A Case Study of MicroSociety Students:

Engaging Learners in a “Real-World” Learning Community

by

Brent Galloway

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Elementary Education

University of Alberta

© Brent Galloway, 2021

Abstract

This case study examined the perspectives of six students who participated in the MicroSociety program as elementary-aged children. MicroSociety is an experiential program designed to provide authentic learning experiences that help prepare students for life beyond school. The purpose of this study was to investigate how these young people experienced learning within this program and how these experiences contributed to their feelings of engagement and disengagement as students in a MicroSociety school.

The theories and research of John Dewey (1938) and Jerome Bruner (1960) provided the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study. Through his theory of experiential education, Dewey advocated that learners should learn by "doing" through exploration, problem solving, collaboration and making decisions as members of their communities. Bruner also saw the value in student-centered approaches to learning that allowed students to construct their own meanings. He saw the value in students working collaboratively and believed they had a role to contribute as part of a culture of learning. Both researchers saw the importance of providing authentic and relevant learning experiences that could motivate and engage learners. The MicroSociety (n.d.) program aligned well with this framework, as evidenced by their mission to create learning experiences that motivate children to learn and be successful by engaging them in their communities and in real life. Following data analysis, an additional framework centered on communities of practice from the research of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) was added to complement my study findings.

The review of the literature in this study focused on student engagement, student disengagement, and the MicroSociety School experience. Recent Canadian evidence has indicated that many students are disengaged as learners, and that this continues in a downward

trend throughout the middle years and onto high school. Disengagement may lead to a lack of enjoyment of school/learning or students who are simply bored with the experiences presented to them. Research on MicroSociety has rarely accounted for the student perspective, with little evidence available to suggest how or whether it contributes to student engagement.

My primary interest in this case study was to understand how students experienced learning in a MicroSociety school. I collected data through interpretive inquiry interviews involving participants who had taken part in the program as elementary-aged children. This study suggests the MicroSociety program, as experienced by my participants, was engaging and empowering for them. This appeared to be due to the provision of real-world learning opportunities that replicated the adult world and provided participants with roles and responsibilities that allowed them to develop competence and confidence. Most importantly, participants became contributing members of a community of practice that, as they have indicated, continues to have a meaningful impact on their lives.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Brent Galloway. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "MicroSociety: A Case Study Approach for Understanding the Engagement of Young Adolescents in Today's Classrooms," No. 00051146, June 21, 2021.

Dedication

Throughout the past few years, I have learned to balance my full-time work responsibilities as an instructor with my research responsibilities. It has not been easy, particularly when I had to take on additional responsibilities of being a caregiver for my aging father. I eventually needed to take a year's leave of absence from my program so that I could attend to his needs. We had many conversations about my studies, and he was interested in what I was doing and in learning about the MicroSociety program. We laughed as he shared stories about how he was a disengaged student when he was in school, and how he thought school seemed irrelevant at times. Despite a successful career as a teacher and administrator, he also spoke of how challenging it was to deal with those students who were disengaged in his classrooms. As a student in his Language Arts and Social Studies classes, I sheepishly recounted how sometimes I was even disengaged in his classes. My father provided me with encouragement and motivation throughout my studies. Unfortunately, he passed away a few weeks before my successful candidacy. Despite this, he continues to inspire me. And so, I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Cecil Galloway, a lifelong learner and passionate educator who inspired many students, myself included.

Acknowledgements

Creating and carrying out this study on how students experienced an experiential learning program such as MicroSociety has been a tremendous learning journey for me as a beginning researcher and as an instructor in preservice education. I am grateful, first of all, to my participants: Eva, London, Lucy, Nicole, Shawn, and Winter. I am greatly indebted to you for agreeing to participate in my study and for your interesting and sometimes entertaining stories.

I provide much thanks to my supervisory committee members who have guided me on my extensive research journey. Thank you, Dr. Linda Laidlaw, Dr. Carol Leroy, and Dr. Suzanna Wong, for your thoughtful and honest feedback that helped me to think more deeply about research and reminded me to stay focused on my purpose. Thank you to those involved with my examination committee, including Dr. Anna Kirova, Dr. Claudia Eppert, Dr. Mijung Kim, and Dr. Gladys Sterenberg from Mount Royal University, who acted as my external supervisor. Thanks also go to Dr. Julia Ellis, my initial supervisor and inspiration, who encouraged me to be brave in using interpretive inquiry with young people.

This study would not have been possible without the contributions and kindness of the staff of Academy Elementary School and the coordinators of the program, both past and present. Although I would like to identify you specifically, due to ethics requirements, I cannot do so. I thank you greatly for welcoming me into your MicroSociety world.

I would be remiss if I did not thank my editor, Lindsey Dippold, from The Heartful Editor, for her countless hours in providing me with thorough feedback and encouragement throughout this process. I enjoyed getting to know you . . . even if it was only through our computer screens.

Finally, I wish to thank my family. Thanks to my children: Andrew, Jordan, and Justine, whose experiences in their communities and schools helped me better understand the types of learning and places that were engaging for them as learners. And lastly, to my amazing wife, Kathleen, for your ongoing support throughout this research study. Not only have you provided feedback and countless commentary on my chapter drafts, but you have given me the freedom and space (including my temporary office in our bedroom) to do this important work, which I hope will help future learners in our schools—including our grandchildren. Thank you. I love and admire you immensely!

Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Preface iv

Dedication v

Acknowledgements vi

List of Figures xi

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

Coming to the Research 4
Purpose of the Study 5
Research Questions 6
The Context for the Research 7
Limitations of the Study 9
Overview of the Dissertation 10

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework 12

Dewey's Theory of Experience 13
Criticisms of Traditional Approaches to Education 13
A Progressive Education: The Subject Matter 15
A Progressive Education: The Way the Teacher Handles the Subject Matter 18
A Progressive Education: The Way the Student Handles the Subject Matter 19
Jerome Bruner and the Constructivist Paradigm 21
Criticisms of Traditional and Progressive Approaches to Education 22
Constructivism and the Learner 23
The Role of the Teacher 26
A Curriculum of Inquiry 28
Cultures of Learning 32
Communities of Practice: A New Theory 34
Situating the MicroSociety Program 35

Chapter 3: Review of the Literature 40

The Engaged Learner 40
Understanding Student Engagement 40
Measuring Student Engagement 43
Improving Student Engagement in Today's Schools 45
The Disengaged Learner 49
Student Disengagement and the Curriculum 50
Student Disengagement and the School Experience 52
Student Disengagement and Agency 56
Trends in Student Disengagement 57
The MicroSociety Program 61
The MicroSociety School: A Real World in Miniature 62
Research on MicroSociety Schools 65
School Change and the MicroSociety Program 68

Challenges and Criticisms of the MicroSociety Program ... 71
Identifying the Gaps in the Literature ... 76

Chapter 4: Methodology ... 79

Case Study and Interpretive Inquiry ... 79
Ethical Considerations ... 83
Research Site ... 84
Research Participants ... 85
Research Methods ... 89
Preinterview Activities ... 89
The Interview Process ... 90
Personal Artifacts ... 91
Data Collection Tools ... 92
Data Analysis and Interpretation ... 93
Paradigmatic Thought: An Analysis of Narratives ... 93
Narrative Thought: A Narrative Analysis ... 96

Chapter 5: Background Information—A MicroSociety School ... 98

Bringing Real Life to Learning ... 98
The Academy Elementary School MicroSociety Program ... 99
A Year in the Life of a MicroSociety School ... 102
The Micro Awards: A Celebration of Student Engagement ... 113

Chapter 6: Findings—Participant Accounts of the MicroSociety School Experience ... 116

Winter's MicroSociety Experience ... 117
Early MicroSociety Memories: "Nobody Would Hire Me" ... 117
Managing a Bank: "Kind of Like Learning it Twice" ... 119
Working in the Government: "I Won't Need Help" ... 123
Life as a MicroCitizen: "You Lose Track of Time" ... 125
Eva's MicroSociety Experience ... 127
Early MicroSociety Memories: "Everything Was Being Done for Us" ... 128
Learning About the Business World: "MicroSociety Makes Life Lessons Fun" ... 129
Developing New Skills in Government Work: "More of a People Person" ... 130
Returning to the Business World: "You Got to Do Hands-On Learning" ... 131
Life as a MicroCitizen: "Embedded in Your Brain" ... 132
London's MicroSociety Experience ... 134
Early MicroSociety Memories: "The Kids Weren't Really In Charge" ... 135
Busy Beavers: "It's an Actual Job" ... 135
Helping Hearts: "Their Time to Be a Leader" ... 137
Life as a MicroCitizen: "I Was Never Tired of It" ... 138
Shawn's MicroSociety Experience ... 140
Early MicroSociety Memories: "It Was a Desk Job" ... 141
Being a Craftsperson: "I Like to Do Hands-On" ... 142
Becoming A Businessperson: "It's Harder to Be a Leader Than a Dictator" ... 144
Life as a MicroCitizen: "Nothing Burned Down" ... 146
Concluding Comments ... 149

