted more strongly and thus Naomi and her family felt compelled to leave the protest as she did not want to engage in such heated disputes. As another illustration of these types of challenges, Naomi discussed how one of her cousins frequently belittles her decision to become a vegan. As she recalled,

I've gotten pretty used to it [negative reactions], so it doesn't really bother me that much, except my cousin. He tries to make it sound like he is all perfect with animals, but really he is really bad. And I've tried telling him that but every time I see him he is always like "why don't you eat meat?" and I have to keep going over it and that makes me really angry.

Thus, despite her best efforts to educate her cousin about the poor treatment of animals bred for consumption, Naomi felt that he refused to listen to her point of view and continued to ignorantly insist that she was wrong, a situation which she found extremely frustrating.

This type of practical challenge was also noted by Hannah. One means by which Hannah and the Ladybug Foundation raise money for homeless persons is to paint baby food jars like ladybugs. These are then distributed to retail outlets and various other public places to provide a means through which people can donate small change.

However, Hannah noted there was some resistance to this scheme:

Well, once when I was younger I received a Ladybug jar back empty. And it confused me more than it hurt my feelings because, you know, I couldn't understand why they didn't want to help. But, people have their own minds and if they don't care about homeless people hopefully they care about someone or something else.

While Hannah was very understanding of people's differences and the fact that some individuals may not regard homelessness as a particularly important issue, this reality presented one obstacle in the way of her successfully raising funds for people in need.

Another practical challenge encountered by child and adult activists alike is the task of successfully incorporating their political philosophies and actions into their everyday lives. In this regard, many of the children recalled how their activist initiatives consumed much of their time, leaving little room in their busy schedules for friends and family. In fact, Hannah felt that the biggest challenge of raising awareness and funding

for Canada's homeless population was that she was forced to spend a considerable amount of time away from home. While Hannah recognized the importance of speaking about homelessness at locations across the country, she found it very lonely and at times frustrating to be separated from her friends and family. Calvin also felt that his activist efforts restricted the time he was able to spend with loved ones. At school, his lunch hours and recreation periods are often spent selling raffle tickets or organizing events to raise money for his Kenya school project. After school he volunteers for a number of organizations, including YOUCAN (Youth Organizing, Understanding Conflict and Advocating Non-violence) which is a youth-driven association that promotes peace. While his friends are supportive of these endeavours, Calvin acknowledged their desire to spend more time together. In a similar vein Aiden asserted that while other children may be conscious of important social issues, "they're usually playing along with their games and things as I'm trying to figure out ways to help the environment." In this way Aiden acknowledged that his passion for saving the environment interfered with other aspects of his life such as free time for play.

Aside from this strain on time, Naomi noted a further practical challenge that rendered the process of integrating her political ideals with everyday life a complex. Specifically, Naomi found it difficult to give up some of her favourite foods that were not vegan. She also recalled that it was sometimes hard to find vegan food as this is not an extremely popular lifestyle choice and thus is not a priority for food producers and distributors.

Again, despite this multitude of commonalities that exist between child and adult activism, there are also several important differences. Most significantly, numerous obstacles faced by child activists in this research project were directly related to their

age and/or status as a child and thus would not be experienced by adults. For instance, the children I interviewed indicated that they were frequently prohibited from certain 'adult' activities and knowledge. In this regard, when Charlotte wanted to write a speech for her school on HIV and AIDS in Africa she met considerable resistance from teachers who claimed that this topic was not age-appropriate. As Charlotte recalled,

when I was in elementary school and I tried to do my speech on HIV and AIDS, they [teachers] were like "no, you're not allowed" because HIV and AIDS is such a mature subject. It wasn't something that little kids knew about because of how you got it and prevention and everything, and they just didn't want me to do it.

Thus Charlotte acknowledged that her teachers were concerned about the possibility of their students learning about sex and sexually transmitted diseases which were deemed 'mature' subjects. Notably, Charlotte's assertion that adults were attempting to limit her access (and that of her peers) to certain knowledge is supported by the work of some scholars who have observed this trend in other cases (see Harden et al. 2000b).

In terms of restrictions placed on the types of activities children are permitted to engage in, Hannah noted that her parents had to accompany her to homeless shelters due to regulations that prevent individuals under the age of 16 from volunteering for such organizations. In a similar vein, Danika's interest in becoming involved with mainstream politics has been curbed by stipulations that one must be 14 before joining a Canadian political party. Cody faced a similar form of resistance. When Cody was 7 years old one of his friends who had been diagnosed with a severe heart condition was being treated at the children's ward of a local hospital. Unfortunately, at this time the ward was under threat of closure. When Cody learned about this situation he became determined to do something. Though a petition had already been created by adults to keep the ward open, Cody asked his mother if there was anything wrong with him starting his own, to which

Jan replied that she did not think so. Jan and Cody then spoke to the school board concerning his desire to create a petition that would largely be circulated amongst his peers and which would be accompanied by an informational speech that would be prepared and delivered by Cody himself. As the two recalled, the board was initially very reluctant to approve this proposition as they claimed Cody could not possibly undertake this endeavour. After all, he was only 7 years old. Eventually, in light of his persistence, the board allowed Cody to deliver his speech in 14 local schools. However, by this time there was only one week left of school. Cody's age accordingly presented a significant barrier to his success in this instance. Significantly, despite the odds being stacked against him, Cody obtained enough signatures to help save the ward. It remains open and fully functional to this day.

Aside from these direct restrictions imposed on children in light of their age, children are also excluded from meaningful action in more subtle fashions. In this regard, Charlotte felt that adult-run activist organizations are inclined to limit children's participation to tokenistic roles. In her experience, it was easy to become involved with adult-led organizations as these groups did not require resume submissions nor did they create overt restrictions based on age. However, Charlotte found these groups undermined children's power to contribute by limiting their involvement to menial tasks. Alternatively, youth-led initiatives did require volunteers to present resumes and, occasionally, to interview for positions. Though the process of becoming involved in these groups was more challenging than those organized by adults, Charlotte felt the end result was more rewarding as youth-led activist endeavours actually valued children's potential. As she explained, "They [adult-led organizations] undermine youth just because they are like 'Oh you're so cute, you can volunteer,' and they don't really need

your resume. But youth organizations want your resume because they want you to be actually involved doing something, not just like handing out cookies or something.” Thus, while youth-initiated activist groups acknowledged children’s capabilities, Charlotte felt that adult-led organizations undermined them.

A related difference between child and adult activism is that children’s issues, opinions and actions are not taken seriously simply because they are *children’s* issues, opinions and actions. The children interviewed for this study frequently articulated this position. For example, the following is an excerpt from my discussion with Aiden:

Trish: So is there anything that, as you’re talking to people and trying to raise awareness about the environment, is there anything that makes that hard for you?

Aiden: Like, my age.

Trish: Your age? And why does it make that hard?

Aiden: Because they think I am not talking about something that serious when I am!

In this interview, Aiden clearly expressed his frustration with adults who do not take children seriously. In fact, he felt this was the biggest challenge in the way of his goal to “save the environment, change pollution and give less chance of global heating.” Danika also felt that adults’ perceptions of children created obstacles in the way of their activism. For instance, when asked whether there were differences between what children and adults can do in terms of creating social change, Danika felt these groups were capable of accomplishing the same things. However the process would be longer for children “because adults would probably take other adults more seriously.” As a more specific example of this idea, Danika noted that while children were quite capable of drafting a political bill, they would not have access to the House of Commons in order

to have the bill debated. As yet another illustration of this trend, when asked how adults respond to her participation in social and political issues, Aisha indicated that adults generally do not believe children can accomplish very much as they are inclined to think “Oh, they’re just kids.” Finally, Cody recalled how challenging it was to put into action his goal of delivering Cuddlers and Comfort Kits to cancer patients in light of the hospital administration’s view that he would not remain committed to the cause. They expressed concern that the hospital would inevitably have to assume Cody’s duties, that they would have to terminate this service, or they would have to bear financial responsibility for continuing the program without him. In essence, Cody felt that, because he was a child the hospital’s administration underestimated his capabilities and did not take his commitment seriously.

Notably, these resistances were experienced more severely by those children engaging in individual, rather than organizational, activism. While the seven ‘individual’ activists all recalled facing obstacles in their political careers, the three children engaged in organizational activism each asserted that nothing had made reaching their goals difficult. This suggests that working together with peers, as well as having the support of an adult, may render engaging in activism easier for children. Importantly, a conversation with Ms. Ryan, the teacher who helped organize and support these students’ efforts, revealed that the resistance to children’s activism in this case was directed at her, and thus did indeed exist. Ms. Ryan noted that while there was never any opposition from the parents of the students, some staff members were initially uneasy with the proposition of encouraging students’ involvement in social issues. A few staff members were skeptical of children’s capabilities and commitments, while others felt they were too busy to become personally involved in such an initiative. Another concern

was that fundraising efforts should be directed towards the school's own needs for sports programs or field trips. Finally, some teachers felt that these projects would cause interruptions to the delivery of class/curriculum programming. Over time, however, Ms. Ryan believes this resistance has lessened as staff members have "realized the value of engaging students in caring and being proactive in life globally." In this sense they have acknowledged the many benefits for children that derive from such action, which include public speaking skills, confidence building, creating global awareness, garnering interest in current events and media study, geographic and historical education. They have also recognized how easily students' engagement in social issues could be incorporated into curriculum strands. Accordingly, an increasing number of staff members at this school have become supportive of students' activist efforts.

The preceding discussion has outlined how the children in this study perceived and expressed differences between themselves and adults throughout the interview process. These sentiments were both clarified and reinforced when children were directly asked two related questions: 'are children different than adults?' and 'can children do different things than adults?' In response to these inquiries, Aisha contended that adults can accomplish more than children because they are more powerful. Thus, while she noted that children could certainly help to make positive changes in our world, she felt it was important for them to be involved because as they grew up they could continue to participate and "when they are adults they will have more power and be able to do more things." In this way Aisha acknowledged children's marginal social status in comparison to their adult counterparts. In other instances, children answered these questions by reaffirming their restricted access to certain knowledge and activities. For instance, Manyara noted that when adults want to help people overseas, they are free to

visit these places. However, if a child wishes to travel to Africa, or even just canvas their own neighbourhood in order to collect donations from people, Manyara stated “if we have to go far from home we can’t go by ourselves, we need an adult.” In this way, Manyara noted how children’s use of space is limited. Finally, Rahul indicated that adults have far more resources than children and thus can accomplish greater feats. As he noted, “Say if the United States of America wanted to help somebody else, they can give them like billions of dollars.” In this regard Rahul felt the tasks children and adults could accomplish were “sometimes the same and sometimes different.”

The experiences of these 10 children thus suggest that child activists are faced with numerous age-related obstacles that would not confront adults. While some of these challenges are practically rooted in children’s actual dependencies on adults (eg. to drive them to the sites of their activism) others derive from our ideas about what it means to be a child. In this sense, adults are inclined to restrict children’s access to certain knowledge, forms of action and public places that do not comply with traditional notions of childhood as a time of innocence, incompetence, vulnerability and play in the private sphere. As noted by Pole, Mizen and Bolton (1999) this use of age as a variable to “control, regulate and influence the lives of children” creates a situation where “the capacity for individual agency is limited by chronology and associated with experience” (p. 51).

Children’s Power: Recognizing Challenges, Limitations and Abilities

Despite these significant barriers in the way of their meaningful participation in social issues, it is important to point out that the children interviewed here remained firmly committed to their goals and employed numerous tactics to overcome challenges. In order to combat the reality that adults do not take him seriously, for example, Aiden

contacted media outlets with the aim of disseminating his message through a legitimate and respected medium. He felt this would demonstrate his commitment to the cause while simultaneously expressing to the public his firm belief that saving the environment is extremely important. Alternatively, Naomi chose a more direct route, preferring to personally speak with people about the issues. In this regard, Naomi noted that when she was faced with resistance to her political philosophies or actions, she attempted to educate people. She tried to explain to individuals, for example, how animals are mistreated in our society and how this situation is preventable. However, if people got angry Naomi indicated that she walked away in order to avoid heated disputes. As she stated,

Well I felt, we felt, we don't want to start fights because then it can get ugly. We try to talk calmly to them and to explain calmly about how the animals are treated and things. That usually helps. But as soon as something starts turning bad, we usually leave.

In other scenarios Naomi simply ignored negative comments or reactions because she knew what she was doing was right. This tactic was also utilized by Calvin who noted that “when other people are down, when they stay stuff that’s negative to me, I’m like ‘well that’s your opinion and I don’t really care about it, because I know I will get the money [to build the Kenya school]’.” He further expressed that he was proud of what he was accomplishing and that, no matter what obstacles lie ahead, he would not stop fundraising for this project until he had achieved his goal of building a school in Kenya.

Along these lines, as a further illustration of the children’s commitment to their individual causes it is worthy to note that when asked if they would continue participating in these initiatives for a long time, until they were ‘grown-up,’ nine out of the ten children indicated they would, with Aisha responding ‘maybe.’ Moreover, many

of the children articulated a desire to branch out into other activities or movements, or to expand the breadths of their own projects. In this regard Charlotte desired to start her own organization that would extend beyond local ‘community work,’ Cody wished to provide Cuddlers and Comfort kits to patients on an international scale and Calvin has decided that, whatever career he chooses, it will certainly involve helping other people. He stated,

I plan on doing this my whole life and I don’t see what would stop me. That’s what I want to end up doing with my career. Originally I wanted to be a lawyer or one of those things where you make a lot of money. Then I realized that’s not really what I want. Like I would still love that but...instead of saying ‘I’m rich and I have a nice big house,’ I would rather say ‘I’ve done this. I’ve helped these people. I’ve made a difference in Third World countries. I’ve made a difference in the global community. What I’ve done has impacted so many people...or even just one person.’

This conviction was also expressed by Hannah who declared that she will continue to help homeless persons until she is 90 and Aiden who asserted that he would continue engaging in activist endeavours until his goal of saving the environment was reached.

Aside from maintaining a firm commitment to their own goals, the children interviewed also asserted that children more generally have a powerful role to play in changing our world for the better. In this regard Charlotte noted how children are forced to live in the reality that previous generations have created. She indicated that children recognize adults’ mistakes and should be able to help repair them.

Charlotte: (...) I feel like grandmas and stuff (...) they kind of left us with all these problems (...) Everyone says that we are the future, but we are here right now. So, they should give us a chance to do something now. We’re not just the future, we can’t just stand here and do nothing and do mistakes that we see as children because we do have different perspectives.

Thus, Charlotte articulated her belief that children and adults have unique perspectives. In light of these differing points of view, she suggested that children may recognize an issue or problem that would not be similarly acknowledged by adults. Accordingly, she asserted that children must be allowed to participate meaningfully in social life and decision-making processes.

As a unique perspective regarding the importance of children's activism, Naomi expressed her belief that sometimes adults grow tired of listening to the same arguments articulated by the same people in the public sphere. In these contexts children's participation may present a welcomed change. These sentiments are evident in the following excerpt from our conversation:

Trish: Are kids different than adults? Can kids do different things than adults to make those changes?

Naomi: Yeah. Because my mother has been trying to get a spay/neuter law down here. Well when I went up to our commissioners to talk about it, it seemed there was just a whole different atmosphere in the room. I mean, the commissioners, since they see mom so much, they really are just like 'yeah, yeah, get on with it.' But when I went up there, everybody starts smiling. And I think that sometimes us kids can do things that grown-ups can't.

Trish: Yeah, and why do you think that is? Do you know?

Naomi: I think it's that way because some people just get so tired of seeing grown-ups stand up there and speak all the time, and it's just a change to have kids come up.

Trish: And do you think kids say different things than adults, or are they just saying it in a different way?

Naomi: I think they are saying the same thing just in a different way.

This dialogue illustrates that, for Naomi, the importance of children's participation lies not in the fact that children have vastly differing perspectives than adults, but rather in the simple reality that children express themselves in unique ways. This change is

welcomed by parties in the public sphere who are accustomed to dealing with the same individuals (adults) on a routine basis.

Another assertion made by some of the child activists who participated in this study was that children have a powerful role to play in educating their peers about social issues and motivating other children to help create positive change. In this regard Calvin noted how children could more easily access other children than could adults. He also felt that children would be more open to the ideas of their peers. The ability of children to motivate others was also articulated by Aisha who felt that each child's attempt to make the world a better place might inspire someone else's, thus creating a world of people who care about one another. Along these lines, several of the children expressed the belief that children's activism is important because any one individual, whether old or young, has the power to change the world (Calvin, Charlotte, Hannah, Manyara, Rahul).

The idea that children's activism is important because children have the power to educate and motivate others through their actions is interesting because the participants of this study felt that the primary factors limiting children's political participation were a lack of education and a lack of motivation. As Naomi articulated,

I think some kids...like the kids who do [engage in activism], I think they do it because they've heard more and they're more knowledgeable. And the kids who don't, they probably just haven't heard much about it and they don't really think about it. I mean because I know that most parents try to keep animal consumption as though it was always like that and they try to keep it away from their kids. I just think that's a little bit wrong. I just wish that more people would have open minds.

In this dialogue it is evident not only that Naomi believes children are uneducated about certain issues, but that this is because adults have shielded them from certain information. These sentiments regarding children not being taught about important

issues were also expressed by Aisha who felt that some children do not become involved in activism because the issues seem far away to people, particularly when events are occurring in ‘someone else’s’ country. In these cases, Aisha believes it is hard for children to get information about an issue, and even harder for them to understand it. In a similar fashion, Rahul stated that some children do not try to help the environment, people or animals “because they don’t know what is happening.” Rahul felt this problem was exaggerated by the fact that, with the environment, some people deny that a problem even exists. Alternatively, some participants felt that children who do become involved in social and political issues are those who “realize what’s going on” (Cody) and “actually realize the importance of doing this” (Aiden).