Chapter 7: Discussion **150**
Experiencing the Real-World Through MicroSociety 150
The Simulated World of MicroSociety: “How Life Works” 151
Playing in the Adult World: “A Place to Learn Adulting” 152
Hands-On Learning: “A Way to Motivate Kids to Learn” 153
An Integrated Experience: “There Was a Crossover” 155
Developing Competency Through Learning Opportunities: “A Chance to Practice” 155
Developing Agency and Confidence as a Participant of MicroSociety 159
Freedom and Choice: “Nothing Has Ever Been That Up to Me” 160
Roles and Responsibilities: “I Felt . . . Very Empowered” 161
Risk-Taking and Learning From Mistakes: “Mistakes Are Proof You’re Trying” 163
Student Voice: “My Opinion Was Valued and Important” 165
Learning as Part of a MicroSociety Community of Practice 167
A Community of Novices and Experts: “It Creates This Community” 167
Collaboration as a Way of Life: “Teach Them the Ropes” 170
Relationships With the Surrounding Community: “Everyone Is So Invested” 174
Learning to Help Others: “Focus on the Problems We Have in Our Community” 176
Staying Connected: “I Just Love it There” 177
Experiencing Engaging Learning Through MicroSociety 179
Being an Engaged Learner: “Someone Who’s Involved” 179
Being in the Flow: “I Kind of Get Caught Up in What We’re Doing” 181
Adults Taking Over: “Some Facilitators Love it Too Much” 182
Concluding Comments 184
Chapter 8: Reflections and Conclusions **186**
Reflections on Interpretive Inquiry Research and Case Study Approach 186
Limitations 190
Learning from Participants: Improving Learning in Today’s Schools 192
Questions of Inquiry and Potential Investigations 199
Concluding Thoughts: A Journey Without Maps to a New Landscape of Practice 203
References **207**
Appendices **221**
Appendix A Information Letter to Parents/Guardians 221
Appendix B Information Letter to Student Participants 223
Appendix C Letter of Consent for Parents/Guardians for Data Collection at School Site 225
Appendix D Letter of Assent for Student Participants for Data Collection at School Site 227
Appendix E Proposed Preliminary MicroSociety Questionnaire 229
Appendix F Proposed Preinterview Activities 230
Appendix G Proposed Interview Questions for Student Participants 231
Appendix H The MicroSociety Experience: Background Information 233
Appendix I The MicroSociety Experience – Student Artifacts 235

List of Figures

Figure 1: Percentages of Students, Based on Grade Level, Engaged in School 59

Chapter 1: Introduction

> Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.
>
> —David Kolb, *Experiential Learning*

I was in Grade 8 when I boldly asked my teacher, "Why do we have to learn this anyway?" She was curt in her reply: "Because it will help you later in life!" She appeared as surprised as I was with my question, for I was typically a well-behaved, quiet, and compliant student. For some reason, I chose that particular science class to exercise my democratic right to freedom of speech. She was not impressed. Nor was I, for I did not get an answer to my question, and I was doubtful if what I wrote in my notes that day would truly help me later in life.

My various school experiences have helped inform me of what I would refer to as engaged learning. As a child, I liked to construct, design, debate, and create. Thus, class work that involved working with my hands, moving, working with others, or that provided me with choice and a voice, were very enjoyable experiences. But many years of my schooling, primarily those in junior high school, were comprised of blurred visions of notes, tests, homework, and worksheets, where I was required to sit passively. My subjects were taught separately from each other, and there were lots of facts to memorize and tests to write; it was not, as Dewey (1915) had suggested, work that "engages the full spontaneous interest and attention of the children" (p. 10), which "keeps them alert and active, instead of passive and receptive" (p. 11).

As an educator, I have always been attracted to the experiential nature of student-centered learning. As a young teacher, there was no particular pedagogical reasoning behind my instructional design decisions; a lot of my choices were simply based on what worked for me when I was a student. I chose instructional approaches that seemed to be most engaging for my students, and we learned together by simply "doing" the work. My students were particularly

fond of choosing and developing projects that were often done collaboratively. They also appeared to enjoy hands-on learning in the form of games, field trips, simulations, and community-based social action projects.

As a teacher and eventually an administrator, I experienced constant tensions in my work. My desire to be a student-centered, progressive educator who designed learning around student interests and experiences seemed at odds with the more teacher-directed and standardized approaches used more commonly by my colleagues in the mid-1980s and 1990s. During this time, and after I became a parent, tensions continued in watching my own children experience some of the same frustrations I did when I was a young adolescent.

Embarking on my Master's of Education degree allowed me to further my quest to learn more about the young person's experience of schooling. As a teacher and administrator, I started to shift my focus, allowing my students to make more decisions and to take on more of the responsibilities of educating within the community of learners. It took many years of practice and plenty of mistakes before realizing that the best decisions I could make involved asking the learner to help make them and then stepping back and letting the students learn through experience and reflection.

In my years as an educator, it has been the learners who appeared less engaged who have caused the most challenge and frustration in my work. But they have also been the ones to capture my curiosity, energy, and focus. These were the same students who questioned my instructional decisions and challenged me by questioning the relevance of the curriculum. They caused me to reflect on the purpose of education—beyond preparing them for the "real-world" of work—to preparing them for the complexities of life in which they were contributing members who felt empowered and engaged as citizens. Not surprisingly then, most of my questions as a

teacher have been directed at finding answers on how to teach and reach these learners better. Entering the postsecondary environment as a preservice education instructor, I was eager to further investigate how students experience school.

As an educator with over three decades of experience in roles such as parent, teacher, administrator, and instructor in preservice education, I continue to consider the relevance of the curriculum and the pedagogical decisions we use to teach students in our classrooms. If we can reach students who are not as engaged, we might lessen the chance for them to become disinterested and at risk of not completing school. But how do you engage learners? As evidence has indicated today's learners continue to experience disengagement in classrooms (Gallup, 2017; Jukes et al., 2010; Willms et al., 2009), I have been interested in investigating the kinds of conditions that might better support learner engagement. For my doctoral study, after having an opportunity to spend time in an experiential program called MicroSociety[2], I became interested in exploring the possibilities this program might present for better engaging learners. I was intrigued after witnessing how the program seemed to empower its students to focus on *real-world learning*, a concept used by MicroSociety creator George Richmond in describing how the program replicated a miniature society in which students were given responsibilities similar to those in the adult world. I decided to explore how students experienced learning in a MicroSociety school as the focus for my investigations.

---

[2] MicroSociety is a program created by George Richmond in which he replicated a miniature society in his classroom. Students were given responsibilities similar to those in the adult world including the creation of an economic system with jobs and taxes, and a political system complete with laws, rights and responsibilities. Richmond would eventually publish about his experiences in a book called *The MicroSociety School: A Real World in Miniature* (1973), that lead to him creating an entire school based on the concept. Eventually, MicroSociety International was formed with a mission of "Bringing Real Life to Learning" to other schools. Today, MicroSociety schools are found throughout the world.

Coming to the Research

I was first introduced to the MicroSociety program several years ago when I began teaching an undergraduate university education course called Active and Interactive Curriculum. The course was centered on elements of constructivism and progressivism, and acknowledged experiential education through ideas such as service learning and project-based learning. A key aspect of the course was examining new approaches to teaching and learning and how to better involve students in their own learning. The course was modeled after the pragmatic teachings of Dewey (1929), who stated "education . . . is a process of living" (p. 292) and that to prepare a student for the future means to give them command of their life (p. 1).

A former student began her teaching career in a MicroSociety School and I invited her to come and speak to the preservice teachers in my course. Joining her was the coordinator of their school's MicroSociety program and a small group of students who came to talk about their learning experiences in MicroSociety. The entire presentation was conducted by the students, including children as young as 8 years old. The students shared a multimedia presentation and confidently described the MicroSociety program, including comments about their jobs, their business ventures, and the challenges and opportunities of participating in such a program. The students answered our questions just as veteran politicians might respond in question period and left us all wanting to learn more about this program.

The opportunity to gain additional information about MicroSociety came near the end of our course as the school invited us to participate in an event they called Market Day, an essential component of the program that I describe more fully in Chapter 5. It was here that we experienced the authentic learning of MicroSociety through our own first-hand experience. We were provided with school currency in the form of school-created paper bills containing a picture

of the school mascot. These bills allowed us to purchase goods and services created and delivered by the students. The event also allowed us to talk to the students. From our conversations, it soon became clear that the students were deeply involved in their MicroSociety experiences. Whether working as entrepreneurs, politicians, bankers, or consumers, every student I spoke to that day expressed enjoyment of the program. Curious to learn more about the program, I left that day with many more questions and soon became intrigued by the idea of learning more about the students who had experienced this unique program.

Purpose of the Study

My study has aimed to investigate how young people experienced an experiential program called MicroSociety. I was interested in knowing more about how students experienced learning within this program and how these experiences contributed to their feelings of engagement and disengagement. Such information could be helpful for other curricular considerations or could provide useful information for similar types of experiential learning programs. I also believe that providing access to student voices and accounts was also important, as according to Conrad and Hedin (1981), in addressing experiential education programs, there is "relatively little hard evidence to demonstrate or document the impact of such programs on student participants" (p. 383).

If schooling is to be "responsive to the needs of society, then young people, as members of society, must share in the creation, management, and evaluation of education" (Chandross, 1986, p. 147). MicroSociety, as an example of an experiential learning program, aspires to be this kind of authentic schooling experience. As a nonprofit organization specializing in building motivating learning environments for students, its mission is clearly described on its website:

> At MicroSociety we believe that kids learn best by doing. Our mission is to create environments that motivate children to learn and succeed by engaging them in the connections between the classroom and the community, real life and the future. (MicroSociety International, 2017, para.1)

Research Questions

In this study, I have used a case study approach to examine how young people have experienced learning through the experiential MicroSociety program. The following research questions have guided my inquiry:

1. How did the former students who agreed to participate in my study experience their MicroSociety program?
2. How did these participants interpret their learning experiences within their MicroSociety program as "real world" learning?
3. How were students empowered (or disempowered) in their participatory roles within their MicroSociety program?
4. How did the participants experience being part of their MicroSociety learning community?
5. And lastly, how were these experiences interpreted as engaging or disengaging by the participants in this MicroSociety program?

Using interpretive inquiry methods, I was able to recruit, interview and collect data from six participants to explore what it was like for these students to experience real-world learning in their MicroSociety school. This interpretive process helped me better understand the roles these students had in this program, how they contributed to their learning community and what they found engaging and/or disengaging about their MicroSociety schooling experience.

The Context for the Research

MicroSociety program creator, George Richmond (1973), was concerned with his own students' lack of interest in schooling. As an author, poet, and painter, he found the challenges of being a rookie teacher in the late 1960s to be overwhelming. His answer to student disengagement was to create a mini-society in his classroom in which students had a voice in decision-making. Students created business ventures and were paid for their work through extrinsic rewards. Richmond (1973) believed students and teachers would find the MicroSociety model "attractive because it allows them to bring real-world experiences into the classroom" (p. 7). With a focus that promoted relevance in schooling experiences, Richmond helped launch the first school-wide MicroSociety in 1981. In what is considered an exemplary model of MicroSociety, the city of Lowell, MA, created an entire school based on Richmond's vision (Cherniss, 2006, p. xx). The school was designed "in the tradition of John Dewey" in which "*doing* reinforces *learning"* (Richmond, 1989, p. 233) and "educates children for the world they will enter as adults" (p. 235). In 1987 the U.S. government "certified the MicroSociety program as one of those whole-school reform models that schools may adopt as part of the Comprehensive School Reform initiative" (Richmond, 1989, p. 10), recognizing the unique nature of the program. U.S. schools interested in the MicroSociety program could receive grants of up to $150,000 over 3 years.

Research on experiential learning programs suggests that "combining experience with education is an effective way to learn" (Ewert, 1995, p. 351). The MicroSociety philosophy of learning from experience aligns well with several of the principles of the Association for Experiential Education (AEE, 2017):

- Experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes. (para. 3)

MicroSociety programs have been recognized by a number of organizations as providing exemplary models of experiential education. The National Dropout Prevention Center identified MicroSociety as one of the 15 most effective strategies for improving student attendance and truancy prevention: "The program has helped to solve problems with student learning and achievement, motivation, attendance, behavior, and climate" (Reimer & Smink, 2005, p. 7). The American Youth Policy Forum (2002), in its survey of 28 leading school reform models, gave its highest rating of five stars to MicroSociety and stated it was highly compatible with the idea of service learning, which

> engages students in purposeful learning and gives them an opportunity to apply what they are learning to a challenging situation or problem in their community. . . . It provides the essential connection that helps students see that what they are learning in class is relevant to the world around them. (Pearson, 2002, p. 5).

As part of their design, experiential programs are expected to provide "an experience for the learner" (Warren et al., 1995, p. 15) and facilitate "the reflection of that experience" (p. 15).

Experiential programs like MicroSociety may also provide a means of responding to the issues facing disengaged youth and “offer powerful responses to problems surrounding student motivation and performance” (Westheimer et al., 1995, pp. 40–41). Although research demonstrates that “experiential programs can profoundly affect participating students and the school community” (Westheimer et al., 1995, p. 41), these programs typically “remain marginal to mainstream educational reform efforts” (p. 41).

Learners in today’s classrooms have different needs from the students that Richmond first taught in his MicroSociety school in Brooklyn in the early 1970s. However, 50 years later, it is valuable to examine the MicroSociety model further but in a new context. My study centers on learners and how they experienced this type of experiential learning, focusing on real-world learning and where the program has strived to provide students with a sense of agency. By listening to the students describe their experiences in the MicroSociety program, I have aspired to better understand what participating students found engaging in their MicroSociety school. I hope my findings might provide other educators with valuable insights on learning experiences that can engage and involve youth in today’s classrooms and communities.

Limitations of the Study

As a case study, there were several limitations placed on my research. The “inability to generalize” (Yin, 2014, p. 20), typical of case study research, was true for this study. I interviewed six participants, and their perspectives were based on experiences within the same MicroSociety program that operated at their school. This study was focused only on the student perspective of MicroSociety. Although valuable information could be gained from interviewing teachers, parents, or community members, this was beyond this study’s purpose and scope. I believe a case study approach using interpretive inquiry interviews was the best way to learn

more deeply about how each participant experienced their MicroSociety program.

Another limitation of this study was that it was carried out at one research site. There are four MicroSociety schools in Canada, and of those, most are still in the initial stages of beginning the program. Therefore, I chose a site with a well-established MicroSociety program created over 10 years ago by a knowledgeable and experienced staff. I believe my participants' experiences in MicroSociety may have also been different from those experiencing MicroSociety for the first time in a new program. Participants in my study may have been predisposed to provide positive responses towards the program because they experienced MicroSociety after it was well established and had been successful for several years.

Overview of the Dissertation

This thesis comprises eight chapters. In Chapter 2, I examine the research and works of educational theorists John Dewey (1938) and Jerome Bruner (1960), who provide the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this dissertation. Dewey's theories support learning through experience and his progressive ideas about education fit well with the experiential nature of MicroSociety. Likewise, Bruner's beliefs in constructivism and student learning, the role the teacher has in the classroom, and his notion of creating communities of learners help provide my framework for examining learning through a model such as MicroSociety. The chapter concludes with a brief examination of the theory regarding communities of practice as developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991). I was introduced to this theory later in my study, but found the key concepts around communities of practice to form a logical connection to the theories of Bruner and Dewey, and provided a significant contribution to this study.

In Chapter 3, I explore the literature relating to student engagement and student disengagement, including defining what it means to be an engaged learner and examining factors

that influence student disengagement. Lastly, I explore the previous research on the MicroSociety program itself. In describing MicroSociety, I explore the reported successes, challenges, and criticisms regarding the program and identify gaps in the research.