Closely related to these notions about education and motivation is the factor of support. In this sense, many of the children felt that having strong parental support greatly enhanced children’s education of social issues, as well as their motivation to engage in action. For instance Aisha felt that parents could help children become involved in important issues by showing their own interest in doing so. Alternatively, when families are not involved in helping people, children do not learn that this is an important aspect of life. These sentiments were also expressed by Calvin who stated,

I think it is really a lot about family I think, support. Because I know my family supports me in this and the whole Africa fundraising thing, like 100%. And also my mom is really involved and so is my dad, so that helps. But other people, their parents, it’s not that they are bad people, it’s they are not focused on that [activism] and they don’t help out maybe as much in their community so it is harder I think for their kids to get involved because they don’t really know that side of the community. I’ve found if your parents have experience, and they are really supporting you than it is a lot easier. And I’m lucky because it’s hard for other people that don’t have support.

Like Aisha, Calvin believed that parents played a key role in helping their children become involved in helping others. In this regard, he too stressed the ability of adults to lead by example. The final child who highlighted the importance of adults in educating and supporting child activism was Hannah, who stated,

Really why I did it is because I had lots of chances. And, well some kids might do it...maybe some kids think they are too little and can't do anything about it, and that's totally not true! Lots of times, you know, maybe they do it because their parents help them out to get into organizations, just start raising money and giving them ideas. Some kids want to help, but they don't know how to start. And by going to adults they can help you about that too. And, you know, those are those are the basic reasons why some do and some don't.

In this passage Hannah contended that in order for children to become engaged in activism efforts it helps if they have guidance, not only in regards to learning about the issues, but also in learning how to act upon their beliefs. For Hannah, this support could come from parents as well as other experienced adults.

Thus, in spite of the significant challenges encountered by child activists, the children interviewed here remained firmly committed to their goals. In fact, Aisha indicated that it is only by doing things and actually making a difference in the world that children can make an impression on adults and change their opinions of children's capabilities. In a similar vein, Charlotte stated "the problem is that people don't think that kids can do a lot, but if we all did something than they would think we could. Age sucks!" In this respect, though the children interviewed generally recognized there were differences between themselves and adults, they firmly believed that children had an important role to play in changing our world for the better. While they highlighted the importance of adult support in educating and motivating children to become engaged in

activism, the children attributed to themselves and their peers a particularly powerful role in this regard.

Balancing Responsibility, Empathy and Play: What it Means to be a Child

The final subject matter I will discuss here is related to how participants defined childhood. In this regard, when asked ‘what it means to be a child’ as well as what they felt were ‘the most important things about being a child’ the children’s answers revolved around several themes: having goals, being true to oneself (and one’s goals), caring about people, animals and the environment, and balancing these types of responsibilities with fun.

In terms of having goals, Manyara felt that most children have really big aspirations; “They want to do everything; they want to do everything they are imagining.” In this regard she felt that an important aspect of being a child was to strive towards these goals no matter what obstacles were encountered. This was also articulated by Hannah who felt a key component of being a child is to “follow your heart.” In a more general sense, Naomi also noted the significance of remaining true to oneself. She stated

I think being a kid, you shouldn’t wish you are something that you are not. And you should just try to be yourself and not really care what other people think of you. I think you should think for yourself. Like if you don’t like someone, you don’t have to be with them. But if you think someone’s cool and you like being their friend...I don’t want to be their friend because they look cool or anything, I just want to be their friend ’cause of what’s inside. And I think that is one of the important things – to be yourself.

While there are a numerous important ideas nestled in this excerpt from my conversation with Naomi, the general theme is that a key aspect of being a child is to be oneself. In

particular, Naomi mentions the significance of accepting who you are, and valuing others for who they really are.

Aside from these broad ideas about what it means to be a child, some of the children interviewed also cited certain concrete qualities. Specifically, children noted the importance of caring about our world, and those people and animals residing in it. For instance Rahul felt that being considerate of the environment was a central part of being a child, while Charlotte asserted the value of caring about people, even when their problems seem distant, such as the AIDS pandemic that is currently ravaging Africa. Interestingly, many of the children also articulated the importance of balancing these responsibilities (and others) with play and amusement. In this respect Rahul felt that caring for the environment should be accompanied by 'having fun.' Cody also stated that being a child "doesn't have to be like work all the time. Just have fun." More specifically, he felt that children should enjoy themselves and spend time with friends and family. In a similar vein, Charlotte accompanied her belief about the need to care for other people with the statement "[being a child] means just doing what you want to do, like doing sports, doing homework." Again this suggests the significance of balancing pleasure, empathetic action and other responsibilities.

The final child to assert this importance was Calvin. In order to explain what it means to be a child, Calvin reflected on his own life. He noted that he has a very busy schedule as he has taken on many responsibilities, which include both paid work and voluntary activist initiatives. Calvin noted that at times he has felt overwhelmed with the tasks he has assumed and has had to remind himself to make time for fun. In this sense, he realized that at this stage in his life some of his engagements are optional, for instance, he does not need money to support himself and hence is not obligated to work.

Accordingly, he felt that an important part of being a child is to have fun and enjoy the freedom of not being constrained by compulsory responsibilities, while at the same time doing one's part to contribute positively to the global community.

The fact that the majority of children interviewed for this study included the importance of empathy and social action in their conceptions of what it means to be a child is extremely interesting, especially in light of the reality that activist children are frequently regarded as exceptional and are thus excluded from traditional notions of childhood. In other words, while the terms 'children' and 'activism' are contradictory, even incompatible, when defined by adults, these terms were intimately related in the minds of the children interviewed for this study. This inclusion of a sense of empathy for others into conceptions of childhood fits well with the findings of other research initiatives that illustrate children's emphasis on interdependence. In this regard, Corsaro and Eder (1990), among others, have highlighted the importance of peer culture and relationships for children. In a broader context, Mayall (2000) found that

Whilst Western liberal thinkers have regarded the autonomous, independent moral agent as the highest form of life, children regard relationships as the cornerstone of their lives. It is of crucial importance to them to work with and through family relationships, to care about those who live elsewhere as well as those they live with (p. 256).

These sentiments were clearly expressed by the children who participated in this study. Not only did they articulate concern for others' well-being, but they also noted the important role friends, family members, teachers, or even complete strangers played in their own lives. Significantly, when asked what made reaching their goals easier, all ten children referred to people. In this respect Hannah felt that individuals who learned about homelessness and who subsequently began to care about homeless people and educate their friends about this important issue helped her the most. Naomi mentioned

her friends who were extremely supportive, including one who had started cutting meat out of her diet and another that chose to become a vegetarian. Cody felt that both of his parents were extremely influential in helping him to reach his goals, while Charlotte recalled how Stephen Lewis and the Wakefield Grannies inspired her and gave her hope. Calvin believed that he could not have accomplished so much in such a short time without the support of his family, and Aisha noted that her commitment to helping people was invigorated when her friends and family expressed interest in issues that were important to her. In light of their emphasis on the interconnectedness of individuals, it makes sense that children feel caring for others is an essential aspect of who they are.

Again, the final noteworthy factor regarding children's conception of childhood was their recognition that responsibilities should, and indeed could, be balanced with time for fun. This supports Punch's (2003) argument that children move fluidly between adult and child worlds by combining responsibilities and play. In this sense, Punch (2003) found that even children living in poverty who are forced to obtain paid employment "nonetheless combine their work and school with play, create their own childhood culture and move back and forth between adult and child-centred worlds" (p. 289). Importantly, these assertions, combined with my own experiences in interviewing 10 activist children, suggest that many of the tensions inherent in modern, Western, socially-created notions of childhood do not exist in reality. In this sense children are neither innocent, passive, incompetent and vulnerable beings who do not know how to properly function in the public sphere, nor are they completely independent, experienced or potentially dangerous individuals who resemble something closer to adults. Social life is far more complex than these reductive juxtapositions imply.

In sum, my interview data suggests that children are not coerced into activism, but rather choose to become engaged in social issues in order to help people and/or positively contribute to our world. These children, though faced with considerable barriers to their activism, maintain that every individual, whether old or young, can change the world for the better. Moreover, my interviewees felt that a sense of empathy and responsibility towards our planet and those persons and animals residing in it could (and should) be combined with leisure time and fun experiences; these characteristics were all highlighted as important elements of childhood.

Having explored these 10 children's opinions and experiences regarding their activism, I will now turn to a detailed discussion of the means through which interviewees were accessed and recruited for this study. Though this is a rather unusual step, I decided that this process provided pertinent data for the thesis as the dilemmas I encountered in accessing interviewees revealed how the same structural conditions that disempower children in our society are reproduced in limiting their participation in social science research of this kind. Further, this situation raises important ethical questions. Following this discussion of research procedures and their implications for children's autonomy, I will briefly summarize the more general conclusions of the thesis and present a few suggestions regarding child activism-related issues that would benefit from further research.

Power and Ethics: A Discussion of Research Procedures and their Implications for Children's Autonomy

In the previous two sections of this thesis I have addressed questions pertaining to child activism that derived from my review of relevant sociological literature. In particular, I used a textual analysis of newspaper articles to explore dominant

constructions of child activism. I then analyzed 10 interviews with child activists in order to learn about their experiences and to gain an understanding of how they conceive of childhood. These interrelated studies illustrated how social conditions in our modern, Western world limit children's opportunities to have a voice in matters that affect them, and in social or political issues more generally. Although there is a growing recognition of children's rights and capabilities, notions of children as vulnerable and incompetent remain prevalent and thus children's need for protection is frequently emphasized over their rights.

With regard to these issues, I found the process of recruiting and gaining access to children as interviewees for this project to be an extremely pertinent source of data. In fact, the methodological dilemmas I encountered at this stage of my investigation demonstrate how the same structural conditions that disempower children in our society are reproduced in limiting their participation in research of this kind (for a detailed overview of the various recruitment methods used in this project, as well as their success rates see Appendix D ~ Recruitment Methods). My experiences suggest that children's participation in social science research is largely controlled by adults who, in keeping with the dominant philosophy of protection, limit children's autonomy to make choices regarding whether they wish to partake in the research project and what the terms of their contribution will be. Accordingly, in line with scholars such as Alderson and Goodey (1996), I argue that it is children's marginal social status that largely complicates their ability to contribute to research projects, rather than an inherent incompetence or vulnerability on their part. This factor raises important ethical questions.

To explore these issues, I will first examine the structural barriers that render doing social research with children extremely difficult. In particular the role of gatekeepers in controlling access to children as well as the form and context of the interview will be outlined. Next, I will discuss the power relationships involved in academic inquiries, and will demonstrate how power fluctuates between the researcher and researched, adults and children. Supporting evidence of children's power in the research process will be derived both from the work of other academics, as well as my own experiences with this project. As children have been increasingly recognized as competent and willing agents within scholarly investigations, in the final section I will question whether a separate and different set of ethical guidelines for doing social research with children is indeed necessary.

The Role of Gatekeepers: Controlling the Research Agenda

As alluded to above, there were many methodological dilemmas encountered in this project. However, two trends were particularly significant: I experienced considerable difficulty in accessing potential child respondents, and outside agents (adults) imposed several restrictions on the form and context of the interview. Each of these developments served to restrict children's power and autonomy.

As noted by Bryman and Teevan (2005), "Gaining access is...a political process" (p. 19). The issue of access generally has two components. First there is the problem of how to get information about the project to potential respondents, and second, there is the ethical matter of consent. In research with children, consent becomes an access issue as it is generally understood that an adult must provide informed consent on behalf of the child. In many cases, adults can decline consent before the research agenda is ever discussed with children. Thus, problems accessing children for social

research generally relate to the role of gatekeepers. A gatekeeper is a “non-researcher who controls researcher access to a research setting” (Bryman and Teevan 2005: 383). When doing social research with children, school boards, principals, teachers, social workers, parents and a number of other adults frequently act as gatekeepers (Hood, Kelley and Mayall 1996; Mauthner 1997; Morrow and Richards 1996; Pole, Mizen and Bolton 1999). In fact, it is often the case that a ‘hierarchy of gatekeepers’ stands between the researcher and potential child participants (Hood, Kelley and Mayall 1996: 120).

In the case of my research, for instance, one of the formal means of recruitment utilized was to send information letters/consent forms home with students in a number of classrooms and schools (see Appendix B ~ School Consent Form). This design resulted in a situation where at least four adult gatekeepers could decline children’s participation in the project without children’s knowledge, input or consent. The first gatekeeper was the school board’s research advisory committee through which all ethics applications must be processed and approved. Since this committee’s approval did not demand participation from principals, the next step in the process was to gain the interest of individual principals. This proved to be one of the most challenging tasks for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it became clear that information about the project was not well marketed to principals. Under the terms and conditions of my ethics application with the board’s research advisory committee, I was not to contact principals directly but rather was to wait until interested parties came forward. Most of the principals and teachers who eventually contacted me had learned about the project informally by a colleague of mine with connections to the school board. Many stated they had not received information about the study from the board, though it is perhaps more likely that they did receive the

briefing and, whether intentionally or not, ignored it. In yet another case, a local principal had received the information and contacted me to decline participation. Shortly thereafter another colleague of mine with children in this school contacted the principal on my behalf to discuss the project. Once it was made clear to this principal that involvement in the program would not impinge on the school's resources, she reversed her decision and allowed information packages to be sent home with students. Thus, informal means of garnering principals' attention and support proved much more successful than more formalized routes.

Another factor that may have influenced principals' decision not to participate in this project was that there were no recognizable incentives for them to do so. Principals' schedules are tremendously busy and resources within the educational system are scarce. This fact was well illustrated by the case of one principal who was extremely interested in the project; however, before signing on she wished to have a conversation with me. We tried to arrange face-to-face meetings on several occasions, but these never came to fruition as something always interfered. Eventually we decided a phone conversation would work best. Again, appointments were arranged but the principal had to cancel on several occasions due to more pressing situations that arose on a day-to-day basis, for example unscheduled meetings with parents and/or colleagues, and in one instance a matter at the school involving the police. Though I had first been contacted by this principal in early January, we did not speak until late February and the information letters/consent forms associated with this study did not get sent home in her school until mid March.

These experiences suggest that principals have a pivotal role in controlling access to children. In many cases, the quest to recruit children for social research via the

educational system will end at this stage in the hierarchy of gatekeepers as principals remain unaware of the research, or opt out of participation. In others instances, the recruitment process will slow to a halt as interested principals attempt to position the research agenda within the confines of their busy schedules and limited resources.

Importantly, if and when a researcher successfully garners principals' interest in a study, teachers and parents may still restrict access to children. In this project, teachers controlled how and when children learned about the study. In some cases, my information packages were sent home alongside all other notices to parents without the project being explained to students in the classroom setting. Alternatively, in one exceptional case a teacher chose to discuss the project with her class, as well as other students who had been involved in school-related activism. Ms. Ryan outlined the basic goals of my thesis project and allowed students to ask questions about it before letters were sent home to parents. Ms. Ryan felt this communication was particularly important since the population of her school consisted primarily of first and second generation immigrants from non-Western nations, many of whom were far more fluent in speaking English than in reading it. In addition to these efforts, she also invited me to make a brief and informal presentation to her class about my intentions for the project; she was the only person throughout the recruitment process to invite me into her class to do so. Significantly, three students were recruited from this school. In fact, these were the only children recruited through the educational system despite the fact that roughly 1,000 information letters were distributed across several schools in the area.⁹

⁹ It is important to note that four other children who heard about the project through the school system expressed their desire to participate. However, this occurred a significant amount of time after the information letters had been sent home. Unfortunately, these children could not be interviewed due to time constraints.

This suggests that teachers also have an important gatekeeping role in mediating researchers' access to children. Since information packages were sent home with students via their classes, the decisions made by teachers about how to present knowledge of the project to students apparently impacted how the research agenda was perceived. These decisions may become increasingly significant in contexts where students and their parents are not fluent in the language chosen for communicating information about the study. In my investigation, had letters been sent home without any verbal explanation and discussion with children, difficulties in understanding the text may have resulted in parents' decision to refuse their child's participation (see Appendix D ~ Recruitment Methods for discussion of how the terms 'political' and 'activism' may have deterred some parents from consenting to their children's participation).

Along these lines, the final gatekeepers involved in gaining access to children were parents and/or guardians. Parents were necessarily involved in the decision-making process for all potential participants, those accessed via the educational system as well as those recruited by other means. In other words, even if all other parties agreed to the terms of the project (for instance, research advisory committees, school boards, principals, teachers and children), the research process could not move forward without the signed consent and permission of parents. Moreover, parents generally¹⁰ had the authority to control when children would be interviewed, where this would take place and who would be present, though once consent from parents was obtained children were asked whether they wanted an adult present for the interview. In cases where children were accessed outside of the educational system, parents also had a role to play

¹⁰ Some restrictions on parents' ability to make these decisions were imposed by the school board. This situation will be discussed in the next section of the thesis.

in deciding whether or not permission would be granted to have their child's actual name used in publications and presentations associated with this research.

In essence, a multitude of gatekeepers mediate researchers' access to children based on their perceptions of the research goals and motivations as well as their ideas "about what the organization can gain from the investigation, what it will lose by participating in the research in terms of staff time and other costs, and potential risks to its image" (Bryman and Teevan 2005: 19). In addition to these practical considerations, gatekeepers are also guided by the philosophy of protection that resides within our modern conception of childhood. As noted previously, while there remains tension in our society over whether children should have rights or be protected, generally the philosophy of protection is regarded as paramount. In terms of social research, Hood, Kelley and Mayall (1996) noted that they

could not approach children directly; their sociopolitical positioning means that adults must give permission. In considering access to children, adults gave priority to the adult duty to protect children from outsiders; this took precedence over children's right to participate in the decision to talk with us (p. 126).

This position has also been supported by scholars such as Mahon, Glendenning, Clarke and Craig (1996), Morrow and Richards (1996), Sandbaek (1999), and Thomas and O'Kane (1998). These authors suggest that perceptions of children's incompetence and vulnerability are used to justify the over-protective stance of adult gatekeepers and their resolution to appropriate children's decision-making powers.

As alluded to previously, gatekeepers not only control access to children, but in many cases have the authority to influence the methodological structure of the research agenda, shaping the types of questions that are to be asked, "who can and cannot be a focus of study, the amount of time to be spent with each research participant, the

interpretation of findings, and the form of any reports, even asking to approve drafts” (Bryman and Teevan 2005: 19). During the course of this research endeavour, gatekeepers employed the philosophy of protection to restrict the form and context of the interview in a number of ways which served to limit children’s power, and in some cases, that of their parents.

In this vein, the school board’s research advisory committee impacted the structure of my research agenda more than any other gatekeeper. In particular, the committee insisted that three significant changes be made to the project’s design before it would be approved. The first revision required that the wording of consent forms be altered to clearly state that all child respondents would be accompanied to the interview by an adult who would remain on site until its completion, the sole exception to this rule being if the interview occurred on school grounds and within school hours, meaning that adult teachers would be close at hand (see Appendix B ~ School Consent Form). Previously the decision regarding whether an adult would be present during the interview was left to the discretion of the interviewee and his/her parents. In fact the original draft of information letters to child activists and their families described in detail how any discrepancies between the parents’ and child’s wishes in this regard would be handled (see Appendix A ~ Original Consent Form). Thus, in addition to requiring researchers to obtain a criminal record check prior to meeting with students, the school board’s advisory committee felt that an adult presence during the interview was necessary to ensure that participating children would be safe from harm.

The second stipulation made by the committee was the strict prohibition of phone interviews. In the beginning stages of designing this research project, my intentions were to conduct all interviews in a face-to-face setting. However, this initial

arrangement was changed in order to accommodate individuals who had expressed their willingness to participate in the project but who were geographically out of reach. Accordingly, prior to submitting the application to the school board's advisory committee, the wording of consent forms was amended to include the option for all respondents to answer questions in writing (either via email or regular post) or to have a conversation with me via telephone. Yet the school board would only approve the research application if the option for phone interviews was excluded. When asked about the reasons for this decision, the committee reiterated their strong commitment to having an adult present throughout the interview. In this regard they felt that a telephone conversation would only allow such an adult to hear one side of the communication and thus the board felt that phone interviews did not offer children enough protection.

The final restriction imposed by the school board was a refusal to allow parents and children the option of having their real names used in any publications, presentations, or informal communications associated with this research. Again, this was an element of the research design that had derived from the wishes and circumstances of respondents who had been interviewed before the application to the school board was submitted; it was not my original intention to use actual names of respondents. However, the board's advisory committee indicated that they had a strong precedent of confidentiality that they felt uneasy abandoning, even if both parents and children consented (verbally and in writing) to the process (Appendix C ~ Other Consent Form includes the option for parents and children to have their real names used and was sent to interviewees recruited outside of the school system).

The concerns exhibited by the school board are clearly related to patterns in our modern conception of childhood that were previously outlined. In this regard, the

board's treatment of researchers is closely linked to social fears about strangers and their potential to harm apparently vulnerable and incompetent children. Researchers are required to obtain criminal record checks and in many cases to meet with teachers and/or principals personally before entering the school environment in order that they may be deemed safe. Furthermore, the board's requirement that a (familiar) adult remain present during all interviews with children is meant to ensure the actions and intentions of these outsiders are legitimate. Though each of these demands is designed to protect children, in effect they also serve to disempower children, and in some cases their parents, by stripping them of their right to decide what is in their own best interest. Accordingly, the role of gatekeepers in controlling both access to children and the form and context of research agendas evokes ethical questions. As Alderson and Goodey (1996) eloquently stated,

Access raises ethical dilemmas. Should we respect adults' non-response or refusal, and so collude in silencing children? Are adults' decisions always an essential protection for vulnerable children against potentially abusive research? Should we accept agreed 'high standards' of research, such as opt-in approaches, contacting parents indirectly through schools and LEAs? Direct, personal, informal approaches elicited enthusiastic responses from parents and children, in contrast to low responses to formal impersonal approaches through the schools... Should these schools be allowed to control research access to families?
(p. 113)

These are important questions that have only recently been posed by the academic community (see, for example, Hood, Kelley and Mayall 1996; Morrow and Richards 1996; Pole, Mizen and Bolton 1999; Thomas and O'Kane 1998). Thus, there have been few, if any, in-depth explorations of them. Accordingly, the remainder of this section of the thesis will be dedicated to discussing these issues in order to begin filling the gap in scholarly literature on doing social research with children.

To this end, power dynamics in the research relationship will be explored with a particular focus on the interview. Using a selection of primarily feminist literature it will be illustrated that contrary to traditional beliefs that the researcher's power reigns supreme over respondents, power in the research relationship fluctuates amongst participants. Though these arguments have largely been based on the experiences of adults interviewing other adults, researchers working with children have increasingly noted their ability to control elements of the investigative process as well as their willingness and competence to do so. In fact, the power of children to shape the research agenda was vividly apparent in my research, and thus the findings of other academics will be supplemented with examples from this study. In light of these factors, the final section will question whether there is a need for the separate and different ethical guidelines for children that are commonly utilized in the social science context.¹¹ To be clear, I do not purport to provide definitive solutions to these complex ethical issues. Rather, my aim is to further the academic discussion in this area.

Who Has the Power? Exploring the Research Relationship

During the past few decades, as the importance of doing ethical research became increasingly emphasized within the academic realm (Denzin and Lincoln 1998: 25), many feminist scholars turned their attention inwards, using personal research experiences to scrutinize conventional and commonly employed methodological practices. One dimension of this trend was a questioning of the relationship between researcher and researched, particularly within the bounds of the interview. An important and groundbreaking work in this regard was Ann Oakley's "Interviewing Women: A

¹¹ As there is a significant difference between medical research and social science research, this discussion will focus solely on the latter.

Contradiction in Terms” that was published as part of a collection of articles about and entitled *Doing Feminist Research* in 1981.

Oakley’s main assertion in this text was that the interview process had been created and framed by a masculine paradigm predicated on hierarchical relations of power and traditional notions of measurement, control, objectivity, detachment, rationality and ‘real science’. Within this model, the interviewee was regarded as a passive instrument of study that was to be treated “as an object or data-producing machine which, when handled correctly will function properly” (Oakley 1981: 37). In light of this perceived one-way hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee, both of whom were thought to become depersonalized through the research process, Oakley suggested that it was necessary not only to problematize the traditional interview methodology, but to reject it completely. In this regard, she advocated for a more relational approach (Oakley 1981: 37, 41), which was thought to produce “not merely a better research *process* but also better research *results*” [emphasis in original] (Patai 1991: 143).

Building on the arguments made by Oakley in the early 1980s, a decade later Daphne Patai revisited the question of whether ethical research was possible, principally in regards to the process of interviewing Third World women. Within this context, Patai (1991) wrote

The dilemma of feminist researchers working on groups less privileged than themselves can be succinctly stated as follows: is it possible – not in theory, but in the actual conditions of the real world today – to write about the oppressed without becoming one of the oppressors? In an absolute sense, I think not... (p. 139).

Like Oakley, Patai felt that power relations inherent in the gender-influenced structure of the interview process were extremely problematic. In terms of traditional interviewing,

Patai argued there was an inherent objectification process built into the system. In this manner she highlighted the ‘split between subject and object’ and contended that “the utilization of others for one’s own purposes (which may or may not coincide with their own ends), and the possibility of exploitation, are built into almost all research projects with living human beings” (Patai 1991: 139). Accordingly, one of Patai’s main assertions was that feminist researchers must not hide behind the label of feminism that frequently evokes notions of ‘sisterhood’ and thus a sense of equality. Instead, research relations should be regarded as innately imbalanced.

A related and important aspect of Patai’s argument was the recognition that interviewing takes place within a broader, cultural system of inequality. Thus, power must be assessed not only in terms of the traditional interview structure, but in relation to the economic, political and social characteristics of the parties involved. In other words, Patai felt that power differentials between the researcher and researched were exaggerated by structural axes of difference. Linking these two assertions about power in research, Patai determined that the researcher frequently has greater access to a wide variety of resources “from material goods to local officials” and thus “in a world divided by race, ethnicity, and class, the purported solidarity of female identity is in many ways a fraud” (Patai 1991: 144). In conclusion, she asserted that, while these complex issues must not provide the basis for abandoning the ‘messy business’ of research, they ought not to be forgotten (Patai 1991: 150).

While both Patai and Oakley placed great emphasis on the power of the researcher within the interview process, many later academics would conceive of a more fluid perception of power that had the capacity to fluctuate between the interviewer and interviewees. In essence there were both political and practical reasons for abandoning

the idea that researchers control all power within the traditional interview process. Politically, the act of treating people as objects was now recognized as immoral, as was pointed out by both Oakley and Patai. Practically, the concept of power had been radically redefined by theorist Michel Foucault (1980) as a productive entity, existing only in its use, and dispersed throughout the social body. Inherent in this conception was a notion of resistance. Thus, according to Foucauldian thought, everybody has power, power is everywhere, and everywhere power is, there is resistance (Foucault 1980). This new conceptual definition of power combined with Oakley's contention that better research results might be obtained from a non-hierarchical, perhaps friendly, research relationship, provided a strong practical impetus to conceive of the connection between researcher and researched in new ways

Perhaps the most pressing reason for questioning previous assumptions about power relations in research, however, was provided by feminists such as Gayle Letherby (2004), Pamela Cotterill (1992), Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert and Martha Henry (2004). During their field work, each of these academics witnessed the fluidity and dispersion of power first hand. In one respect, they found that interviewees could, and often did, exercise power, for example, through appeals to reciprocity and by posing questions to and about the questioner. On the other hand, their fieldwork experiences also exposed their own feelings of vulnerability as researchers. To explicate this shift more clearly, I will turn to a few in-depth examples from this feminist literature.

In their recent article "Reassessing the Research Relationship: Location, Position and Power in Fieldwork Accounts," Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert and Martha Henry (2004) convey their own experiences of power within research associations. Specifically, both encountered varying degrees of power in relation to their respondents. For instance,

some interviewees used the idea of reciprocity to their advantage. In one case the researcher had gained access to participants through her father's position in the community as a physician. After she had left the field, and the country, her father was asked to provide medicinal services to a former research participant free of charge. A similar situation occurred when the second researcher accessed respondents through a family friend who was also the interviewees' boss. In this case, respondents "negotiated time off from work, by scheduling the interviews...during office hours. Since they were not in an ideal position to complain or refuse an interview, they negotiated the circumstances to their benefit..." (Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry 2004: 372). Accordingly, Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry assert that people do not live and act within fixed, stereotypical roles but in fluid and dynamic relationships.

In this respect, the authors contend that particularly important considerations for the investigation of power dynamics within research are the actual location and positioning of both researcher and researched, as well as how both participants position and locate one another in response to their perceptions of the location and positioning of the other (Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry 2004: 367). By highlighting these factors, Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry (2004) recognize that "researchers can also be objectified, manipulated and exploited, especially when they are not positioned as part of a dominant group or culture" and that there is a great need to "appropriate a framework which imagines power as shifting, multiple and intersecting" (p. 364). Again, these two important ideas have been supported by the research and writing of other scholars.

In her study of involuntary childlessness, Gayle Letherby (2004) used a technique called 'research by correspondence' that basically entailed an exchange of written letters between herself and her respondents. During the course of this research,

she found that even through this indirect form of communication, respondents were able to exercise power. For example, in several cases research participants complained to Letherby about the 'style or content' of her writing. In other instances, respondents asked personal questions of the researcher, again asserting their agency and potentially powerful role within the research process to shape both its structure and content (Letherby 2004).

Pamela Cotterill also drew attention to the fluidity of power within research relationships in her 1992 article, "Interviewing Women: issues of Friendship, Vulnerability, and Power." Very much in line with the arguments of Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry, as well as other feminist scholars (see for example: Bhavnani 1993; Hall 2004; Tang 2002), Cotterill (1992) asserted that "whilst all women are oppressed, the individual consciousness and experience of that oppression differs considerably in relation to class, age, and race" (p. 600). A particularly interesting aspect of this piece was the author's in-depth discussion of the potential for researchers themselves to become vulnerable. In this regard she wrote, "My experience suggests that the balance of power shifts between the two [researcher and researched] and, even in circumstances where the respondent is extremely vulnerable, this can affect the researcher so that she feels vulnerable too" (Cotterill 1992: 601). As an example of the potential implications of this situation, Cotterill noted that the vulnerable position of interviewees may lead the interviewer to reconsider the ethical nature of her research agenda and perhaps end the interview (p. 601).

A second factor pointed out by Cotterill that may render the researcher relatively powerless as compared to the respondent, was her feelings of vulnerability due to being a novice in the research process. In fact, Cotterill admitted to having struggled with

these feelings herself. Related to this, she also noted the extreme dependence of the researcher on the researched for information that could also result in feelings of vulnerability on the part of the interviewer. In this vein, she acknowledged that, despite their perceived interest, respondents could not be expected to be as dedicated to the project as the researcher herself. Thus, the onus remained on the researcher to sustain a commitment from them “if her research [was] to develop beyond a set of unexplored hypotheses” (Cotterill 1992: 603).

Other scholars have also noted the various means through which a researcher might experience feelings of vulnerability. In her article “Interviewing – An ‘Unnatural Situation’?” Jane Ribbens (1989) outlines several pertinent examples:

Lorna McKee and Margaret O’Brien (1983)...felt that the normal interviewing stance meant that they could not challenge sexism which they encountered in interviews with men. Similarly, Carol Smart (1984)...felt doubly oppressed in interviews with powerful men – first as a woman she was not supposed to interrupt, and second as an interviewer her role was supposed to be passive, so that the interview itself reinforced traditional patterns of interaction between a man and a woman. She was also unsure about how to deal with material that she found really objectionable, while her powerful interviewees just assumed that she would agree (p. 581).

In these situations, social-structural imbalances were exaggerated through the interview process, leaving the researcher to feel quite powerless.

In sum, there has been a significant shift in thinking about power within some feminist work and literature over the last several decades. Starting from the assumption of a hierarchical and one-way relationship that favoured the researcher, feminists have found both political and practical reasons to construct a more fluid, dynamic conception of power that is exercised by both interviewer and interviewee. Within these bounds,

both participants have a key role to play in shaping the context and content of an interview, and either may be exploited or experience sensations of vulnerability.

In the following section these contentions, which have been primarily formulated on the basis of woman-to-woman interviews, will be applied to the context of doing social research with children. While children have traditionally been viewed as particularly vulnerable participants in the investigative process, therefore requiring special consideration and protections, academics are increasingly recognizing children's ability to exert power in research environments. Moreover, several scholars have noted their own feelings of vulnerability when interviewing children. These factors suggest that power fluctuates between the researcher and researched, even in situations where an adult is interviewing a child.

One interesting discussion of the complex relationship between children and adults in the interview context is found in Alderson and Goodey's (1996) reflections on their study regarding cross-generational perceptions of individuals involved with education for children with physical, emotional and learning difficulties. Early in this text, the authors each note their initial anxiety about interviewing children, despite having experience speaking to children in other research contexts involving families. Goodey in particular confessed that although the child respondents of his current study were recruited from within his own familiar cultural boundaries, he found the prospect of interviewing them "more threatening...[and] more alien" than interviewing "Islamic militants on workplace committees at the height of the Khomeini revolution" (Alderson and Goodey 1996: 107). He was especially concerned that children would not talk to him, or would not provide him with sufficient information. Though he admitted this was a common fear of social researchers, he emphasized how his worries were exaggerated

in this case as he regarded child respondents as a “different, possibly dangerous species” (Alderson and Goodey 1996: 108). Notably, Goodey asserted that these perceptions of children as different from adults justify the creation of unique methodologies and ethics protocols, which in turn reinforce the notion that children are different. This vicious cycle produces an environment in which researchers fear that despite their best intentions, their research “will be coercive and oppressive to child respondents” (Alderson and Goodey 1996: 108). With all these concerns about interviewing children in mind, child participants can seem as daunting as lions, leaving researchers in a precarious and vulnerable position.

Shifting away from these initial anxieties, the next section of Goodey’s discussion focused on his actual experiences with children in the research setting. Here Goodey explained how children respondents impacted his research in a myriad of ways by creating “challenges, refusals, inversions and ironic survival strategies, all of which reset the ethical framework of our encounters” (Alderson and Goodey 1996: 109). For instance, Goodey noted the ability of children to exert power over even the most seemingly straight-forward aspects of research. In this vein, as he arrived at various schools and struggled to find his place in these new surroundings, children frequently took control of the situation by introducing themselves to him. Moreover, in the absence of other adults, children offered their help in providing Goodey with access to other children. In one particular case, while Goodey was awaiting the presence of a sign language interpreter in order to communicate with respondents, a child with verbal capabilities indicated that he was a fluent signer and could mediate Goodey’s conversation with his deaf brother. Commenting on this experience, Goodey remarked,

Patrick takes command of a situation in which I may not seem to be clear about who I am, so that we can all get on with it; it is a demand for realism and honesty (even if it appears innocent of the fact that avoidance and dishonesty are common) that will focus on who we are, why we are here and how we are going to relate to each other (Alderson and Goodey 1996: 109).