Chapter 4 describes the methodology used in my study, including a description of the qualitative research process involving case study and interpretive inquiry. I describe the research participants, research site, and research methods, including preinterview activities, interviews, observations, and personal artifacts. I also provide a description of how I collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data.

Chapter 5 provides an elaboration of my research site's background information and how the MicroSociety program operated there. This background information will provide context to help readers better understand the findings presented in Chapter 6, in which I share my participants' accounts of their experiences in the MicroSociety Program. In Chapter 7, I provide interpretations and discussions of findings and examine the prominent themes I uncovered in the interview data. I conclude this dissertation in Chapter 8 by offering my reflections, recommendations, and additional questions for further investigations.

Throughout this dissertation, I have been guided by the works of John Dewey and Jerome Bruner. With his progressive ideas, Dewey's theories were valuable in my research centered on experience and education and also corresponded well with Bruner's (1960) emphasis on social constructivism. Bruner's beliefs in designing meaningful learning experiences for students provided a logical research base to explore the problem of student disengagement. In the following chapter, I outline how these two theorists contributed to my study's theoretical and conceptual framework.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

After exploring the work of different educational theorists, I became convinced the research and theories of John Dewey (1938) and Jerome Bruner (1960) were most suitable to my study, and they had a good fit for the theoretical and conceptual framework for my dissertation. Both theorists were interested in relevance of learning and in student engagement, in their individual work addressing educational reform. Bruner (1971) stated, “What is taught should be self-rewarding by some existential criterion of being ‘real,’ or ‘exciting,’ or ‘meaningful’” (p. 114). Decades earlier, Dewey (1938), an educational progressivist, argued that schools needed to demonstrate “an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (pp. 19-20). After I collected my data and began the analysis process, I became interested in the theories of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991). Their body of work centered on the concept of communities of practice would prove to be a logical fit to my study findings.

As I have learned more about MicroSociety and students’ interpretations of their experiences with this program, I have come to understand the program as one that embodies some of the perspectives of both Dewey and Bruner; as a place in which students learned authentically, where they were encouraged to take risks, and where their teachers joined with them in cocreating learning experiences that prepared them for their life ahead. Dewey and Bruner both studied schools in which student experience and hands-on learning were emphasized. They both emphasized the importance of learning together within a community of learners; a belief also fundamental to the research of Lave and Wenger that I describe more specifically at the close of this chapter.

In the following sections, I share summaries of the research of John Dewey and Jerome Bruner. I provide a backdrop to each researcher's theories that includes background information,

their criticisms about education, and their suggestions for improvement. I conclude the chapter by discussing the connections between Dewey and Bruner with the works of Lave and Wenger and their theory of learning within communities of practice. I first begin by commenting on John Dewey and his theory of experience.

Dewey's Theory of Experience

John Dewey's theory of experiential education provides one of the guiding frameworks for this dissertation. Dewey (1859–1952), an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer was a pragmatist who was closely linked to the progressivist education movement of the 20th century. He argued that "learners must be allowed to explore" and that teachers should "help focus learners' attentions while they provided learners with relevant experiences" (Davis, 2004, p. 134). Dewey was also a strong influence for George Richmond (1973), the founder of the MicroSociety program, which I address in more detail in Chapter 3.

Regarding education, Dewey believed the child should be "the starting-point, the center, and the end" (Dewey, 1902, p. 107). Putting the learner in the center of pedagogical decisions is built upon the progressivist notion that requires "a philosophy of education based upon a philosophy of experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 29). Dewey believed schools needed to place "emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his [*sic*] activities in the learning process" (Dewey, 1938, p. 67). This pragmatic approach to viewing the child as one possessing their own experiences that could be used to guide further learning was a sharp contrast to the dominant teaching practices at the time.

Criticisms of Traditional Approaches to Education

Dewey was critical of traditional education and its emphasis on students passively memorizing facts. He felt there was "no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to

secure the active co-operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his [*sic*] studying" (Dewey, 1938, p. 67). Dewey (1916) stated, "only in education . . . does knowledge mean primarily a store of information aloof from doing" (p. 140) where teachers "instead of . . . changing their curriculum so that they could teach pupils how to learn from the world itself . . . have gone on bravely teaching as many facts as possible" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 307). Dewey (1938) posited that traditional education was so "bound up with the past" that it provided little help for students "in dealing with the issues of the present and future" (p. 23). In describing these 20th-century U.S. schools, Dewey stated they were designed to "cover the ground" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 16), where "quantity rather than quality of knowledge is emphasized" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 13). Dewey believed, "in attempting to systemize and standardize, the curriculum has ignored the needs of the individual child" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 41). He also viewed the subject-centered approach to traditional education as a place that would "divide and fractionize the world" (Dewey, 1902, p. 105) and cause the child to feel disconnected from "the subject matter of [his own] life experiences" (Dewey, 1916, p. 8).

Over 100 years later, the same arguments are made in contemporary schools, which emphasize coverage of material and standardization. In *Beyond Measure: Rescuing an Overscheduled, Overtested, Underestimated Generation,* Abeles (2015) called today's students "the most tested generation in history" (p. 101). Abeles argued this excessive focus on testing and standardization affects students' engagement and interest in school. The move to increased testing has been common in the United States and has influenced several Canadian provinces such as Alberta. Dewey was critical of these over-scheduled and over-standardized places of learning of the early 1900s, and suggested the "tragic error is that we are so anxious for the results of growth that we neglect the process of growing" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 7). Dewey

believed three things needed to change to transform this traditional transmission model of schooling to fit a more progressive society: "first, the subject matter, second, the way the teacher handles it, and third, the way the pupils handle it" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 170).

A Progressive Education: The Subject Matter

Dewey strongly advocated for teaching practices focused on "learning by doing" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 87), rather than on instruction that is isolated and separate from the purposes of learning as "something to be memorized and reproduced upon demand" (Dewey, 1916, p. 101). He was optimistic about education shifting to active learning replacing passive/receptive approaches.

To address his concern regarding the disconnection between what children experienced in their classrooms with what they would later encounter in the world in which they lived, he proposed an experiential and active approach to learning, centered around play, work, community, and social responsibility. Dewey founded the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools (still in existence today) as a place to apply and practice his progressive ideas. The concept of play was important in these experimental schools: "The educational value of this play is obvious. It teaches the children about the world they live in. . . . Through their games they learn about the work and play of the grown-up world" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 108).

Later, Dewey's ideas were carried out in other experiential schools across North America. Following their work studying progressive schools in several U.S. cities, Dewey and his wife Evelyn[1] stated, "the best success came when the children's . . . activities were linked up with social interests and experience" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 111). This philosophy of play

---

[1] Evelyn Dewey (1889-1965) was an education reformer who also authored several books on education. She worked alongside her husband, John, in surveying experiential schools which lead to the release of their only co-authored book *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915).

was viewed as valuable for both young and older students. For younger students, play was used "not only as a method of making work interesting to the children, but for the educational value of the activities it involves, and for giving the children the right sort of ideals and ideas about everyday life" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 109). In higher grades, the element of play was often used through dramatization, which Dewey referred to as "make-believe in action" (p. 119). Dramatization was "another way of saying that learning by doing is a better way to learn than by listening" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 120).

Dewey felt it was important that play was a component of a student's school experience. He felt when children are engaged in activities that "bring their natural impulses into play . . . learning is easier" (Dewey, 1916, p. 106). He also believed through play, students learned about adult life. A large focus on integrating play opportunities into the classroom was based on the notion that students learned about adult life, including the "the occupations of their elders" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 108). These occupations, or work opportunities, were another essential component of Dewey's progressive subject matter.

In addition to learning through play, Dewey also felt it was important that children learn through work, or what he referred to as occupations. In *Schools of Tomorrow*, coauthored by John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey (1915), the researchers documented cases of educational experiments where there were few opportunities in schools "for the child to work" (p. 22). The authors felt this lack of work impacted a child's motivation and interest in school. Dewey defined occupations as "a mode of activity on the part of the child which reproduces, or runs parallel to, some form of work carried on in social life" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 83). For example, instead of just learning about gardening in the classroom, students would create a garden plot and study gardening practices and theories (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 93). Through

this application of hands-on learning, “the occupation supplies the child with a genuine motive; it gives him [*sic*] experience at first hand; it brings him [*sic*] into contact with realities” (Dewey, 1915, p. 16) and “prepares them to some extent for the practical duties of later life” (Dewey, 1915, p. 10).