In this way Patrick is able to set the tone of the interview by requiring immediate, open and honest communication amongst the parties involved.

As another illustration of children's ability to exert power within the investigative process, Goodey outlined his experiences interviewing a child named Lauren. From the outset of their meeting Lauren assumed a dominant role in the research relationship. Initially she accomplished this by introducing Goodey to an adult teacher who had passed them by in the hallway of her school, thereby authoritatively positioning herself as a liaison between these strangers. She proceeded to lead Goodey into the room where the interview would take place and made the decision to close the door, at first locking it and then changing her mind. As the interview progressed it became apparent to Goodey that Lauren was much more interested in asking questions than answering them, and thus "The interview itself eventually becomes a tug of war..." (Alderson and Goodey 1996: 109). Interestingly, Goodey noted that the personal questions Lauren posed were not meant to obstruct his research goals, but rather were utilized to create a more natural, friendly environment, an element of her character that was supported by observed interactions between Lauren, family members, and other individuals at school. In these ways Lauren was able to control the environment in which the interview took place, as well as the content and direction of the discussion between herself and the researcher (Alderson and Goodey 1996).

Goodey and Alderson are not the only academics who have begun to explore the complex power dynamics between children and adults in research settings. In fact, Harden, Scott, Beckett-Milburn and Jackson (2000) mirrored many of the sentiments expressed by Goodey. For instance, Harden shared Goodey's initial apprehension and anxiety about interviewing children. As she recalls, "*I experienced greater concerns about the process of data collection, and self-doubt about my own research skills, than I have ever felt before*" [emphasis in original] (Harden et al. 2000a: para 3.3). She expressed concern that children might not talk to her and attributed this in part to her position as a stranger, as well as to her perception of children as inherently different from adults. In this regard she noted, "*In some ways I felt closer to a Russian adult than to Scottish children*" [emphasis in original] (Harden et al. 2000a: para 3.7). In line with Goodey's suggestion that researchers may unnecessarily worry about the potential for their research to be oppressive, Harden also admittedly feared that the interview process might be particularly uncomfortable or challenging for children. Again, this notion was reinforced by her perception of children as distinctly different from adults.

It is perhaps important to note that Harden's fears were exacerbated by the fact that she had relatively little prior contact with children. In fact this was the primary reason behind the decision made by two of her colleagues, Scott and Jackson (both middle-aged women with no children of their own, and no previous experience interviewing individuals younger than age 14), to opt out of the interviewing process despite their "wealth of qualitative research experience, including with teenagers and on sensitive topics" (Harden et al. 2000a: para 3.1). Reflecting on this decision, Scott and Jackson have recognized their initial acceptance of the notion that children are inherently different from adults and that interviewing them is a "special activity

requiring special skills and self-presentation” (Harden et al. 2000a: para 3.1). While not wishing to depict the process of doing social research with children as an easy task, Scott and Jackson have subsequently contended that it is essential for researchers to be “reflexive about both their own and wider social assumptions in this context” (Harden et al. 2000a: para 3.1).

The examples provided by these authors suggest that interviewing children can evoke feelings of uncertainty amongst social science researchers, particularly in light of the fact that children are perceived as inherently and vastly different from adults. It seems ironic that prevalent notions of children as vulnerable and incompetent beings result in researchers’ own feelings of vulnerability and incompetence. However, despite my own wealth of experiences with children¹², I too became apprehensive about interviewing them.

At the outset of this project I had no reservations about speaking with children; the doubts that I would eventually acquire stemmed directly from the uncertainties and warnings of others. For instance, during the early stages of planning I presented my intended methodological approach to a group of my colleagues in a class setting. During the discussion period which followed the demonstration, I was inundated with questions about how I would gain access to children, doubts that child activists existed, warnings that ethics committees would not approve my application to interview children personally, and suggestions that I should instead speak with older youth who had been engaged in political activities from a young age. Initially I unreflexively accepted these cautions, assuming my colleagues were more knowledgeable and experienced with the research process than myself. I began to doubt my ability to access children, as well as

¹² These experiences were predominantly limited to informal, social (rather than academic) contexts.

my skills as an interviewer. In fact, had it not been for the encouragement of my supervisor who advised me to remain true to my goal of a child-centered project, I would certainly have heeded my colleagues' cautions and directed my attention towards adolescents and away from children.

Analogous to the experiences outlined by other academics, not only did I encounter feelings of vulnerability and apprehension about interviewing children, but I also witnessed the ability of children to exert power over the investigative process. While this occurred in a variety of ways, several of the more obvious examples will be discussed here. One of the first illustrations of children's power to sway the nature of the research agenda occurred when my first respondent challenged the notion of anonymity. In accordance with common practices of social research, when designing the consent forms for this project I had guaranteed that children's identities would not be known to external parties (see Appendix A ~ Original Consent Forms); pseudonyms would be assigned to each child and used in all informal and formal communications. I had unreflexively assumed that anonymity was an essential ethical protocol, particularly when dealing with children. However, shortly after sending an information package to Hannah Taylor and her family, I received an email from Hannah in which she wrote,

You can also use my name and the name of our Ladybug Foundation. I said to my parents when I read your letter that I think people learn better when they really know who it is they are hearing from. I believe in my heart that all kids can do what I do they just need a chance. I have had soooooo many amazing and great chances to learn and grow up in caring.

As one of the main goals of this project was to maintain a child-centered approach I felt I could not ignore Hannah's wishes in this regard. Thus, the appropriate ethics boards were contacted, consent forms were altered and it was decided that all future

respondents should have the option of having their real names utilized.¹³ While the school board's research advisory committee chose to reject this option for their students, my university's ethics committee approved the revision on the condition that parents give their consent (in writing) on this matter for each child.

Interestingly, Hannah was not the only child to express concern about what name would be used to represent her. The parent of my second respondent, Kelly Palmatier, also indicated that after reading the original consent forms, her daughter Naomi questioned why her real name would not be used. Kelly explained to Naomi that this was generally done for people's protection, and also to ensure that they could talk freely with researchers knowing that what they said would remain confidential. Following this conversation Kelly indicated to me that her daughter was fairly unsatisfied with this answer and in any case wanted to ensure that a 'pretty' name was selected for her. Once I had articulated the newly formulated option of allowing children to have their actual names used, Kelly left this decision with Naomi who eagerly agreed to the proposition. In this way, these children altered a key aspect of my methodological design. Significantly, out of the seven children interviewed outside of the educational system, all chose to have their real names published, though two families decided to have their last name omitted.

A second way children illustrated their power within the context of the interview was to recognize themselves as experts in their own lives and to position themselves as such. During many of the interviews children were clearly aware of the fact that their experiences as activists and knowledge of various social causes outweighed my own.

¹³ In fact as consent forms had already been sent to several other families, I chose to re-contact each of them in order to explain this new option and to provide them with the revised forms.

This was exemplified by the fact that on numerous occasions they would interrupt their own stories in order to ask if I knew what they were talking about, for instance if I was familiar with a certain geographic location, person or organization. If I indicated my lack of knowledge, the interview was subsequently put on hold while children ensured I was up-to-date on the issues that mattered most to them. For example, this is an excerpt from my conversation with Charlotte:

Trish: What are some of the things that you are doing to try to make the world a better place?

Charlotte: Well I've been involved in HIV and AIDS in Africa with Stephen Lewis. It started when I saw the movie *Rent* with my sister 'cause she was a big fan of *Rent*. And then I just got really involved and started...like I did a speech in my school in grade 6 on HIV and AIDS in Africa; and I got to the finals and stuff. And then I started emailing the Stephen Lewis foundation and then it just kept moving on from there. Then the Wakefield Grannies, do you know them?

Trish: No.

Charlotte: They're a group in Wakefield, Quebec which is close to where I live. They're a group of grandmothers who connect to South African Go-Go Grannies. And they're taking care of their grandchildren whose parents died of AIDS. I have a pen pal...Her parents died when she was 8 and she said every time she goes to school all she can talk about is her parents; and also the other kids [are the same]. And so they filmed my speech – the Wakefield Grannies – because they make documentaries and send them all over the world. And so then they invited me to have a meeting with Stephen Lewis before one of his talks. Do you know Stephen Lewis?

Trish: I've heard his name before but I am not really familiar with him.

Charlotte: Stephen Lewis was the former UN Special Envoy for HIV and AIDS in Africa, and he is a huge AIDS activist and one of the biggest. He does a lot of things with David Suzuki and he's really famous.

In this dialogue it is apparent that Charlotte recognized her knowledgeable position.

Once I had admitted to having little familiarity with both the Wakefield Grannies and Stephen Lewis, Charlotte quickly assumed the role of educator, thereby taking control over the conversation.

A further means through which children exerted power in the interview context was by challenging my assertions or wording. In one particularly memorable instance, I was speaking to Hannah about her role in raising money and awareness about Canada's homeless population and whether she would recommend this type of work to her peers.

The conversation went as follows:

Trish: So, you're a pretty busy girl – if other kids wanted to help out, do you think you would recommend it? Would you tell them that it is a good or bad thing in your life that you are so busy doing this work?

Hannah: Yeah, it's a great thing in my life. I love doing it, but I wish I didn't have to. But I love the Ladybug Foundation, how I'm helping and how so many people have helped me. But I wish I didn't have to do it, you know?

Trish: Because you wish there were no homeless people, is that what you are saying?

Hannah: Yeah.

Trish: Yeah, so you wish that the problem wasn't there.

Hannah: Well I don't see a problem, I see people. But, I wish that those homeless people could have a home and then I wouldn't have to raise money for them.

In response to Hannah's statement that while she was very glad to be in the position to help other people she wished that there was no need to do so, I attempted to reiterate her feeling that the situation of homelessness should not exist. However, my wording apparently offended Hannah who did not desire to have the word 'problem' associated with homeless people. Thus she quickly corrected me and restated her position for my clarification. By challenging me in this way, Hannah clearly indicated that she was a competent social agent who had the power to question others' (even adults') understanding of the world.

Aside from the fact that Hannah was unafraid to confront what she understood to be a negative comment about homeless persons on my part, the power dynamic between Hannah and I was also impacted by her wealth of experience with the interview process that greatly outweighed my own. This allowed Hannah to challenge my authority as researcher by making judgments about my interviewing skills. For example, when asked if there was anything she wanted to add to the discussion before its end, Hannah declared, “OK! Let me tell you something – you have the best questions out of all the interviewers I’ve ever spoken to.” While I was appreciative of this compliment and very happy that the conversation was pleasurable for both me and my respondent, Hannah’s comment reminded me that I was a novice in this process and that she was a well-practiced interviewee.

These examples support the notion that power fluctuates between researchers and the researched, even in situations where an adult is interviewing a child. My experiences as well as those of some feminists and childhood sociologists suggest that children are competent agents who are able to meaningfully contribute to social research when given the chance. Again, this raises questions about the need for a unique set of ethical protocols for researching with children.

Is there Need for Special Ethical Guidelines for Children?

Research ethics refer to a “set of moral principles and rules of conduct” that are imposed on research designs in order to ensure that participants are treated with respect and remain safe from harm (Morrow and Richards 1996: 90). While many ethical models incorporate considerations about children into broader guidelines for ‘adults with impairments’ or refrain from explicitly referring to children altogether (Morrow and Richards 1996: 93), in practice it is evident there is greater concern about ethics

protocols when the intended research respondents are children. This was clearly illustrated in my own experience as both informal parties (eg. colleagues at school) and formal organizations (eg. the university ethics committee as well as the school board's research advisory committee) expressed concern about children's vulnerability and how this would be accounted for in my investigation. As previously outlined, this desire to ensure children were adequately protected from potentially harmful research resulted in restrictions on the form and context of my inquiry in the name of good ethical practice.

Yet the question remains as to whether this system of a separate, more stringent code of research ethics for children is indeed necessary. In order to address this question it is essential to examine the current justifications utilized to support these practices. Evidence suggests that ethical concerns regarding research with children are frequently based on the assumption that children are inherently and vastly different than adults. This was illustrated by Goodey's description of children as a unique species (Alderson and Goodey 1996), Harden's sentiments that she felt 'closer to a Russian adult than to Scottish children' (Harden et al. 2000a), as well as the advice offered to me by colleagues that it would be far easier to interview adolescents than children. Importantly, Morrow and Richards (1996) assert that "these discussions in turn can be reduced to two related descriptive perceptions that adults hold of children, that is, children as vulnerable and children as incompetent" (p. 96). In this way children's perceived biological and psychological vulnerabilities remain the focus of ethical concern (Morrow and Richards 1996) and it is accordingly deemed necessary to protect children from potentially abusive research (Harden et al. 2000a).

This particular view of children as incompetent and vulnerable is rooted in the psychological model of human development founded by Jean Piaget that was briefly

outlined in the literature review of this text. Basically, Piaget asserted that “children’s thinking undergoes dramatic and patterned changes as they mature biologically and gain social experience” (Macionis and Gerber 2002: 116). In this view, children’s development is thought to occur in a linear and predictable manner; it progresses “from simplicity to complexity, from irrationality to rationality...on the path to adulthood” (Valentine 1997b: 66). As a result, children are regarded as innately different or even less than adults.

Despite the prevalence of this mode of thought, children have been increasingly recognized as competent social agents, both within the broad context of their everyday lives and in the micro environment of social research. The creation of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* as well as other legal recognitions of children’s capabilities, combined with observations of children’s power in this research project and others, contradict ideas about children’s inherent incompetence or vulnerability as expressed in the development model. The implications of this realization for ethical protocols are obvious. In this regard, Alderson and Goodey (1996) contend that,

If we reject the Piagetian view of children as not yet competent or fully functional moral beings, then we should be aware of an equally questionable implication, that children constitute a separate species for ethical purposes. It is a short step from saying that children think or act in a characteristically non-adult way, to ‘treating’ them characteristically, as stereotypes of childhood or of disability, with one ethics for adults and another for children. [emphasis in original] (p. 114)

In other words, since there has been mounting acceptance of the idea that children have the potential to be powerful, competent agents in our social world, the justification for more stringent ethical guidelines for children based on their incompetence or vulnerability no longer stands. In fact, the proliferation of ethical protocols in terms of

both breadth and rigidity can be regarded as constraining to scholarly research. This point was well articulated by Kevin Haggerty (2004) who outlined how the expansionist regime of research ethics “structure[s] what truths can be spoken and by whom” (p. 392).

The intent of this discussion is certainly not to argue for the abandonment of ethical guidelines for social research. Rather, the aim is to promote reflexive consideration of ethical protocols that are rationalized by perceptions of children as ‘different’ (incompetent and vulnerable) and which, at the same time, reinforce these ideas. The importance of this reflection is rooted in the fact that some ethical practices may unnecessarily limit children’s agency, thereby contributing to their marginal status in our society. In this regard,

The main ethical issues should not revolve around children’s innate difference but relate to children’s social location as subordinate to adults. For example, ‘informed consent’ is problematic not primarily because of children’s lack of understanding of research, but because their participation in any research project is dependent on adult gatekeepers (Harden et al. 2000a: para 2.24).

Thus ethical considerations pertaining to research with children should focus on the social relations between children and adults that preclude children from having voice. Analogous to arguments put forth by some feminist and antiracist scholars, it is essential that researchers address issues of power and control when dealing with children. The first step in this process is inevitably acknowledging one’s own socio-political position in relation to potential respondents. In the case of doing research with children, this must be followed by an agreement “on research standards that enshrine children’s rights to be informed and listened to in all matters that affect them” (Alderson and Goodey 1996:

115), a principal set out in the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* more than two decades ago.

In sum, children have traditionally been marginalized both in research and our broader society, a trend that has left little room for their voices to be heard, or for their meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Within this socio-historical context, as researchers the challenge is not to assume an either-or mentality in which children are either treated as powerful or powerless, as trouble or in trouble, active or passive, or as either having rights or needing protection. Rather, we must recognize the complexity of childhood and human nature more generally. In this way, the aim of research should be to include children in ways that best suit the realities of their lives in our modern, Western culture.

Conclusion

During the latter half of the twentieth century, the notion of children's rights was brought to the forefront of public attention on a global scale via the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Engrained in this document was a sense that, while children both required and deserved certain protections (eg. from exploitation, abuse and discrimination), they also had the capability and right to speak for themselves and thus to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. In essence the *Convention* guaranteed to children a right to engage in active citizenship. Despite the worldwide recognition and ratification of this document, there remains concern regarding whether venues and support systems for children to exercise their rights as set out in the *Convention* have actually been created. Furthermore, while government bodies in Canada and abroad have very recently begun to examine their policies and practices relating to children, there has been little, if any, involvement of children in this process.

Within this context, this project was designed to explore the subject of child activism through the use of sociological literature, newspaper articles, and, most importantly, interviews with children themselves. Although the academic literature reviewed here was more broadly related to childhood than to my specific focus of child activism, it provided a thorough account of our socially constructed ideas about childhood, and also offered some insight regarding the potential implications of these notions for the lives of real children. The literature suggested that socio-historical conditions in contemporary, Western society have marginalized children. In particular, several tensions or dichotomies in social constructions of childhood that render children relatively powerless in their day-to-day lives were highlighted. Children are either viewed as needing protection or having rights. There is concern that children are either at risk or pose a risk. Lastly, despite the growing recognition of children's right and ability to engage in active citizenship and the desire to produce civically engaged adults, there remains a prevalent belief that the place of children is in the private sphere where they are to be seen and not heard. Again, this pattern fits with the broader trend to reductively dichotomize concepts in social theory. For instance, there is a strong tendency to juxtapose notions of structure and agency such that the complex interactions between these variables are ignored. In relation to children, this means that their capabilities and rights (children's agency) are rarely discussed in conjunction with their vulnerabilities or structural influences in children's lives.

These tensions in our ideas about childhood were confirmed by the textual analysis of newspaper articles relating to two Canadian child activists. In these journalistic accounts, Craig and Hannah were at once portrayed as 'normal' children who were vulnerable, innocent, playful, incompetent and dependent, and as exceptional,

rational, abnormally-developed beings that resembled something closer to adults. In an era where there exists great concern that childhood is disappearing, these portrayals reinforce biographical divisions between children and adults. This occurred on one hand by the journalists' reaffirmation of what a 'normal' childhood is, and on the other, by the exclusion of Craig and Hannah from this category in light of their participation in the public sphere.

While these ambiguities are rooted in ideas about childhood, they have implications for the actual lives of children. This was clearly observed in both the recruitment and interview stages of this research. In terms of the latter, the children who participated in this study clearly articulated numerous age-related restrictions, challenges and obstacles they had faced in their activist careers. This included limitations to their access to knowledge (eg. information about 'mature' subjects) and activities (eg. participation in social movement organizations being restricted to tokenistic roles). Further, children felt their ideas, opinions and actions were not taken seriously simply because they were children. In this way the children acknowledged their general exclusion from decision-making processes; there were little opportunities for them to have their voices heard or to make positive contributions to our social and political environment.

Again, the implications of broad notions about childhood for the actual lives of children were also evident in the recruitment stages of this project as I attempted to access potential child interviewees. The dilemmas I encountered in gaining access to participants for this study illustrate how children's marginal social status is reproduced in limiting their participation in research of this kind. Specifically, adult gatekeepers controlled my access to children, as well as some elements of the research design. Thus,

in line with prevailing notions that children are vulnerable and incompetent beings, children's need for protection was emphasized over other rights. This occurred in spite of the fact that children, in this project and others, have demonstrated their power and ability to competently contribute to the research process.

These findings suggest that our society is at an impasse regarding how we think about childhood and how we act towards children. In this sense, the historical conceptions of the Apollonian child (characterized as naturally good, innocent, and at risk) and Dionysian child (depicted as naturally corrupt, active and risky) have collided. As noted by Cunningham (1995),

The peculiarity of the late twentieth century, and the root cause of much present confusion and angst about childhood, is that a public discourse which argues that children are persons with rights to a degree of autonomy is at odds with the remnants of the romantic view that the right of a child is to be a child. The implication of the first is a fusing of the worlds of adult and child, and of the second the maintenance of separation (p. 190).

In essence, our present society is influenced by a myriad of myths, stories and perceptions of childhood that have prevailed to varying degrees throughout the course of history. This research project has illustrated how these ideas influence children's everyday lives, how in Scott, Jackson and Backett-Milburn's (1998) words, "In everyday life abstract ideas of 'the child' come up against the actuality of children of different ages and genders, with a range of attributes and capacities" (p. 692). However, it is also important to note that reality can in turn shape ideas. In this regard, children's voices and actions have clearly demonstrated a defiance of either-or, dichotomous classifications. Through the exploration of the lives of real children, whether by their inclusion in research agendas or in social life more generally, it becomes difficult to preserve idyllic conceptions of children as perfect, innocent angels. It also becomes

naïve to regard them as completely incompetent, vulnerable or a-political. These reductive dichotomies do not account for the messiness of social life. Like any human beings, children are riddled with complexities, both as individuals and as a cohort.

Notably, this complexity was acknowledged by the children who participated in this study as they amalgamated characteristics into their conceptions of childhood that are normally juxtaposed. In this regard the children recognized their dependencies and need for adult support and encouragement, while firmly maintaining their abilities to positively contribute to our world. Although this research effort was quite small with only 10 participants, Mayall (2000) noted a similar trend in his research. As he explained,

children's accounts point to a paradox: they agree with adults that childhood is a period of life – an apprenticeship – when people are rightly subordinated to those with more experience and knowledge. Being protected by adults from absolute responsibilities is one kind of right children identify. On the other hand, being an apprentice is only part of the story of childhood. Children's accounts forcibly indicate that they are moral agents, who carry out important activities, both in the structuring and progressing of their own lives within relationships, and in making and remaking relationships within the family and with friends (Mayall 2000: 255).

Again, these findings suggest that children have recognized the complexities of their lives, acknowledging their need for certain protections while at the same time asserting their ability and rights to participate meaningfully in social life.

This project has therefore highlighted the need to be reflexive of how we think about children in our society generally, as well as how they are included in social science research. It is evident that these ideas have significant implications for the everyday lives of children. In this sense, it is relatively easy to identify children as incompetent in a society which does not provide them with the chance to prove their

abilities. Treating children as though they are inherently vulnerable, incompetent and dependent on adults can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy since “children cannot be competent to do things which they have never been allowed to do” (Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn 1998: 694). This situation renders the process of listening to the voices of children themselves extremely important, for it is only through these means that we will truly begin to understand what it is to be a child in contemporary, Western society.

In this regard, there are numerous issues related to child activism, and childhood more generally, that would benefit from further scholarly research. Firstly, as this study was quite small with only 10 child participants, it would certainly be valuable to interview additional activists. As each of the children interviewed here had unique interests, it is likely that further investigations into children’s activism would reveal a vast repertoire of causes and actions, each worthy of its own study. Furthermore, as all of my interviewees reside in North America, future studies could examine the lives of child activists in other parts of the globe. It would be fascinating to explore the ways in which children’s activism is shaped by the political, social, economic and/or religious environments in which they live.

Another area that would benefit from further research relates to children’s conception of childhood. In this study, children felt that social responsibility (eg. caring for people, animals and the environment) was an important aspect of being a child. However, this association of activism and childhood may very well have been related to the fact that these children were themselves civically engaged. In other words, it is likely not a coincidence that this particular cohort of children felt that activism was an inherent part of being a child. It would be interesting to ask non-activist children ‘what it means

to be a child' in order to ascertain how their conceptions are similar or different to those of their activist counterparts.

Thirdly, more work could be done to explore the ways in which children in some areas of the globe are being provided with opportunities to meaningfully contribute to their social and political environments. It would definitely be valuable to assess children's opinions of these programs in order to learn which strategies they feel are successful. There is currently some academic research in this regard. Matthews and Limb (2003), for instance, spoke with children aged 13-18 in the United Kingdom to learn about children's perceptions of Youth Councils. The authors found that there were a number of barriers to Youth Councils' success. These included a need for substantial commitment from supportive adults, the ability to keep children the central focus of the Council, the need for a clear focus of the group, for openness and transparency, and the need for the group to be relevant to the lives of children. In regard to the latter point, the authors contend that many councils have become too political and children are "inevitably cast as 'bit-part players', sidelined through the insensibilities of local bureaucracies" (Matthews and Limb 2003: 189). Further research focused on assessing initiatives that provide children with opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes is needed to ensure these programs are relevant to children's lives and do not limit children to tokenistic roles. Moreover, this type of research could provide insight as to how initiatives that children deem successful can be replicated in other contexts or places.

In conclusion, at the outset of the thesis I stated that the goal of this research project was not only to explore the phenomenon of children's activism but also to create a greater awareness about this issue. This second objective became increasingly

important to me as the children and parents who participated in this study frequently expressed their frustration with the reality that they could not find any information about child activism. On one hand, as the children struggled to pursue their goals, many of them articulated a desire to learn about activities other children were engaged in and felt they would benefit from having a venue through which they could connect with other activists. For example, Charlotte desired to create her own organization and thought it would be greatly beneficial to learn how to effectively do so from someone her own age. Alternatively, parents wanted to learn how to support their children, and, in some cases, how to help their children balance activism with behaviours and actions that are more commonly associated with 'normal' childhoods (eg. free play and time with friends).

In light of these circumstances, I designed a web site aimed at providing general information about child activism to any interested parties, as well as to provide a venue through which child activists and their families could support one another. The web site (www.groups.google.com/group/child_activism) includes information about both historical and contemporary instances of children's activism, links to further resources pertaining to these stories on the Internet, a list of groups and organizations that recognize or award children's political and social commitments, and a discussion forum whereby individuals can talk about this important issue (for a more thorough description of information on the web page see Appendix H ~ Child Activism Web Page). Additionally, I will post my thesis and list of resources on the web site once it is completed.

This web site can be viewed by anyone on the Internet. Further, the discussion forum was created in a manner that offers any individual who visits the site the opportunity to post a message (though I must approve of messages from non-group

members before they are viewable to others). To generate awareness of this resource, the web address was emailed to all participants of this study¹⁴, as well as to friends, colleagues and various organizations and people whom I had met during the process of recruiting participants for this study. To date, several children have become members of the site and one child has contributed to the discussion group. As well, I have received positive feedback from Ms. Ryan and many of the parents of my interviewees. I plan to maintain this site indefinitely and to continuously add information on the page as I learn more about this fascinating issue.

¹⁴ Again, some children were necessarily accessed via adult gatekeepers. For instance, I did not have contact information for the three school children interviewed and thus emailed Ms. Ryan with the hopes that she would share the web address with them and perhaps other children in her school.

Trish Desjardins
180 Lees Avenue
Apartment 2109
Ottawa, ON
K1S 5J6

September 12th, 2006

The purpose of an informed consent is to ensure that you understand the purpose of this study and the nature of your child's involvement. The informed consent must provide sufficient information so that you can determine whether you wish your child to participate.

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Trish Desjardins and I am a Master's student in sociology at Carleton University. I am currently conducting research about child activists in the Ottawa area. My work is being supervised by Professor Aaron Doyle, also of the sociology department at Carleton.

The purpose of this study is to learn from children who voluntarily undertake political action. The primary objectives will be to learn what inspires these children, what issues they are interested in, whether they have faced any resistance to their political actions, and how we, as adults, can encourage and facilitate their political involvement while maintaining a child-centered approach.

Your child has been selected as a potential participant in my research because of his/her nomination for Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa's (CAYFO) annual Spirit Youth Awards. I will be contacting between 10 and 15 children (aged 10-13), all of whom have been selected for the same reason and based on the same information. In order to protect your privacy, CAYFO has distributed this letter on my behalf.

With your permission, your child will be asked to complete an open-ended interview regarding their experiences as activists. I will conduct the interview. The interview will take place face-to-face at a previously arranged location that is most convenient for you and your child. The interview is expected to take approximately 45 minutes but can be shortened if you or your child wishes, or lengthened if your child feels comfortable continuing in the discussion.

If it would make you and your child feel more comfortable with the interview process, yourself (the parent/guardian) or another adult of you and your child's choosing can be present during the entire interview. In the case that you would like

to be present during the interview and your child expresses concern about your attendance, I will speak to both you and your child in order to determine whether an agreement can be reached. One possible solution could be for your child to choose another adult to accompany him/her. If consensus cannot be reached as regards to an adult presence during the interview, I will not be able to include your child in this research.

In order to ensure your child fully understands the nature of his/her involvement and to determine whether he/she wishes to have an adult present I will need to speak to your child alone for a few minutes before the interview begins. During this time I will discuss my research intentions and ask your child if he/she has any questions or concerns about the process. Again, it is important you understand that if your child does not want to participate in this research, he/she will not be interviewed, even if I have obtained your consent.

There are no anticipated risks to your child participating in this research. However, since children are a relatively vulnerable group in society (as compared to adults) one potential risk is that they may feel pressured to participate in this project if your consent is obtained. To protect child participants against such pressures I have included in this package a letter to your child explaining the research project. I will also verbally inform your child of his/her rights prior to the interview. Again, your child has the right not to participate even if you consent to the interview. If your child does agree to participate he/she has the right not to answer any question, or to withdraw from the interview process altogether. Should your child decide to withdraw from the interview, you and your child may decide at that time if I may use the information he/she has provided to that point.

The benefit of this study is that it will allow your child to present his/her experiences with political activism. While certain topic areas will be pre-determined by me, your child will have the chance to discuss his/her views on what issues matter to children and how these are and should be being dealt with.

The data collected in this research project are confidential. Your child's name will not be used in the final written document. Instead, a pseudonym will be used and it will be assigned by me. All responses will be attributed to the pseudonym. Also, no identifying information about your child will appear in the final written thesis. The raw data from the interview material will be used solely by me.

The interviews will be audio-taped with your consent and the consent of your child. If you choose not to have your child's answers recorded on tape, I will simply take handwritten notes. I am the only person who has direct access to the interview material (whether on paper or tape). This material will be kept on my personal computer which is located in my home where I am the sole resident. Furthermore, the computer is protected by a password that only I know.

Appendix A ~ Original Consent Forms

144

The information your child, along with the other participants, provides will be presented in a written thesis paper which I plan to publish. Further, results may be presented at conferences or in the form of scholarly journal articles. With your consent, the data will be stored for the purpose of potential graduate research concerning further, more in-depth investigation of this research topic. However, you may decide to have the data pertaining to your child's interview destroyed upon the completion of this project, and thus his/her responses would not be used for any future research.

This letter has been distributed by Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa (CAYFO). However, if your child wishes to participate in this study, or should you require further information please contact Trish Desjardins by e-mail at tdesjar2@connect.carleton.ca or by using the self-addressed stamped envelope I have provided in this package. You can also contact Dr. Aaron Doyle either by telephone at 520-2600 extension 1914 or by e-mail at adoyle2525@rogers.ca.

This research has received ethics clearance through the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee. Should you have any ethical concerns about this study, including information about the rights of participants, please contact Professor Antonio Gualtieri (Research Ethics Committee Chair) by telephone 520-2517 or e-mail at ethics@carleton.ca.

Consent:

***I have read the above description of the study and I understand the conditions of my child's involvement. My signature indicates that I freely consent to my child's participation in this interview. I consent ___ do not consent ___ to my child being audio taped throughout the interview, and I understand that he/she may ask to have the audio recorder turned off at any point. Furthermore, I understand that although I have given consent for my child to be interviewed, he/she has the right to decline participation. I recognize that the researcher (Trish Desjardins) will not interview any child who appears unwilling, uncomfortable or who clearly states a desire to not participate in this research. I understand that my child has final say in this regard.*

Parent/Guardian's Name (please print): _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian's Signature: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Dear _____,

My name is Trish Desjardins and I am a student here in Ottawa. Right now I am working on a project to learn more about children who are trying to make changes in their schools, in the area where they live, in the city of Ottawa, or even the world. I want to know what topics children are interested in or worried about. I also want to learn why some children choose to do something about the situations they feel need some change. Finally, I want to know what children think adults can do to help them in this process.

I learned about you through a group called Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa (CAYFO). I know that you were nominated for a Spirit Youth Award, and I would really like to talk to you about the changes you are trying to make. I will also be talking to about ten other kids your age who were nominated for the award.

If you agree to help me with my project, we will meet somewhere that you are comfortable talking. You can bring a parent or another adult with you if you want and I would be happy to meet them too. I hope to ask you a few questions that I have planned, but I also want to hear a lot about what you think is important for me to know.

When we are talking I would like to use a microphone and computer to tape our voices so that I remember all the important information you tell me. If you do not want your voice recorded, just tell me and I will write down what we say instead. When I am finished meeting with all the other boys and girls I will write a paper for my school. In this paper, I will not use your name. I will make up a fake name for you so that no one will know you who are. I may also talk to other adults about what you and the other children tell me, but I will ALWAYS use your fake name.

It is very important for you to know that you do not have to meet and talk with me if you do not want to, even if an adult tells you it is a good idea. This is your choice. Also, if you decide to talk with me you can choose not to answer any of my questions. If you feel uncomfortable, scared or just do not want to talk anymore, you can tell me at anytime and we will stop our talk right away.

Now that you have read my letter you can choose if you want to meet with me. If you do, please sign your name below. Remember that if you have any questions you can ask your parent to write me a letter or you can wait and ask me when we meet.

Consent:

***I have read this letter and I want to meet with Trish to talk about the things I am doing to help people or make the world a better place. I understand this is my choice and that I can change my mind at any time.*

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Trish Desjardins
180 Lees Avenue
Apartment 2109
Ottawa, ON
K1S 5J6
(613) 321-0614

March 5th, 2007

The purpose of an informed consent is to ensure that you understand the purpose of this study and the nature of your child's involvement. The informed consent must provide sufficient information so that you can determine whether you wish your child to participate.

Dear parent/guardian,

My name is Trish Desjardins and I am a Master's student in sociology at Carleton University. I am currently conducting research about child activists in North America, and particularly within the Ottawa area. My work is being supervised by Professor Aaron Doyle, also of the sociology department at Carleton.

The purpose of this study is to learn from children who voluntarily undertake political action. The primary objectives will be to learn what inspires these children, what issues they are interested in, whether they have faced any resistance to their political actions, and how we, as adults, can encourage and facilitate their political involvement while maintaining a child-centered approach.

My aim is to learn from roughly ten to fifteen children, between the ages of nine and fourteen. If your child is voluntarily involved in political activities he/she would make a wonderful candidate for this research.

With your permission, as a participant in this research your child would be asked to complete either a short questionnaire or an open-ended interview regarding his/her experiences as an activist. If your child is interested in completing a questionnaire I can send one to you via email, or via regular post. In the latter case I will also include a self-addressed stamped envelope for you to return the completed questionnaire to me at your convenience. If your child is interested in being interviewed, I will personally conduct the interview which will take place face-to-face at a previously arranged location that is most convenient for you and your child. The interview is expected to take approximately 45 minutes but can be shortened if you or your child wishes, or lengthened if your child feels comfortable continuing in the discussion.