Dewey was concerned about students who found little value or purpose in the traditional education approach of the time and who were disengaged from school. He believed providing work opportunities for the young would keep students in school and felt it was the work of the school to ensure that “everyone has a calling and an occupation, something to do” (Dewey, 1915, p. 17). Dewey supported linking curriculum more closely to the students’ lives so it might provide them with better preparation for their future in the world as adults (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 268). Rather than teach subjects and occupations in isolation, Dewey felt these occupations should be “drawn almost entirely from the community in which they [the students] live” (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 43).

Utilizing the community to enhance learning was another critical component of the subject matter in Dewey’s (1916) progressive views of education. He thought that the curriculum must adapt “to the needs of the existing community life; it must select with the intention of improving the life we live in common so that the future shall be better than the past” (Dewey, 1916, p. 105). Students working together in the community did not just occur; it required planning and thought by the teacher who needed to know their individual subjects, their individual students, and how they could contribute to their communities.

Dewey (1938) was a strong believer in children working and learning together and regarded education as a social process in which the “development of experience comes about through interaction” (p. 58). To make this happen in a school setting, Dewey believed the

traditional role of the teacher needed to change from one who was seen as being in charge to one who "takes on that of leader of group activities" (p. 59). Dewey believed this approach strengthened the ideals of democracy by providing students with opportunities to develop a strong sense of social responsibility. He stated, "a curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together" (Dewey, 1916, p. 105). Dewey proposed mock elections and student governments to develop citizenship skills so that students could "acquire a social sense of their own powers" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 24). By placing social control in the hands of the students, it was believed everyone could contribute and feel a sense of responsibility in their communities. Dewey (1915) reiterated, to do this means "to make each one of our schools an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society" (p. 20).

A Progressive Education: The Way the Teacher Handles the Subject Matter

Dewey (1915) put responsibility for designing authentic learning based on play, work, community, and social responsibility squarely in the teachers' hands. He believed other methods needed to be used rather than a prescribed approach to teaching that involved students reading and reciting facts from textbooks. Dewey saw that teachers failed to consider the experiences the child brought with them to school or the new experiences that awaited when the community was invited into the classroom. He believed schooling required a new way of thinking in which the teacher created a classroom full of rich and significant learning experiences that involved the teacher and others, including the student. As he explained:

> The plan, in other words, is a cooperative enterprise, not a dictation. The teacher's suggestion is not a mold for a cast-iron result but is a starting point to be developed into a

> plan through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process. The development occurs through reciprocal give-and-take, the teacher taking but not being afraid also to give. (1938, p. 72)

Dewey (1938) supported the notion of authentic learning projects that had real-world connections (p. 14). He felt “ideas are not segregated, they do not form an isolated island. They animate and enrich the ordinary course of life” (Dewey, 1916, p. 89). Once again, this required the teacher to think differently about how to use their time and how best to involve the student. Dewey’s (1916) criteria for these kinds of authentic learning experiences centered on two questions:

> 1. Does it grow naturally out of some question with which the student is concerned?
> 2. Does it fit into his [*sic*] more direct acquaintance so as to increase its efficacy and deepen its meaning? (p. 141)

By using an interdisciplinary approach, Dewey believed students would be more fully developed with a “whole mind and a whole body,” completing their schooling with “a fuller mind and an even healthier body” (Dewey, 1915, p. 50).

A Progressive Education: The Way the Student Handles the Subject Matter

The final area Dewey (1902) felt needed to change to transform traditional schooling was based on the student, which included how the student would handle the subject matter and in which roles they would have in a progressive school. The traditional education model from Dewey’s time had one role for the student—a passive receiver of information delivered from the subject matter expert—the teacher. Dewey believed in honoring the experiences children brought with them to the schoolroom. He did not view the curriculum as something separate from the

child: “the child and the curriculum are two operative forces, both of them developing and reacting on each other” (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 70).

Dewey and Dewey (1915) proposed a learning experience in which the curriculum evolved with the student's contributions. They felt a curriculum in which children’s experiences were fully integrated would create a child who not only likes school but sees their own experiences as being “worthwhile on their own account” (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 29). Dewey believed students needed freedom, choices in content, process, and product, and a voice in the classroom. Following these changes, Dewey believed students would be more engaged, which would lead to growth.

Dewey advocated for a differentiated teaching approach based on the students’ individual goals, talents, and interests. This approach was in contrast to a standardized teaching model with a set curriculum and one in which students demonstrated their learning using the same processes, resulting in the same products. The most important component of Dewey’s progressive approach to a child’s learning was not the end product, rather the child’s interest in continuing to learn.

Dewey (1938) realized his teaching and learning approach would be challenging for some, but believed “the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming” (Dewey, 1916, p. 29), and everyone had a role: the teacher, the student, and the community. Dewey felt the challenge was to unify and organize education by considering all of the various factors. As a pragmatist, he proposed that schools become miniature societies that reflected the experiences of the real world:

> The practical world is the real world to most people; but the world of ideas becomes intensely interesting when its connection with the world of action is clear. Because the

> work is real work constant opportunities are furnished to carry out the school policy of meeting the needs of the individual pupil. (Dewey, 1915, p. 266)

Dewey's philosophy of experience, pragmatism, collaborative learning, student ownership, interdisciplinary learning, and pedagogical practices centered on the importance of problems, service, play, and work provided valuable connections to my study and considering student experiences in the MicroSociety program.

Jerome Bruner and the Constructivist Paradigm

As with Dewey (1938), the work of Bruner (1960) would also prove a valuable support to my research. Dewey's (1938) idea that "education as growth . . . should be an ever-present process" (p. 50) was also true to the constructivist philosophy as supported by American cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (1915–2016). Bruner opposed behaviorist ideas applied in education and turned his focus on cognition, as best shown in one of his earlier publications called *A Study of Thinking* (1956). Bruner's work in the 1960s to the 21st century would have a greater impact on education. I chose Bruner's work to support my theoretical and conceptual framework, not only because of his beliefs in how students constructed meaning, but because of the important responsibilities he believed the teacher had in providing authentic and relevant learning experiences to help motivate students.

Bruner began his career in experimental psychology in the 1940s, but after he became director of the Harvard Center for Cognitive Studies in 1960, his work shifted to focus on cognitive and educational psychology (Bruner, 2006, p. 1). Bruner's ideas were attractive to many educators. Although similar to Dewey in his beliefs in the importance of discovery, experience, reflection, and problem-solving, Bruner believed the role of teacher to be of significance. He felt it was important to determine how certain subjects were to be structured and

taught (Bruner, 1966). He felt the curriculum of the 1960s needed to focus more on problem-solving and problem-posing, with the teacher having a significant role as an instructional designer. By the late 20th century, Bruner's thinking evolved once again as he began to place considerable emphasis on learning within a culture based on social interactions, scaffolding, and mediation as influenced by the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Bruner, 1996). In this section, I provide a background to Bruner's various theories, including his criticisms about education and his suggestions on how to reform it. I have purposefully focused on Bruner's more recent work as this era of his research was more aligned with MicroSociety practices.

Criticisms of Traditional and Progressive Approaches to Education

Like Dewey, Bruner (2006) was critical of traditional approaches to education and the view that children were empty vessels that needed to be filled with knowledge. He viewed children not as blank slates but as people who arrived at school with their own experiences. Bruner, too, challenged the "passivity of the process we call education" (Bruner, 2006, p. 26) with its emphasis on gaining and storing information. He advocated for a better way that did not separate learning and doing.

Bruner (2006) was also critical of behaviorist approaches being used in schools. While researching cognition in the 1960s, he visited many schools and became critical of what he observed. For Bruner (2006), "knowing . . . was not passively receiving and associating stimuli from 'the world,' and then responding in conformity with rewards of 'reinforcements' from outside" (p. 1). He was critical of a system that emphasized grades and competition over "interest in the material to be learned [as] the best stimulus to learning" (Bruner, 2006, p. 14).

Bruner (1996) disapproved of a system that put "emphasis on transmitting 'subject matter'" (p. 21). He felt for students to achieve mastery, they need to "gain good judgment, to

become self-reliant, to work well with each other. And such competencies do not flourish under a one-way 'transmission' regimen" (Bruner, 1996, p. 21). Throughout his career, Bruner wrote extensively on how to improve education; four of these ideas relevant to my study include (a) constructivism and the learner, (b) the role of the teacher, (c) a curriculum of inquiry, and (d) cultures of learning.