In accordance with school board policy, and in order to ensure that you and your child feel comfortable with the research process, yourself (the parent/guardian) or another adult of you and your child's choosing must accompany your child to the location of the interview and remain at that location until the interview is

completed. The sole exception to this policy is that an adult need not accompany your child to the interview if the agreed location is at your child's school during school hours.

In order to ensure your child fully understands the nature of his/her involvement and to determine whether he/she wishes to have an adult present I will need to speak to your child alone for a few minutes before the interview begins. During this time I will discuss my research intentions and ask your child if he/she has any questions or concerns about the process. Again, it is important you understand that if your child does not want to participate in this research, he/she will not be interviewed, even if I have obtained your consent.

There are no anticipated risks to your child participating in this research. However, since children are a relatively vulnerable group in society (as compared to adults) one potential risk is that they may feel pressured to participate in this project if your consent is obtained. To protect child participants against such pressures I have included in this package a letter to your child explaining the research project. In the case of interviews, I will also verbally inform your child of his/her rights. If your child does agree to participate (either by completing a questionnaire or by being interviewed) he/she has the right not to answer any question, or to withdraw from the process altogether at any time. Should your child decide to withdraw from the research process you and your child may decide at that time if I may use the information he/she has provided to that point.

The benefit of this study is that it will allow your child to present his/her experiences with political activism. While certain topic areas will be pre-determined by me, your child will have the chance to discuss his/her views on what issues matter to children and how these are and should be being dealt with.

The data collected in this research project is completely confidential. Your child's name will not be used in the final written document. Instead, a pseudonym will be used and it will be assigned by me. All responses will be attributed to the pseudonym. Also, no identifying information about your child will appear in the final written thesis. The raw data from the interview material will be used solely by me.

The interviews will be audio-taped with your consent and the consent of your child. If you choose not to have your child's answers recorded on tape, I will simply take handwritten notes. I am the only person who has direct access to the interview material (whether on paper or tape) as well as information provided in the form of a questionnaire. All of this material will be kept on my personal computer which is located in my home where I am the sole resident. Furthermore, the computer is protected by a password that only I know. Hard copies of documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my apartment. Again, only I have the key to this cabinet.

Research findings will *not* appear in any school records and will not affect your child's academic standing in any way. The information your child, along with the

other participants, provides will be presented in a written thesis paper which I plan to publish. Further, results may be presented at conferences or in the form of scholarly journal articles. With your consent, the data will be stored for the purpose of potential graduate research concerning further, more in-depth investigation of this research topic. However, you may decide to have the data pertaining to your child’s interview destroyed upon the completion of this project, and thus his/her responses would not be used for any future research.

If your child wishes to participate in this study, or should you require further information please contact Trish Desjardins by e-mail at tdesjar2@connect.carleton.ca or at the residential address noted above. You can also contact Dr. Aaron Doyle either by telephone at 520-2600 extension 1914 or by e-mail at adoyle2525@rogers.ca. This research has received ethics clearance through the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee and the Ottawa-Carleton Research Advisory Committee. **It has also been approved by your child’s principal.** Should you have any ethical concerns about this study, including information about the rights of participants, please contact Professor Antonio Gualtieri (Research Ethics Committee Chair at Carleton University) by telephone 520-2517 or e-mail at ethics@carleton.ca.

Consent:

I have read the above description of the study and I understand the conditions of my child’s involvement. My signature indicates that I freely consent to my child’s participation in this project.

**** PARENT/GUARDIAN OF CHILDREN WISHING TO BE INTERVIEWED:**

- *___ I consent to have my child participate in an audio-taped interview. I understand that he/she may ask to have the audio recorder turned off at any point. Furthermore, I understand that although I have given consent for my child to be interviewed, he/she has the right to decline participation. I recognize that the researcher (Trish Desjardins) will not interview any child who appears unwilling, uncomfortable or who clearly states a desire to not participate in this research. I understand that my child has final say in this regard.*

**** PARENT/GUARDIAN OF CHILDREN WISHING TO COMPLETE A QUESTIONNAIRE:**

- *Please send me a questionnaire via email ___ via regular post ___. (Please include your address when contacting me). I understand that my child has the right to decline participation altogether or to refrain from answering any question(s) he/she so chooses. I will abide by my child’s wishes in this regard.*

OR ___ I DO NOT CONSENT TO MY CHILD’S PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY.

Parent/Guardian’s Name (please print): _____ Date: _____
 Parent/Guardian’s Signature: _____
 Researcher’s Signature: _____

Dear student,

My name is Trish Desjardins and I am a student here in Ottawa. Right now I am working on a project to learn more about children who are trying to make changes in their schools, in the area where they live, in the city of Ottawa, or even the world. I want to know what topics children are interested in or worried about. I also want to learn why some children choose to do something about the situations they feel need some change. Finally, I want to know what children think adults can do to help them in this process.

If you are a person who likes to help other people or who is trying to make these types of changes I would really like to hear from you.

If you agree to help me with my project, you can decide to meet me in person, or you can ask me to mail you some questions for you to answer at home. If you choose to speak with me in person, we will meet somewhere that you are comfortable talking. **You must bring a parent or another adult with you to this meeting.** I hope to ask you a few questions that I have planned, but I also want to hear a lot about what you think is important for me to know. When we are talking I would like to use a microphone to tape our voices so that I remember all the important information you tell me. If you do not want your voice recorded, just tell me and I will write down what we say instead.

When I am finished learning from all the other boys and girls I will write a paper for my school. In this paper, I will make up a fake name for you so that no one will know who you are. I may also talk to other adults about what you and the other children tell me, but I will ALWAYS use your fake name.

It is very important for you to know that you do not have to meet and talk with me if you do not want to and you do not have to write answers to my questions, even if an adult tells you it is a good idea. This is your choice. If we meet and you feel uncomfortable, scared or just do not want to talk anymore, you can tell me at anytime and we will stop our talk right away.

Now that you have read my letter you can choose if you want to meet with me or answer some questions in writing. If you do, please sign your name below. Remember that if you have any questions you and your parent can write me a letter.

Consent:

***I have read this letter and I want to help Trish with her project. I understand this is my choice and that I can change my mind at any time.*

- *___ I would like to talk to Trish in person about the things I am doing to help people or make the world a better place.*

___ I agree to have my voice recorded in the interview.

- *___ I would like to answer some questions in writing about the things I am doing to help people or make the world a better place.*

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Trish Desjardins
180 Lees Avenue
Apartment 2109
Ottawa, ON
K1S 5J6

(613) 321-0614

March 19th, 2007

The purpose of an informed consent is to ensure that you understand the purpose of this study and the nature of your child's involvement. The informed consent must provide sufficient information so that you can determine whether you wish your child to participate.

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Trish Desjardins and I am a Master's student in sociology at Carleton University. I am currently conducting research about child activists in North America, and particularly within the Ottawa area. My work is being supervised by Professor Aaron Doyle, also of the sociology department at Carleton.

The purpose of this study is to learn from children who voluntarily undertake political action. The primary objectives will be to learn what inspires these children, what issues they are interested in, whether they have faced any resistance to their political actions, and how we, as adults, can encourage and facilitate their political involvement while maintaining a child-centered approach.

My aim is to learn from roughly ten to fifteen children, between the ages of nine and fourteen. If your child is voluntarily involved in political activities he/she would make a wonderful candidate for this research.

With your permission, as a participant in this research your child would be asked to complete either a short questionnaire or an open-ended interview regarding his/her experiences as an activist. If your child is interested in completing a questionnaire I can send one to you via email, or via regular post. In the latter case I will also include a self-addressed stamped envelope for you to return the completed questionnaire to me at your convenience. If your child is interested in being interviewed, I will personally conduct the interview which will take place face-to-face at a previously arranged location that is most convenient for you and your child. **If an in-person meeting is not possible, interviews can also be conducted via telephone.** The interview is expected to take approximately 45 minutes but can be shortened if you or your child wishes, or lengthened if your child feels comfortable continuing in the discussion.

If it would make you and your child feel more comfortable with the interview process, yourself (the parent/guardian) or another adult of you and your child's choosing can be present during the entire interview. In the case that you would like to be present during the interview and your child expresses concern about your attendance, I will speak to both you and your child in order to determine whether an agreement can be reached. One possible solution could be for your child to choose another adult to accompany him/her. If consensus cannot be reached as regards to an adult presence during the interview, I will not be able to include your child in this research.

In order to ensure your child fully understands the nature of his/her involvement and to determine whether he/she wishes to have an adult present I will need to speak to your child alone for a few minutes before the interview begins. During this time I will discuss my research intentions and ask your child if he/she has any questions or concerns about the process. Again, it is important you understand that if your child does not want to participate in this research, he/she will not be interviewed, even if I have obtained your consent.

There are no anticipated risks to your child participating in this research. However, since children are a relatively vulnerable group in society (as compared to adults) one potential risk is that they may feel pressured to participate in this project if your consent is obtained. To protect child participants against such pressures I have included in this package a letter to your child explaining the research project. In the case of interviews, I will also verbally inform your child of his/her rights. If your child does agree to participate (either by completing a questionnaire or by being interviewed) he/she has the right not to answer any question, or to withdraw from the process altogether at any time. Should your child decide to withdraw from the research process you and your child may decide at that time if I may use the information he/she has provided to that point.

The benefit of this study is that it will allow your child to present his/her experiences with political activism. While certain topic areas will be pre-determined by me, your child will have the chance to discuss his/her views on what issues matter to children and how these are and should be being dealt with. **Furthermore, it may provide an opportunity for individual child activists to connect with others across Canada and abroad.**

The data collected in this research project can be completely confidential; this choice is left to you and your child. If you choose the information to remain confidential, your child's name will not be used in the final written document. Instead, a pseudonym will be used and it will be assigned by me. All responses will be attributed to the pseudonym. Also, no identifying information about your child will appear in the final written thesis. The raw data from the interview material will be used solely by me. **However, if you and your child feel comfortable with having his/her name used in the final paper I will accommodate this option. If there is a discrepancy between**

you and your child's wishes on this matter I will err on the side of caution and ensure the confidentiality of his/her personal information.

The interviews will be audio-taped with your consent and the consent of your child. If you choose not to have your child's answers recorded on tape, I will simply take handwritten notes. I am the only person who has direct access to the interview material (whether on paper or tape) as well as information provided in the form of a questionnaire. All of this material will be kept on my personal computer which is located in my home where I am the sole resident. Furthermore, the computer is protected by a password that only I know. Hard copies of documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my apartment. Again, only I have the key to this cabinet.

The information your child, along with the other participants, provides will be presented in a written thesis paper which I plan to publish. Further, results may be presented at conferences or in the form of scholarly journal articles. With your consent, the data will be stored for the purpose of potential graduate research concerning further, more in-depth investigation of this research topic. However, you may decide to have the data pertaining to your child's interview destroyed upon the completion of this project, and thus his/her responses would not be used for any future research.

If your child wishes to participate in this study, or should you require further information please contact Trish Desjardins by e-mail at tdesjar2@connect.carleton.ca or at the telephone number or address listed above. You can also contact Dr. Aaron Doyle either by telephone at 520-2600 extension 1914 or by e-mail at adoyle2525@rogers.ca.

Should you have any ethical concerns about this study, including information about the rights of participants, please contact Professor Antonio Gualtieri (Research Ethics Committee Chair at Carleton University) by telephone 520-2517 or e-mail at ethics@carleton.ca.

Consent:

I have read the above description of the study and I understand the conditions of my child's involvement. My signature indicates that I freely consent to my child's participation in this project.

**** PARENT/GUARDIAN OF CHILDREN WISHING TO BE INTERVIEWED:** *I consent ___ do not consent ___ to my child's real name being used. I consent ___ do not consent ___ to my child being audio taped throughout the interview, and I understand that he/she may ask to have the audio recorder turned off at any point. Furthermore, I understand that although I have given consent for my child to be interviewed, he/she has the right to decline participation. I recognize that the researcher (Trish Desjardins) will not interview any child who appears unwilling, uncomfortable or who clearly states a desire to not participate in this research. I understand that my child has final say in this regard.*

~ OR ~

**** PARENT/GUARDIAN OF CHILDREN WISHING TO COMPLETE A QUESTIONNAIRE:** I consent ___ do not consent ___ to my child's real name being used. Please send me a questionnaire via email ___ via regular post ___. (Please include your address when contacting me). I understand that my child has the right to decline participation altogether or to refrain from answering any question(s) he/she so chooses. I will abide by my child's wishes in this regard.

Parent/Guardian's Name (please print): _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian's Signature: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Dear Student,

My name is Trish Desjardins and I am a student here in Ottawa. Right now I am working on a project to learn more about children who are trying to make changes in their schools, in the area where they live, in the city of Ottawa, or even the world. I want to know what topics children are interested in or worried about. I also want to learn why some children choose to do something about the situations they feel need some change. Finally, I want to know what children think adults can do to help them in this process.

If you are a person who likes to help other people or who is trying to make these types of changes I would really like hear from you.

If you agree to help me with my project, you can decide to meet me in person, or you can ask me to mail you some questions for you to answer at home. **Another option is for us to talk on the phone.** If you choose to speak with me in person, we will meet somewhere that you are comfortable talking. **You can bring a parent or another adult with you if you want and I would be happy to meet them too.** I hope to ask you a few questions that I have planned, but I also want to hear a lot about what you think is important for me to know. When we are talking I would like to use a microphone to tape our voices so that I remember all the important information you tell me. If you do not want your voice recorded, just tell me and I will write down what we say instead.

When I am finished learning from all the other boys and girls I will write a paper for my school. In this paper, you **can decide with your parents if you want me to use your real name or a fake one.** Some boys and girls feel safer talking when it is a secret. **If you are one of these people I will make up a fake name for you so that no one will know you who are.** I may also talk to other adults about what you and the other children tell me, but I will **ALWAYS use your fake name.** Or, if you feel safe with people knowing who you are and what we talk about, then I can use your real name in my paper and when I talk to other people.

It is very important for you to know that you do not have to meet and talk with me if you do not want to and you do not have to write answers to my questions, even if an adult tells you it is a good idea. This is your choice. If we meet and you feel uncomfortable, scared or just do not want to talk anymore, you can tell me at anytime and we will stop our talk right away.

Now that you have read my letter you can choose if you want to meet with me or answer some questions in writing. If you do, please sign your name below. Remember that if you have any questions you and your parent can write me a letter.

Consent:

***I have read this letter and I want to help Trish with her project. I understand this is my choice and that I can change my mind at any time.*

- I want Trish to use my real name __. I want Trish to use a fake name __.*
- I would like to talk to Trish in person about the things I am doing to help people or make the world a better place __.*
- I would like to answer some questions in writing about the things I am doing to help people or make the world a better place __.*

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Original Methodological Aims and Approach

There were two principal themes or questions regarding child activism that I sought to explore in this thesis. The first goal was to gain an understanding of how child activists are perceived in our society in order to explore whether these notions fit (or do not fit) with our broader, socially constructed, ideas about childhood. To explore this topic, I conducted a textual analysis of news media reports relating to two Canadian child activists. The second aim of the thesis was to learn about the experiences of child activists more generally. I wanted to understand if and how our ideas about childhood interact with the opinions and experiences of actual children. In this regard, I sought to discover why some children become activists and how society has responded to their activism. In order to address this latter set of issues, a qualitative, child-centered research model was developed.

More specifically, my plan was to interview approximately 10-15 children, aged 9-14 who were intentionally and purposefully engaged in activism. The interviews were to be semi-structured and I would conduct all of them. I anticipated that all interviews would take place in the Ottawa area and that I would meet with child participants in a face-to-face setting; I expected that a parent or guardian would be present in the majority of cases. Though the initial aim of employing semi-structured interviews was maintained, many other facets of the research design were altered as recruiting and meeting with child activists proved to be far more difficult a task than first anticipated. The following discussion will outline the evolution of this research design from its earliest stages in terms of the various recruitment schemes utilized to gain access to potential respondents.

First Recruitment Method ~ Contacting Potential Respondents via a Third Party

Organization

The first methodological approach employed to recruit child activists for this study entailed mailing information letters/consent forms to children and their families via a third party organization in the Ottawa area. This organization, Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa (CAYFO), coordinates an annual awards ceremony that celebrates and honours children and youth under the age of 20 who are making a difference in their schools, neighbourhoods and communities. While these awards are divided into several different categories, I was particularly interested in the Global Citizenship award. I therefore contacted the Executive Director of CAYFO, David Millen, who graciously agreed to help in any way he could. A member of CAYFO then sifted through all previous nominations for the award and found 10 children who were within the age range I had specified for this project. In order to protect the children's privacy, I sent 10 information letters/consent forms to CAYFO in order that Mr. Millen could address and mail the packages to potential respondents. Unfortunately, no responses derived from this recruitment scheme.

Second Recruitment Method ~ Contacting Potential Respondents via Email and the

Internet

In light of this initial setback, several informal means of finding potential interview respondents were employed. First, I sent a general email outlining the research intentions of this project to graduate students in the departments of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University via an email listserve. Through this communication

I was directed to various community organizations, persons who work with children, youth councils, and awards for children. I then contacted each of these organizations and persons, primarily via email, however there were few responses. All of the individuals who did respond were eager to help and very interested in the topic, yet two general problems arose. A few of the individuals did not know any children under 14 who were activists, while others were able to relay the names of activist children but no way to contact them. This was particularly the case when the organizers of children's awards (eg. the David McGuinty Award for Citizenship, the Junior Citizens Awards, the Ontario Principal Council's Leadership Awards) were contacted. As the children's names were a matter of public record, organizers had no issue with imparting lists of past winners, however, they were not able to provide contact information for the children, and in many cases this was due to the fact that the organizers themselves did not have this information.

Aside from this general email sent to my colleagues, an Internet search was also initiated to find child activists more directly. Though many instances of child activism were found (both historical and contemporary as well as local and international), the process was painstakingly slow. The main reason for this was that there appeared to be a reluctance to label children's public actions to create positive social change 'activism.' This made Internet searches extremely difficult. When entering the search terms 'child' and 'activism' into various databases the outcome was the same: either no matches were found or instances of adults acting politically on children's behalf were the primary results. Thus terms such as 'participation', 'leadership' or 'community involvement' were substituted for the term activism with better results. Through these searches the

names (and in some cases Internet sites) of various child activists, as well as groups and organizations which encourage child activism, were found (though again this was seldom referred to as such). I then contacted each of these groups and organizations and three parties quickly indicated their interest and willingness to participate in the project.

Third Recruitment Method ~ Contacting Potential Respondents via the School System

As these processes of informal recruitment had not yielded enough respondents, after several months of searching, a third means of recruiting child activists was implemented. Specifically, an ethics application was submitted to a school board's research advisory committee requesting permission to send information letters/consent forms home in a number of schools and classrooms in the community. Previous to the submission of this application, the initial consent forms (sent to three parties accessed via second recruitment method) were altered to include a definition of 'child activist' and requested that parents, with the aid of their children, self-identify child activists in the family [see Appendix B ~ Consent Forms for School Board Participants]. The schools themselves were to have a very limited role in the research process. Their function was primarily to distribute letters to students and their families who could then contact me directly, though the school board suggested class rooms could in some cases be used as convenient interview locations. It was expected that if these packages could reach roughly 100 families than enough participants would be found.

Again, since such a small sample of school age children was required for this study a non-probability, purposive sampling strategy was employed to locate schools with known activist populations. In this regard, some schools and students were specifically recommended for this research by friends and colleagues. In other cases,

months of school board and individual school's news letters to parents, news releases and school profiles were examined with the aim of finding activist children. Initially only those schools with known activist populations were sent information about this thesis by the school board, though eventually the school board made this information accessible to all principals within the district.

Again there was very little response to this recruitment effort. Eventually more than 1000 letters were sent home via three schools. Only three children¹ and their families contacted me, all by way of the child's school, in response to these packages. There are a number of issues which may have contributed to this low response rate. Most obviously, not all children are engaged in activism. Furthermore, those children who are actively involved in social causes may not identify themselves and what they do as activist work. Just as likely, it was parents and guardians who did not view their children as activists. Thus, one major factor that may have contributed to low response rates was that people may not have been willing to classify children as activists.

A related explanation was offered to me by a participating teacher. She suggested that the word 'political' may have negative connotations for some families, particularly those who have recently immigrated to Canada from Non-Western nations. She noted that when discussing this project with her class (in a school with a rich cultural diversity, where more than 80% of students are second generation immigrants) some students voiced concern over the word 'political' and she had to explain to them that political activism simply meant helping people, the earth or animals. This teacher also noted that

¹ Four other children who learned about the project via letters sent home from school contacted me long after they had received the information package. Unfortunately, I had to exclude these children from the project due to time constraints.

many of the students and their parents were far more fluent in speaking English than in reading or writing it, another factor which may have resulted in miscommunication about the word 'political.' Thus it would seem that the words 'activism' and 'political' are contentious terms that parents and children may not have felt comfortable associated themselves with. This may have impacted the low response rates in this study. In any case, three of the child participants for this project were recruited via the school system.

Fourth Recruitment Method ~ Contacting Potential Respondents via the Ottawa Association for Bright Children (ABC)

While in the process of contacting schools, principals and teachers I was directed to a local organization, the Ottawa Association for Bright Children (ABC), which, as the name implies, provides a variety of services for bright children and their families. A colleague spoke to an organizing member of the Ottawa ABC branch on my behalf and I quickly received an email from her indicating that she was willing to help in a number of ways. The ABC coordinator indicated she would send information about the project directly to a number of families whom she felt might be interested. She also included this information in a general e-mail sent to members of the Ottawa ABC. Finally, at a members meeting on February 28th, 2007, 125 information letters regarding my study were distributed. It was these letters that attracted the attention of one activist child and his mother who would eventually participate in the research project.

Fifth Recruitment Method ~ Contacting Potential Respondents via Flyers, a Facebook Page and Calls to Local Activist Organizations

Though the recruitment process was initiated in September, by the beginning of February only three children had been interviewed. Accordingly, the tactics employed to

access activist children were again broadened. At this stage a number of schemes were utilized. Firstly, a one-page flyer was created to advertise this project in new ways [see Appendix E ~ Recruitment Flyer]. The flyer was printed and distributed in various locations in Ottawa, with a high concentration in one specific residential area. This area was chosen because it was geographically located close to Carleton University and, accordingly, many Carleton staff members, professors and students reside in the area. It was felt that these educated individuals may be more involved in activism and may be more inclined to participate in social research than other populations who are less familiar with the process. Flyers were posted in community centers, libraries, coffee shops and dance studios.

This same flyer was also used to inform people of the project via the Internet. This occurred in two ways. The flyer was emailed to third party organizations dealing with kids and/or activism, and the text of the flyer was used to create a Facebook group. Facebook is a rapidly growing online forum advertised as a means for people to keep in touch with friends and family, or to meet new people. The premise of Facebook is that one creates a free account, sets up a personalized web page and can invite others to view their page. Facebook 'friends' can also leave messages on other members' 'walls' for all to see, or send private messages to one another. For the purposes of recruiting child activists, a Facebook group was created entitled "Do You Know a Child Activist?" The group was created in such a manner that anyone on Facebook could view the information, post messages on the page, or contact me personally (either via email or via Facebook messaging). Once the group was made I invited approximately 60 personal contacts to view the page. I also sought out other Facebook groups with similar themes

(eg. activism, social causes) and posted public messages inviting people to view the “Do You Know a Child Activist?” group. Eventually more than 50 people joined the group, however, no child activists were recruited via this means. Interestingly, several group members indicated that they had been involved in political activism from a very young age, but all of these people were beyond my upper age limit of 14. It seems that perhaps the demographic age group of Facebook did not match those of this study.

The final means utilized to access children for this study was to directly call various activist organizations in the Ottawa area. More than three full days were spent finding organizations (an endeavour that was significantly aided by an online directory for activist groups in the Ottawa area: <http://www.perc.ca/groups/>) and contacting them via telephone. In each conversation I quickly explained who I was and what I was doing, and asked if the organization could help me in any way. Most of the organizations I called were very interested in the project; however few were able to help. Many requested I send my information to them in writing in order that they may post my flyer in their office or email it to potentially interested parties. In one case the person who happened to answer my call had an activist child whom she felt would be thrilled to participate. Furthermore, at that moment a mother of a 12 year-old child was in the office in order to get more information about how her daughter could participate in this organization’s youth-lead initiative against violence. Thus, I was able to speak to both of these mothers who then discussed the project with their children, both of whom eagerly contacted me for an interview.

Appendix D ~ Recruitment Methods

165

In sum, after approximately 6 months of attempting to access 10-15 activist children for this study, the various methods of recruitment employed enabled me to access and interview 10.



Does Your Child Engage in Civic or Political Action?

*Is he/she involved in raising awareness or funds to support social causes?
Does he/she volunteer for a non-profit organization that works for social change?*

Research is currently being conducted by Trish Desjardins, a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at Carleton University, to learn more about civically-engaged children between the ages of 9 and 14. The project is being supervised by Professor Aaron Doyle, also of the Sociology department at Carleton.

The primary objectives are to understand what inspires these children, what issues they are interested in, what obstacles they face to their actions, and how we, as adults, can encourage and facilitate their political involvement while maintaining a child-centered approach.

As participants in this research children will be asked to complete either a short questionnaire or an open-ended interview. Interviews can take place via telephone or by way of a face-to-face meeting at a location of your choosing. For more information please contact Trish at the email address or phone number posted below.

**Note* In-person interviews will only be available to residents of the Ottawa area. Participants from the US and Canada may be interviewed via telephone. All other participants will be given a questionnaire. Research will be conducted in English.*

**Note* This research has received ethics clearance through the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee. Should you have any ethical concerns about this study, including information about the rights of participants, please contact Professor Antonio Gualtieri (Research Ethics Committee Chair at Carleton University) by telephone 520-2517 or e-mail at ethics@carleton.ca.*

[Researcher's contact information was listed here]

Hannah Taylor

Age: 10

Activist Interests: Hannah's main activist initiative is to raise awareness and money for Canada's homeless population. She does this, in large part, through the organization that she co-founded (the Ladybug Foundation), though she insists that talking to, being friendly with and simply caring for homeless people is what these individuals need most – and it is something that each of us can do. Hannah was inspired to become involved with this issue after having witnessed a homeless man eating out of a garbage can. She was 5 years old at the time and could not understand why someone would be forced to do this. Today, she travels across the country teaching people to care for the less fortunate. Though the Ladybug Foundation is primarily concerned with Canada's homeless population, Hannah does not let geography bound her aspirations. In fact, she and several members of her family planned to travel to Mexico in the winter of 2007 in order to build homes for the country's impoverished citizens.

Aside from the difficulties faced by homeless persons, Hannah has also become concerned with the rising number of orphans in Africa that is inherently related to the AIDS epidemic in the region. She hopes to visit Africa someday soon (as soon as her parents will agree to the trip) in order to learn more about this tragic situation and to help create a positive social change in the area.

Interview Format: This interview took place via telephone. Though I spoke with Hannah's mother Colleen both before and after the interview, she was not in the room while Hannah and I were speaking.

Naomi Palmatier

Age: 10

Activist Interests: Naomi is interested in a wide variety of social causes. One of her main priorities is to ensure the ethical treatment of animals. In this vein, she has chosen to become a vegan, she saves (and occasionally adopts) stray or abandoned animals, and she has recently made efforts to get a spay/neuter ordinance passed in her community. She has also been to a number of protests (a Mad Cow protest against the factory farming of beef, a protest against lams animal testing, a KFC protest against the factory farming of chickens, and so on). In one particularly memorable event, she attended a circus protest against using animals in entertainment during which she dressed in a tiger costume and sat in a cage. She has also written a letter to several Senators asking them to protect the Arctic National Forrest in Alaska.

Naomi is also interested in helping impoverished populations in Mexico as this is where her biological parents reside. She has held a 'compassion birthday party'

for which she requested that guests bring small donations (such as children's vitamins) rather than gifts. These donations were then packaged and sent to Mexico's poor. Further, in order to help guests learn about her heritage, Naomi wore Mexican fiesta attire, served Mexican food and had a traditional piñata.

Interview Format: This interview took place via telephone. Though I spoke with Naomi's mother Kelly both before and after the interview, she was not in the room while Naomi and I were speaking.

Cody Clark

Age: 12

Activist Interests: Cody's main activist initiative entails caring for and comforting cancer patients during their hospital stay. He was inspired to become involved in this issue at the age of 5 when both of his parents were diagnosed with cancer. Having immigrated to Canada from England, his parents did not have any relatives close by who could care for Cody while they received treatment. Thus, Cody spent a lot of time at the hospital and witnessed the pain and fear that accompanies cancer firsthand. In light of these experiences, Cody soon decided that he could do something to comfort patients in the Chemo Unit of a local hospital. He started to save his own money and to collect donations in order to provide teddy bears, or 'Cody's Cuddlers' to patients so that they would have something to cuddle during treatments. Later, he would expand these efforts and prepare comfort packages for patients. These 'Individual Comfort Kits' would include a blanket, a teddy bear, and other age appropriate items (eg. rattles for babies, or books in the 'grandma and grandpa kits'). Each Kit also included a personal, handwritten note from Cody himself. Sadly, in February of 2006, Cody's father lost his fight with cancer. To honour his memory, one year later Cody brought his Cuddlers to a hospital in New York and is now one step closer to reaching his goal of comforting cancer patients on a global scale.

Though the treatment and care of cancer patients remains very close to Cody's heart, he has also been involved in other activist initiatives over the years. To briefly mention a few, he raised over \$2,500 at the age of 7 to keep a local cardiac unit from closing. He further gathered 2,500 signatures for a petition that, to this day, helps keep the unit open. In this instance, Cody was motivated by a friend who relied on the Unit's facilities due to a severe heart condition. Finally, Cody has also been an active contributor to Orphan Helpers Inc. by raising and donating money that was used to purchase necessities, supplies and toys for a troubled orphanage in El Salvador.

Interview Format: This interview took place in-person at a local coffee shop. Cody was accompanied by his mother, Jan. Though she sat at the same table as us, she did not speak during the interview. After the more formal interview was

completed, Jan, Cody and I engaged in a casual discussion of his activism and this thesis study.

Charlotte Connolly

Age: 12

Activist Interests: Charlotte is interested in a range of social causes from environmental protection, to peace-building initiatives, to issues of gender. Her main focus, however, is the current and devastating AIDS epidemic in Africa. Charlotte learned about this issue when watching the movie *Rent* with her sister. Though this film focused on North Americans dealing with HIV and AIDS, when Charlotte began reading about this disease she found that it was a particularly widespread problem in Africa.

In order to raise money to fight against the AIDS epidemic in Africa, as well as to raise awareness about this issue, Charlotte has participated in several protest marches, she has become an active member of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, and she has written a speech about AIDS that was presented to her colleagues at school. She has also organized a number of fundraisers, one of which was a hunger banquet. At this event, guests purchased tickets for a provided supper. Each guest was given a different coloured ticket that, unbeknownst to them at the time, corresponded to a particular socio-economic class in Africa. For instance, green tickets represented 10 per cent of the African population who are wealthy. People who received these tickets were given a lavish meal that included four courses. Blue tickets corresponded to the 20 per cent of Africans who make up the working class. These guests were given salad and a small portion of rice. Finally, 60 per cent of the guests were given a pink ticket. These individuals were made to sit on the floor, they only received rice for dinner, they had to venture outside to fetch their own water, and the men were served before the women. Thus, the event generated greater knowledge about the living conditions in Africa, while raising money to combat AIDS at the same time.

Interview Format: This interview took place in-person at a local coffee shop. Charlotte was accompanied by her mother. Charlotte's mother sat at a separate table located across the room from Charlotte and I while the interview conversation took place and thus she was not privy to our discussion. After the interview was completed, Charlotte's mother came back to our table and the three of us engaged in an informal discussion about the project and child activism. During this conversation, Charlotte was reminded of several topics and activities that she wished to discuss. Thus, her mother left us again in order that we could continue the interview.

Calvin Mitchell

Age: 14

Activist Interests: Analogous to a number of the other activists interviewed, Calvin is interested in many social causes. In the past year, his biggest project has been to collect money that will be used to build a school in the Maasaimar region of Kenya, Africa. To this end, he has organized a number of fundraisers. One particularly memorable event was a vow of silence held at his school. Willing students vowed to remain silent for a full 24 hours and were financially sponsored by family and community members. Calvin also organized a change drive that raised more than \$2,000. Since this amount of money largely exceeded his expectations, \$500 was donated to charity organizations that used the funding to feed an entire school full of children in Africa for one year.

Calvin's inspiration has come from a range of sources. On one hand, Calvin noted the important role his parents have played in teaching him the value of positively contributing to the (global) community. He has also been motivated by figures such as Craig Kielburger, Nelson Mandela and Oprah Winfrey who have made considerable efforts to help those in need. Finally, he chose to focus his efforts on aiding African populations because he was inspired by their courage and positive outlooks in the face of great hardships and tragedy.

Interview Format: This interview took place in-person at the office of a local activist organization to which both Calvin and his mother belong. Calvin's mother worked in a separate office while I interviewed Calvin, and thus she was not privy to our conversation. Again, once the interview was over, the three of us briefly discussed child activism and this thesis study.

Aisha

Age: 12

Activist Interests: Aisha's interest in social causes was sparked quite recently when she learned about various tragic incidents and circumstances that people around the globe are forced to endure. After learning about Hurricane Katrina and a recent mudslide in Guatemala from a teacher at her school, for example, she chose to volunteer her time to raise money for those in need. In doing so, Aisha was involved in several fundraising efforts which included making and selling sun catchers, friendship pins and bracelet's, and canvassing local neighbourhoods for donations.

Aisha felt that her teacher, Ms. Ryan, was a huge inspiration for her activism. She was also encouraged to create positive social changes by another young activist, Ryan Hreljac, who presented a speech at her school outlining how he had raised money to build a well in Africa. These individuals allowed Aisha to

feel as though she could make a difference and that this process could be both fun and rewarding.

Interview Format: This interview took place in-person in a classroom at Aisha's school. When asked whether she would like a teacher to be present before the interview began, Aisha indicated that she would. Thus, Ms. Ryan remained in the room for the duration of our conversation, though she chose to work at her desk across the room rather than sitting at the same table as Aisha and myself.

Rahul

Age: 12

Activist Interests: Rahul also learned about contemporary global issues from his teacher, Ms. Ryan, and was inspired to create positive social change in order to help less fortunate people. To this end, Rahul raised money for a range of charities by volunteering to work at a bake sale at school, by building and selling sun catchers, and participating in various other fundraisers.

Rahul is also part of the Environmental Club at school and accordingly spends time cleaning the school yard and helping to raise awareness about environmental issues amongst his peers. As one of two class representatives, he is responsible for helping his classmates learn to be environmentally friendly, and is in charge of properly collecting and disposing of his classroom's compost and recycling.

Interview Format: This interview took place in-person in an office in Rahul's school. Since Rahul had no preference as to whether or not a teacher would be present for the interview, our conversation took place without another adult in the room (though occasionally other teachers and administrators glanced through the window on their way by).