Constructivism and the Learner

Bruner's work focused on principles of constructivism, a philosophy which can be traced back to the work of educational psychologist Jean Piaget (1950) and his theory of cognitive development. Constructivism is concerned with ways in which students make sense of their own experiences, which Davis (2004) referred to as an "individual's conceptual development" that was "evolving and rooted in one's physical engagements with the world" (p. 204). Constructivists view learning as an "organic process through which a learner continuously adapts interpretations and expectations in order to incorporate new experiences into her or his system of understanding" (Davis, 2004, p. 204). Bruner (1961) initially associated constructivism with discovery in the "matter of rearranging or transforming evidence in such a way that one is enabled to go beyond the evidence . . . to additional new insights" (p. 22).

According to Weimer (2013), "constructivist approaches emphasize learners actively constructing their own knowledge rather than passively receiving information transmitted to them from teachers and textbooks" (p. 21). In his ground-breaking book, *The Process of Education,* Bruner (1960) challenged the traditional model of children learning by being told what to learn. Instead, he believed children would learn more effectively through discovery and by generating information on their own. This process leads students to evaluate their findings against sources which leads to the acquisition of more new information (p. 51). He argued that

"Acquired knowledge is most useful to a learner . . . when it is 'discovered' through the learner's own cognitive efforts, for it is then related to and used in reference to what one has known before" (1996, p. xii). Bruner (1962) believed there were two reasons for encouraging discovery:

> In the first place, the child will make what he [*sic*] learns his [*sic*] own, will fit his [*sic*] discovery into the interior world of culture that he [*sic*] creates for himself [*sic*]. Equally important, discovery and the sense of confidence it provides is the proper reward for learning. It is a reward that, moreover, strengthens the very process that is at the heart of education—disciplined inquiry. (pp. 123–124)

Bruner (1971) stated, "We have tended to overlook the question of what keeps learners interested in the activity of learning, in the achievement of competence beyond bare necessity" (p. 55). He addressed the matter of relevancy in the curriculum by stating that for students to construct the meaning of significance, it had to be of value to them (Bruner, 1971, p. 124).

Bruner was deeply influenced by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and his theory of social-constructivism. Vygotsky (1978) believed learning took place through interactions with adults and more capable peers who supported the less capable learners. Further, social constructivists suggest that students interact with others, including peers and teachers, to develop a richer understanding that is not as possible when working individually (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky's research on the zone of proximal development transformed Bruner's ways of thinking about cognition and the mind (Bruner, 1996). In his pivotal work, *Mind in Society,* Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual developmental level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Vygotsky's (1978) basic

idea was that learning was a collaborative experience in which adults provided guidance to the child to advance to the next steps of the learning process on their own. Bruner (1986) defined the zone of proximal development as “an account of how the more competent assist the young and the less competent to reach that higher ground” (p. 73). This idea transformed Bruner’s (1986) thinking as best summarized in his own words:

> I have come increasingly to recognize that most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture. It is not just that the child must make his [*sic*] knowledge his[*sic*] own, but that he [*sic*] must make it his [*sic*] own in a community of those who share his [*sic*] sense of belonging to a culture. (p. 127)

Originally, Bruner (1985) had used the word scaffolding to describe the intervention by a learned person in assisting those with less knowledge. Vygotsky’s ideas of the Zone of Proximal Development influenced Bruner’s (1985) thinking on this matter:

> If the child is enabled to advance by being under the tutelage of an adult or a more competent peer, then the tutor or the aiding peer serves the learner as a vicarious form of consciousness until such time as the learner is able to master his [*sic*] own action through his [*sic*] own consciousness and control. (pp. 24–25)

Bruner (1986) used this idea of scaffolding to focus on the importance of guidance and collaboration in learning language. Once again, Vygotsky’s (1978) belief that language was acquired through mediation influenced Bruner (1986), who stated, “it was Vygotsky’s genius to recognize the importance of language acquisition, [as] language and its form of use . . . reflect our history” (p. 78). Vygotsky (1978) saw language and the tools associated with it as “a way of sorting out one’s thoughts about things” (p. 72). These ideas supported Bruner’s (1986) arguments against a transmission approach to curriculum delivery: “the language of education is

the language of culture creating, not of knowledge consuming or knowledge acquisition alone" (p. 133).

To plan relevant learning experiences, Bruner (1971) suggested greater involvement from the student. If relevancy was to be achieved, schools need "much more participatory democracy in the formulation of lessons, curricula, courses of study, and the rest" (p. 114). Bruner believed in providing agency for students, which would enhance their self-esteem. This agency included providing students with more responsibility in "setting and achieving goals in all aspects of a school's activities . . . everything from maintenance of a school's physical plant to a share in decisions about academic and extracurricular projects to be undertaken" (Bruner, 1996, p. 38).

Following decades of educational reform, Bruner was hopeful with "the new wave of research . . . to recognize the child's perspective in the process of learning" in which children "are seen as constructing a *model* of the world to aid them in construing their experience" (Bruner, 1996, p. 56). After years of studying human development, Bruner (1996) was convinced that educators now had a more comprehensive understanding of teaching and learning "with the child as an active, intentional being; with knowledge as 'man-made' rather than simply there; with how our knowledge about the world and about each other gets constructed and negotiated with others" (p. 65). He also believed the teacher had a significant role in designing these kinds of powerful learning experiences that were relevant, more engaging, and meaningful to students.

The Role of the Teacher

In contrast to the philosophical views of Dewey, Bruner examined the psychology and cognitive science around instruction. He defined instruction as a "provisional state that has as its object to make the learner or problem solver self-sufficient" (Bruner, 1966, p. 53). He believed,

"To instruct someone . . . is to teach him [*sic*] to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge" (p. 72).

Bruner (1971) posed the question, "How do you teach something to a child, arrange a child's environment, if you will, in such a way that he [*sic*] can learn something with some assurance that he [*sic*] will use the material that he [*sic*] has learned appropriately in a variety of situations?" (p. 70). The idea to have students use "their heads to solve a problem by reflecting on what they already know or have already learned" (p. 74) was something Bruner (1971) felt was missing in many schools.

In his landmark book *Toward a Theory of Education* (1966), Bruner was struck by the "absence of a theory of instruction as a guide to pedagogy" (p. 31). He would emphasize the important role of the teacher in what we would refer to today as an instructional designer. He explained that "a theory of instruction . . . is principally concerned with how to arrange environments to optimize learning according to various criteria—to optimize transfer or retrievability of information" (Bruner, 1996, pp. 37–38). He believed "instruction is prescriptive in the sense that it sets forth rules concerning the most effective way of achieving knowledge or skill" (Bruner, 1996, p. 40). Bruner (1996) felt the teacher should be "concerned with how what one wishes to teach can best be learned, with improving rather than describing learning" (p. 40).

Bruner (1996) developed his theory of instruction to describe the teacher's role as an instructional designer. Regarding what he saw as problems in instruction, Bruner (1996) felt teachers should focus on "how to stimulate thought in a school, how to personalize knowledge, and how to evaluate what one is doing" (p. 154). Bruner (1996) believed "knowledge is a process, not a product" (p. 72). Therefore, he felt "evaluation should examine not only the product or content of learning but also the process by which the child gets or fails to get to

mastery of materials, for only in that way can the efficacy of pedagogy be examined" (Bruner, 1996, p. 164). Through his research Bruner witnessed how children showed more commitment to learning when they felt more competent. He believed "intellectual mastery is rewarding . . . when the learner recognizes the cumulative power of learning" which leads ". . . to something that before was out of reach" (Bruner, 1996, p. 30). Although he strongly believed "thinking is the reward for learning" (p. 26), Bruner (1996) was concerned that "we may be systematically depriving our students of this reward as far as school learning is concerned" (p. 26). To change, a new approach to curriculum was needed.

A Curriculum of Inquiry

Dewey and Bruner also differed in their ideas about curriculum. For Dewey (1916), curriculum was created from the child's present interest and experience, which was used to address problems which "are relevant to living together" (p. 25). Dewey believed the purpose of schooling was life itself in making society a better place. Bruner (1961) was more concerned with improving society by asking, "What shall we teach and to what end?" (p. 2). He believed curriculum planning and development should be carried out by university scholars and people distinguished in their fields of practice. By purposefully thinking about the content and structure of curriculum, society would advance due to "a well-educated citizenry" (Bruner, 1961, p. 2).