Manyara

Age: 11

Activist Interests: Manyara was the third child to learn about global issues from Ms. Ryan. Though she was not born in Canada, she has lived in this country most of her life. Thus, Manyara was extremely shocked to learn that children in various parts of the world do not have clean water to drink and that many cannot attend school. She believes that all children, and all people, should have clean drinking water and the opportunity to obtain an education. In fact, Manyara strongly asserted that all people should have the same opportunities and comforts that we in Canada enjoy. It was for these reasons that she decided to volunteer her time and energy to help others.

Notably, Manyara also indicated that her passion for helping other people grows exponentially as her friends and family encourage and support her activism. She

is inspired by others' actions and she thinks that it is fun to work with people her own age to create change and actually make a difference.

Interview Format: This interview took place in-person in a classroom at Manyara's school. Manyara also had no preference regarding whether a teacher would be present for the interview. Thus, in this instance, Ms. Ryan was intermittently in the room during my conversation with Manyara. For the first portion of the interview, Ms. Ryan remained at her desk working. Later, she left the room to attend to other responsibilities.

Aiden

Age: 7

Activist Interests: Aiden has only recently begun his activist career and is primarily concerned with environmental issues. Currently, his main goal is to establish a composting program in his community. To do so he has been encouraging people to become aware of their actions and how these impact the environment. He has also contacted various media outlets in order to garner attention for this topic via a respectable medium.

Though he did not remember exactly when or why he became interested in this issue, Aiden did mention that he has asthma and therefore likely understands the effects of environmental pollution more than others.

Interview Format: This interview took place via telephone. Aiden's mother remained present during the entire interview. In order for both Aiden and his mother to hear my side of the conversation, I was put on speakerphone. During the formal portion of the interview Aiden's mother remained silent. Once this process was completed, Aiden's mother and I spoke casually about his activism and my thesis project.

Danika

Age: 11

Activist Interests: Danika is interested in a variety of issues that include both mainstream political issues and broader social causes. One project that Danika was particularly proud of involved organizing several initiatives to raise money for her school's library. During the month of February, for instance, she arranged a raffle for a Valentines Day chocolate prize. This endeavour raised approximately \$500 that was used to buy new books. Like Aiden, Danika could not recall what inspired her to become involved in these issues.

Interview Format: This interview took place via telephone. Danika's mother remained present during the entire interview. Again, in order for both Danika and

her mother to hear my side of the conversation, speakerphone was used. Analogous to Aiden's case, Danika's mother remained silent during the formal portion of the interview and engaged in a more casual conversation with myself at the completion of my discussion with Danika.

Family Questions

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) What grade are you in?
- 3) Where do you live?
- 4) Where were you born?
- 5) Where were your parents born?

Big Questions – Take Your Time!

- 6) What are some things you do to try to help others or make the world a better place?
- 7) What inspired you to become involved/how did you become involved in these activities?
- 8) How old were you when you first became involved?
- 9) Was there anything that made reaching your goals difficult?
 - How did you deal with these problems?
- 10) What made reaching your goals easier?
 - Who or what helps you the most?
- 11) How do people respond to your participation in _____ (issue/activity)?
 - What do adults think?
 - What do your friends, or other children think?
- 12) How do these reactions make you feel?
- 13) What do you think ‘being a child’ means?
 - What are the most important things about being a child?
- 14) What are some things about the world that you would like to change?
- 15) What role do you think children have in making those changes? (How can children help make those changes?)
 - Are children different than adults?
 - Can children do different things than adults?
- 16) How can other people (adults) support what you are doing? (Maybe think about how your parents, teachers or other adults support you.)
- 17) So, you are a very busy boy/girl because of _____ (issue/activity). Why do you think that some children choose to make changes and some children don't?
- 18) If another child wanted to get involved and make changes, would you tell them it is a good or bad thing in your life? Would you tell them they should be involved too?
 - What have you learned through these activities?
 - What are some of the good things about being involved?
- 19) Do you think it is something that you will continue for a long time, until you are grown-up?
- 20) Are any of your other family members involved in these sorts of issues/activities?
 - [If yes] Who is involved? Were they involved before or after you?
- 21) Are there any other things that you would like to talk about?
 - Are there any other questions that I should have asked?

Historical Cases of Child Activism

The Five Cent War

After WWII in 1947 the price of chocolate bars was increased from 5 cents to 8 cents. Many kids in Canada were upset at this increase that seemed huge; after all this almost doubled the price of candy bars! As a result they decided to protest. Many children made signs and protested in front of their local candy stores, and some even created a protest song. There were even chocolate boycotts in many large Canadian towns. In the end, some media labeled the protesting children Communists and thus their protests were unsuccessful.

For more information see:

<http://www.candywrappermuseum.com/fivecentwar.html>

- This web site is home of the Candy Wrapper museum; it briefly outlines what occurred during the five cent war.

http://www.travestyproductions.com/film_five_cent.html

- This web site discusses the five cent war in more depth. There has been a film made about the five cent war that is available to purchase via this site.

http://www.telefilm.gc.ca/data/production/prod_2321.asp?LANG=EN&c=2&gr=DOC

- Information about the film.

The Newsboys Strike of 1899

In the late nineteenth century, the circulation of newspapers in North America was on the rise. To meet this growing demand, in a time when people came to the newspaper rather than vice versa, major publishers and circulation managers contracted out work to young boys, later dubbed 'Newsies.' The Newsies paid fifty cents for a hundred copies of the daily paper and sold them on the street to consumers at a higher price. To make a profit, therefore, they had to distribute all the papers they had contracted for. This system worked well for all parties involved as the Newsies autonomously controlled their work environment, choosing when, where and how long to work, while newspaper owners were able to increase sales and keep up the expanding market.

The process was interrupted, however, during the Spanish-American war when the distribution price paid by Newsies was increased rather dramatically to sixty cents per hundred copies. In response to this increase, on July 21st, 1899 the Newsies of Manhattan took to the streets. While New York publishers Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst did not originally take the strike seriously, the young activists were persistent in their claims. On August 2nd, after a two-week strike by the young boys, the

publishers conceded and the strike ended with the papers agreeing to fully refund Newsies for all unsold papers from then on.

For more information see:

<http://www.peachtree-online.com/printer/newsboys.htm>

- This web page presents an historical overview of newsboys in North America. There are resources for kids, parents and educators.

http://www.geocities.com/estella2560/go_on_strike.html

- This is an actual newspaper article from The New York Times, July 21st, 1899 Page 2.

http://people.hofstra.edu/faculty/alan_j_singer/294%20Course%20Pack/7.%20Workers/120.pdf

- Written as a teaching aid, this site incorporates a number of historical newspaper articles about the Newsboys strike as well as pictures of the newsies and possible projects for kids learning about this event.

The Soweto Riots of 1976

One example of child activism took place in the late 1970s in the South African township of Soweto. Around this time, the apartheid regime decided to rigidly enforce an outdated policy which stipulated that secondary school proceedings must be in the language of Afrikaans, rather than English or native African languages. Teachers and students alike largely ignored this imposition, however, as they resented this assimilation effort on the part of their oppressors. As time wore on, tensions grew. Teachers chose to resign or were fired for not instructing in Afrikaans, and students who refused to complete assignments in this language were expelled.

The situation culminated in a massive protest march in 1976, which was attended by more than 20,000 students. Unfortunately, it was not long before police began firing tear gas, and then bullets, into the crowd of children. More than 3360 persons were killed during the Soweto Riots. Many of the fallen were black school children, bravely attempting to protect their culture from the apartheid regime. Today, in Soweto and surrounding communities it has been recognized that the 1976 riots were the beginning of the end of the apartheid system and children were a significant part of this process. Accordingly, memorials have been set up to commemorate the children and praise their bravery.

For more information see:

<http://libcom.org/history/1976-the-soweto-riots>

- This is a one page description of the 1976 Soweto Riots.

<http://www.ccds.charlotte.nc.us/History/Africa/save/mcaulay/mcaulay.htm>

- This web site presents a more in-depth description of the event. *CAUTION* There are some violent and graphic images on this page which may be alarming to some individuals. Discretion is advised.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915082-3,00.html>

- This is an article from Time magazine outlining children's powerful role in the Soweto Riots.

Modern Examples of Child Activism

Organizations Founded By Kids:

Alex's Lemonade Stand: www.alexlemonade.org/

- Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation is a unique foundation that evolved from a young cancer patient's front yard lemonade stand to a nationwide fundraising movement to find a cure for childhood cancer. Since Alexandra "Alex" Scott (1997-2004) set up her front yard stand at the age of four, more than \$9 million has been raised towards fulfilling her dream of finding a cure for all children with cancer.

Cody Clark & His Comfort Kits: www.codyscomfortkits.com/index.htm

- After both of Cody's parents were diagnosed with Cancer when he was only 5 years old, Cody spent a lot of time at the hospital. During this time Cody decided that he wanted to do something to help people living with Cancer, in particular he wanted to make their time at the hospital a little more comfortable, and perhaps even less scary. To do so, Cody began providing Comfort Kits and Cuddlers (teddy bears) to cancer patients in his hometown. This site outlines how Cody became interested in helping people, the numerous projects he is involved with, what awards he has received and how you can help.

Free the Children: www.freethechildren.com/index.php

- Free the Children is an organization that was founded by Craig Kielburger when he was about 12 years old. This organization is about kids helping kids. There are many tips and tools explaining how kids can get involved in this organization or in other activist projects. Craig, his brother Marc and other Free the Children activists have written many useful books (including the new The Making of an Activist) which can be ordered via this web site.

Hannah Taylor & The Ladybug Foundation: www.ladybugfoundation.ca/

- At the age of 5 Hannah Taylor witnessed a homeless man eating out of a garbage can. She could not understand why this man had nowhere to live and why he had no food. Hannah was very concerned about this man and continued to ask her family questions about him. Eventually her mother told her that maybe if she did something to help her heart would not be so sad. A few years later, Hannah created the Ladybug Foundation in order to raise awareness and funding to help Canada's homeless population. This site outlines how Hannah became interested in helping homeless people, what projects she is involved with and how you can help.

Ryan Hreljac and the Ryan's Well Foundation: www.ryanswell.ca

- At the age of 6, Ryan Hreljac learned that without access to clean water people become ill and sometimes even die. He set out to raise \$70 towards building a well in Africa and, having reached his goal in four months, Ryan kept working and organizing. He has now raised over \$1,500,000 and his work has helped to change the lives of thousands of people in Africa who might not otherwise have been able to lead healthy, normal lives. Ryan's Well Foundation has come together to continue this important and inspiring work.

Other Organizations Which Support and Encourage Child Activism:

Climate Change Kids Site: <http://epa.gov/climatechange/kids/index.html>

- This organization is a sub-component of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Created for kids, it explains key issues and terms such as 'climate change' and the 'greenhouse effect' in a child-friendly manner. It also lists a number of ways that kids can make changes in their everyday lives to reduce the negative impacts their actions may have on the environment.

Compassionate Kids: www.compassionatekids.com

- Compassionate Kids is an international, non-profit organization dedicated to helping teach children compassion towards the earth, people and animals. This web site is wonderful for both child activists and their families as it contains articles about 'Volunteering with Children' and 'Activism with Children' as well as practical ideas about how kids can get involved. Furthermore, through this site you can find out how to create a Compassionate Kids chapter in your own area.

Environmental Kids Club: www.epa.gov/kids/index.htm

- This organization is a sub-component of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The web site discusses many issues from clean air to animal protection in a child-friendly manner. It also provides online activities for children and youth to learn about environmental issues. Finally, the club offers free, educational resources such as a 'Happy Earth day Activity and Coloring Book' which can be downloaded and printed from the site.

Just Youth Development and Peace: <http://youth.devp.org/aframes.html>

- As noted on the Just Youth Development and Peace web site, "For more than 35 years, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE supported communities working to improve conditions that end poverty and bring about justice... creating a better world! We support programs in many countries of the South --- Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These community-based programs involve local people and focus on justice, human rights and participation in society. They deal with people involved in social movements, farm cooperatives, youth centres, or small loans projects. We especially support women, who make up the majority of the poor. In Canada, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE works to educate Canadians about the causes of poverty and injustice that affect people in the South. Through our annual ACTION and national awareness-raising campaign, we push for alternatives to stop unjust situations that affect all of us."

The web site has educational information about social justice issues. It also has a listing of active youth groups in Canada. Please note, this is a faith-based group.

"Me to We Philosophy" Created by Craig and Marc Kielburger (Founders of Free the Children): www.metowe.org/

- This web site corresponds to Craig and Marc's book "Me to We: Finding Meaning in a Material World." As noted by the authors, "*Me to We* is a philosophy, a manual, a manifesto and a movement. It's about finding meaning in our lives and our world by reaching out to others. Thinking "we" instead of "me." *And it's so easy to be a part of it!*" The web site offers a discussion forum for individuals to share their stories of helping others. It also has a blog, and a news letter which individuals can subscribe to for free. Children and youth are invited to join the 'Me to We' team; to become involved in social action.

New Moon Magazine: www.newmoon.org/magazine/

- New Moon Magazine is written by and for girls aged 8-14. The purpose of the magazine is to "Bring girls' voices to the world." Recently, a New Moon Club has been created to further facilitate girls' discussion. Previous discussion topics include whether or not children should be given more political rights. The site also includes information about how young people can become politically involved about issues they feel are important (eg. there is a section which teaches children how to write an effective letter to their member of Congress). Previous editions of the magazine can be ordered online.

Peace Corps Kids World: www.peacecorps.gov/kids/

- This organization is a sub-component of the Peace Corps. The site explains in a child-friendly manner what the Peace Corps is, as well as the importance of volunteering and helping other people. It lets children know that there are many ways for them to help make the world a better place. One really interesting part of this web page is that it describes the real life stories of kids around the globe who are making a difference. There is also an invitation for other children and youth to share their own stories.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) Kids:
www.petakids.com/

- The PETA Kids site is a wonderful, interactive way for children to learn about animals and how they are sometimes inappropriately treated by humans. Aside from more general information about animals, the site contains contests, games, and practical tips for kids to create a more animal-friendly world.

YOUCAN: www.youcan.ca/index.php

- As noted on their web page, "YOUCAN is an organization focused on youth-led initiatives in non-violent conflict resolution and violence prevention, both nationally and internationally." There are currently teams operating in Ottawa, Toronto and Edmonton which are organized by youth volunteers (ages 12-25). YOUCAN organizes and sponsors events such as the Resolve It! National Youth Symposium on Peace building and Conflict Resolution, as well as national and international exchanges, camps and other forums designed to 'inform, empower, outreach and create positive change.'

Recognition and Awards for Active Kids

Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa [CAYFO]

According to CAYFO's web site (www.cayfo.ca), "We are an organization that values and promotes our children and youth. We are specialists in youth engagement, participation, and community service. We have enormous respect for young people and what they can offer their community. We promote

their abilities, accomplishments, and achievements. We connect them to their community. We point them to opportunity. We help them SOAR!"

Spirit Youth Awards: As one means of recognizing the accomplishments of children and youth, CAYFO holds an annual awards ceremony, "The Spirit Youth Awards." This ceremony rewards persons under the age of 20 who have succeeded in one of seven categories: personal courage, academic perseverance, arts and literature, young entrepreneurship, young athletes, global citizenship and young philanthropist. For more information visit <http://www.cayfo.ca/corporate/awards.php>.

Ontario Principal Council Leadership Award

OPC established a student awards program, which was introduced to all elementary, and secondary public schools in Ontario in 1999. The Award takes the form of a large plaque that remains on display in the school, and a small plaque which is to be presented to a student each school year. Criteria for the receipt of the award is at the discretion of the principal, but should be appropriate to the award's title. For more information visit:

<http://www.principals.on.ca/cms/display.aspx?nav=pop&cid=4655>

The David McGuinty Award for Citizenship

In each school in Ottawa South, the David McGuinty Award for Citizenship recognizes an eighth grade student selected by teachers for his or her civic participation in school and the community, and for scholastic achievement. The award honors the student who has shown by their words and actions that they possess the qualities and characteristics we hope to instill in all students and in our community. For more information visit:

<http://www.davidmcguinty.com/english/youth/scholarship-programs.php>

The Me to We Awards

The Me to We philosophy is based on the bestselling book of the same name by Craig and Marc Kielburger. It encourages us to live our lives as socially conscious and responsible global citizens, engaging in daily acts of compassion and kindness, building meaningful relationships and community, and considering the impact on We when making decisions in our own lives.

As noted on the Me to We web page, "Canadians across our great country sometimes don't recognize or value the work we do to help others - and we thought that should change!" In that spirit, Craig and Marc Kielburger created the Me to We awards. The awards are divided into five categories: social action, youth in action (12 and under), youth in action (13-17), educator, and in the community. For more information visit:
<http://www.metoweawards.com/about/about.html>

The Kids Hall of Fame

The Kids Hall of Fame is a family friendly place where children under the age of 20 are recognized for their accomplishments. The Kids Hall of Fame publishes the stories of amazing children from all over the world. To see what other kids are doing or to nominate someone you for the Hall of Fame visit: www.thekidshalloffame.com

The Brick Awards

The Brick Awards are meant to honour young people who are changing the world for the better. As noted on the award's associated web page, "Brick Award winners aren't just the leaders of tomorrow. They are the leaders of today." Brick Awards are divided into several categories: Education and Environment, Global Impact, Health, and Community Building. This year's winners ranged in age from 11-25. The winners appeared on a televised show which celebrated their accomplishments. To learn more about this year's winners, to apply for next year's awards, or for other general information please visit: www.brickawards.com

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