The idea of structure was most obvious in Bruner's idea of the spiral curriculum. His experience in schools led him to conclude, "our schools may be wasting precious years by postponing the teaching of many important subjects on the ground that they are too difficult" (Bruner, 1961, p. 12). Bruner (1961) stated it was possible to introduce the child at an early age to "the ideas and styles that in later life make an educated man" (p. 55). He stated the "criterion for any subject taught in primary school, whether, when fully developed, it is worth an adult's

knowing, and whether having known it as a child makes a person a better adult" (Bruner, 1961, p. 52).

In his book *The Relevance of Education* (1971), Bruner provided four recommendations for transforming the schooling experience:

1. A curriculum that focused on the skills of problem solving
2. A shift on emphasizing the unknown and the speculative that is organized around problems which have no known solutions
3. Sharing the process of education with the learner.
4. Developing a school curriculum that not only included what was the best in past curricula, but that was also experimental in nature with a focus on controversies, debates, and problems. (pp. 115–117)

Bruner (1971) was a strong supporter of a curriculum centered on problems and problem solving. He believed "good problems . . . are [*sic*] the chief vehicle for good curricula" (p. 109). Bruner (1971) felt it was essential for teachers to design "an approach to learning that allows a child not only to learn the material that is presented in a school setting, but to learn it in such a way that he can use the information in problem solving" later on in life (p. 70). He felt "knowledge as it appears in our schooling be put into the context of action and commitment" (Bruner, 1971, p. 115).

In addition to a focus on problem-solving, Bruner (1971) suggested that curriculum include a focus "on the unknown and the speculative" (p. 116). He felt more attention should be provided to subjects "organized around problems which have no clearly known solutions" (Bruner, 1971, p. 116). Bruner believed it was in the unknown where students would be required to use their knowledge to think of solutions. He felt "intuitive thinking, the training of hunches,

is a much neglected and essential feature of productive thinking not only in formal academic disciplines but also in everyday life" (Bruner, 1971, pp. 13–14). He realized, however, this "shift in emphasis will shake the traditional role of the teacher as the one who knows, contrasting with the student who does not" (Bruner, 1971, p. 116). Another challenge Bruner (1971) foresaw was for educators to "share the process of education with the learner" (p. 116), which involved the teacher turning over some control to the child and allowing students to discover, to question, and to make mistakes. For some teachers, this was an unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory.

Bruner recommended we look at curriculum differently. In addition to keeping the best aspects of the school's curricula, he proposed an experimental curriculum with "seminars, political analyses, the development of position papers on school problems, 'problem finding' in the local community" (Bruner, 1971, p. 117). How were schools to carry out the recommendations that Bruner had to offer? For Bruner (1961), "the first and most obvious problem is how to construct curricula that can be taught by ordinary teachers to ordinary students and that at the same time reflect clearly the basis or underlying principles of various fields of inquiry" (p. 18). Bruner (1961) believed

> mastery of the fundamental ideas of a field involves not only the grasping of general principles, but also the development of an attitude toward learning and inquiry, toward guessing and hunches, toward the possibility of solving problems on one's own. (p. 20)

This new approach to inquiry-based learning would not only be for the students but also the teachers. Bruner's (1962) response to this situation was to encourage teachers to simply "jump in" for "I have never seen anybody improve in the art and technique of inquiry by any means other than engaging in inquiry" (p. 94).

Bruner took his philosophy of structure, the spiral curriculum, problem-based learning, and inquiry further with the creation and introduction of a new Social Studies curriculum called Man: A Course of Study (MACOS), which was used in many American and British schools during the 1970s. As an integrated humanities program, Bruner used his concept of the spiral curriculum to introduce key concepts that became more complex as the students advanced through different levels of learning. The course was successfully packaged with extensive pedagogical tools such as games, stories, artifacts, role-plays, visual aids, and films, which were used to help the students create clarity and deepen their curiosity. Rather than a specific focus on content, the emphasis of this course was built around skills, such as discussing and questioning, so that students could think for themselves and reach their own conclusions. Despite winning countless awards and receiving federal funding to develop the program further, MACOS had a controversial life in U.S. schools of the 1970s. According to Ronald Evans (2011), author of *The Tragedy of American School Reform*, the MACOS program had many critics. Conservatives believed the program was “designed to mold children’s social attitudes and beliefs that are almost always at variance with the beliefs and moral values of their parents and local communities” (Evans, 2011, p. 128). Some argued the program indoctrinated children and endorsed socialism; “they preferred an “approach that would promote traditional American values” (Evans, 2011, p. 113). They did not “believe that children should be encouraged to think” but rather “they should be told what to believe by their parents, teachers, textbooks, and other sources of authority” (Evans, 2011, p. 113). Some parents and community members were concerned with what they referred to as “psychological devices” being “used throughout the course, including role-playing, group discussions, and encounter sessions, in which students are required to openly discuss intimate aspects of their personal lives and those of their families and

friends" (Evans, 2011, p. 128). Despite being an innovative curriculum designed to influence children profoundly, the MACOS program eventually stopped being used. It was replaced with a more traditional back-to-basics social studies program that included history and geography. Evans (2011) concluded

> The controversy over MACOS proved that even the disciplines and the new inquiry models, with students as junior social scientists, could be controversial because they asked students to develop their own conclusions. Educational conservatives and many members of the public, it seems, wanted a more traditionally 'American' and authoritative perspective fed to students. (p. 142)

The failure of Bruner's MACOS was reminiscent of similar attacks that Dewey experienced during the progressive era of education. The MACOS controversy meant that educational reform centered on inquiry and innovation was over-for the time being. But Bruner would resurface once again near the end of the century to make another strong case for educational reform, this time, based on his new outlook towards creating schools with cultures of learning.

Cultures of Learning

Near the end of the 20th Century, Bruner (1996) began to shift his pedagogical thinking once again. The influence of Vygotsky's theories helped Bruner to see the value in students collaborating to learn, not only with each other, but also with the teacher, and sometimes also with parents and community members. This idea of mediated learning as supported through cultural scaffolding caused Bruner to reexamine his idea of cognition and culture, to see that "most of our approaches to the world are mediated through negotiation with others" (p. 68).

Bruner (1996) understood that culture was significant in education, as reflected in his beliefs about the value of tutoring, the role of language, and the creation of learning

communities. Bruner (1996) believed education was a process that transmits culture and that it is constantly "being recreated as it is interpreted and renegotiated by its members" (p. 123). He realized that most learning was a sharing of culture, which included the child's own knowledge that they brought to the community in which they belonged. Bruner felt the purpose of schools was to create a "joint culture . . . as an appropriate step en route to becoming a member of the adult society in which one lives out one's life" (p. 127).

Bruner (1996) was encouraged to see schools that established mutual learning cultures. In these schools, "classroom cultures are organized to model how the broader culture should work if it were operating at its best and liveliest and if it were concentrating on the task of education" (p. xv). In these communities of learning, learners help others learn based on their own abilities. Everyone, including students, teachers, and sometimes parents and community members, had a role to learn together to advance the learning culture and create an "enabling community" (p. 76). Bruner (1996) conceived a vision of schools serving a renewed function within a changing society. This would entail "building school cultures that operate as mutual communities of learners, involved jointly in solving problems with all contributing to the process of educating one another" (pp. 81–82). Bruner believed we needed to reconsider how the concept of school culture contributed to learning and the advancement of society.

In *Culture of Education* (1996), Bruner offered four crucial ideas to advance education based on agency, reflection, collaboration, and culture for all members of the learning community (p. 87). Through exercising agency in their daily learning activities, all learners would take more control of their learning. Through reflection, learners would better understand what it was they were learning, and why they were learning it. Collaboration and "sharing the resources" with those "involved in teaching and learning" (Bruner, 1996, p. 87) would advance

learning. And lastly creating the kind of culture in which the learner would construct and negotiate new meanings "will make those taught more effective, less alienated, and better human beings" (Bruner, 1996, p. 118). This, in turn, would help learners construct a reality for a better world.

Communities of Practice: A New Theory

Originally, the works of Dewey and Bruner informed my knowledge of learning communities. Dewey and Dewey (1915) believed "the school becomes itself a form of social life, a miniature community and one in close interaction with other modes of associated experience beyond school ways" (p. 194). Bruner's (1986) later works focused on the value of creating "communities of learning" in which a "sharing of the culture" took place (p. 127). Further into my study and during the analysis phase of my research, I was introduced to another theory that further enhanced my knowledge of learning communities.

An examination of the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and their theory of communities of practice provided an additional framework in which to view my findings. These theorists believed "learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind" and is "mediated by the differences of perspective among the coparticipants" (p. 15). As described by Lave and Wenger (1991) a "community of practice," is a place where "learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind" (p. 15). These theorists claimed "learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 50–51). This new theory connected well with the theories provided by Dewey and Bruner, and further enhanced the notion of how the MicroSociety program created a community. Because my study of Lave and Wagner's concept of communities of practice arose after I had collected my

data, it was not used to frame my work in the way that Dewey and Bruner were used. My placement of Lave and Wenger's work in my discussion of findings is done purposefully as a response to my data analysis.

Situating the MicroSociety Program

Dewey's philosophy influenced MicroSociety creator, George Richmond. Clinchy (1995) has stated Dewey and other progressive educators argued for a recontextualizing of education that was "reconnected to and based on firsthand experience in the real world and that takes place largely in that world" (Clinchy, 1995, p. 402). An approach such as this is exemplified through the MicroSociety experiment, which could "radically alter the traditional context of in-school learning" (Clinchy, 1995, p. 403) and replace it "with the creation in school of a simulation of the 'real' or non-school world" (p. 403). After all, a MicroSociety school is "first and foremost a school that attempts to break down that disconnection between schooling and life in the real world" (Clinchy, 1995, p. 403).

As a rookie teacher, Richmond (1973) struggled with disengaged learners in his Grade 5 classroom in Brooklyn, NY. He first created the concept of MicroSociety in 1967 by "creating a miniature society within the classroom" (Cherniss, 2006, p. xix). He created this program to make learning more real for students with a model that "attempts to connect children with the web of social, political, and economic experience that surrounds virtually everything we do" (Richmond, 1973, p. 120). By integrating concepts of economics and politics into his subjects, he created a program that modeled Dewey's ideas of providing "opportunity for establishing cross connections between the subject matter . . . and the wider and more direct experiences of everyday life" (Dewey, 1916, p. 123).

Following the success of his new initiative, Richmond (1973) eventually published his doctoral thesis, *The MicroSociety School: A Real World in Miniature*. In his thesis, Richmond (1973) drew upon the progressive works of Dewey and built a school model that "rejects the kind of schooling that is an imposition from above and from outside, in favor of a growing from within" (p. 262). He agreed with Dewey, who "criticized schools for relying on predigested experience: secondary experience instead of concentrating on putting children in touch with primary experience" (Richmond, 1973, p. 262). Richmond (1991) compared public schools with communist models of society, stating, "Both are fundamentally totalitarian. Both devote enormous amounts of energy and resources to control. Both subordinate the civil liberties and economic interests of the people they purportedly exist to serve" (Richmond, 1991, p. 1). Not surprisingly, Richmond (1973), like Dewey and Bruner, believed the mandate for schools in North America was "to prepare students to live and work in a democratic society" (p. 214).

Although he was a strong supporter of Dewey's philosophy of nurturing democracy through education, Richmond (1973) disagreed with the fact that Dewey chose a model of ideal democracy where students worked in occupations that were free of economic stress and social conflict. Richmond (1973) felt this weakened the democratic message because it "omitted some of the very experiences that are most educative" (p. 278) in solving real-world problems, such as having a business fail or a bill defeated due to lack of support. Richmond (1973) felt a new approach to education was needed that "requires a theory of experience that integrates the fundamental contexts, structures, and forces of actual existence . . . so that students learn to shape themselves and the world in which they dwell" (p. 265).

In referring to Richmond's beliefs, Cherniss (2006) stated if the "school's traditional structures for imposing control over the students did not work, perhaps giving the students some

freedom and responsibility could" (Cherniss, 2006, p. xix). In a 2005 interview Cherniss conducted with Richmond and Richmond's wife, Carolynn King, they stated the two basic assumptions of learning within a MicroSociety program were that "real, sustained learning takes place when students are intrinsically engaged and motivated" (as cited in Cherniss, 2006, p. 10), and that "children learn best by playing, working, doing and reflecting" (p. 10). Both ideas are echoed in the research of Dewey and Bruner.

Bruner also believed in the importance of student discovery, inquiry, and intrinsic motivation. With a focus on preparing children for the future, Richmond's MicroSociety philosophy aligns well with Bruner's thoughts that education was "to take advantage of past learning in attempting to deal with and master new problems" (Bruner, 2006, p. 24). Bruner's text *Toward a Theory of Instruction* elaborates on the idea that learning is a process: "knowing is a process, not a product" (Bruner, 1966, p. 72) that stimulates inquiry and skill. Likewise, *The MicroSociety Handbook* (Richmond & Richmond, 1996) stated that "the process is vastly more important than the product; indeed, the imperfections in the process lead students themselves to take charge and make it work effectively" (Richmond & Richmond, 1996, p. 3). As with Bruner's MACOS project, the MicroSociety curriculum is well developed with extensive resources for educators. The program has proven to be less controversial than MACOS, perhaps because it had very humble beginnings, was primarily driven by a grassroots movement and took several decades before becoming part of the U.S. educational landscape.

The task of creating culture to build society was another visible connection between the works of Richmond and Bruner. Richmond (1973) believed "schooling must come to mean society building and that, in turn, means that schools must encourage students to enter explicit social contracts with people and with institutions" (p. 171). This idea is consistent with Bruner's

own beliefs on how “culture shapes mind, that it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds, but are very conceptions of ourselves and our powers” (Bruner, 1996, p. x). Bruner (1996) felt the role of schools was to not simply reproduce culture but rather to focus on relevancy in “preparing students to cope with the changing world in which they will be living” (p. ix). Bruner (1996) was excited to explore schools that established “mutual learning cultures” that were “organized to model how the broader culture should work if it were operating at its best and liveliest and if it were concentrating on the task of education” (p. xv). Evidence of this might be found in the over 300 elementary and middle schools utilizing the MicroSociety program today and working with over 250,000 students (MicroSociety, n.d.).

The MicroSociety program intends to help students engage and learn through real-world experience. This includes learning about economic and political systems by earning money through the creation of business ventures, by creating a constitution through an elected student government, by enforcing laws, and as in the real world, by paying taxes. Teachers “assume the roles of facilitators and consultants” (Cherniss, 2006, p. 15) and look for “curriculum connections and instructional opportunities” (p. 16). By observing, encouraging, and guiding, the teachers try their best to step back and allow the learning and all of the mistakes that go with it, to unfold so that “the students, not the teachers, run the MicroSociety program” (Cherniss, 2006, p. 16), or as it is stated on the MicroSociety website, “Kids in Charge” (MicroSociety, n.d.).

The research of Dewey and Bruner, which provided my theoretical and conceptual framework, has been of tremendous value to my case study regarding how students experienced the MicroSociety program. As an experiential program, MicroSociety is grounded in Dewey’s idea of students learning about the world through experience and reflection. As my study explored how the MicroSociety experience has been engaging or disengaging for students,

learning through experience was a critical component, and a central aspect to my research questions. Dewey's philosophy of interdisciplinary learning, learning by doing, and learning together through play, drama, and work, support the simulated world of MicroSociety, as does empowering students with responsibilities such as student government.

My research on Bruner was, at first, not as visibly connected to the MicroSociety Program, as compared to Dewey. However, by examining his massive contribution to education, I began to see more significant connections in his ideas of constructivism, inquiry and problem-based learning, and later to mediated learning, and the creation of cultures of learning. These elements are also present in the philosophical principles of the MicroSociety program.

Lastly, and providing additional strength to my study were the theories of Lave and Wenger (1991) centered on the concept of communities of practice. Wenger (1998) informs us that "communities of practice are everywhere" (p. 6). Further to this is the notion of accessing the community to enhance learning opportunities, a common practice in MicroSociety schools. Through various roles and responsibilities, the MicroSociety program provides opportunities for students to contribute to a community of practice that engages and empowers them, and which also helps to build society.

In the next section, I provide a review of the literature available about the MicroSociety program. In addition to this I also explore the research on student engagement, the problem of student disengagement, and the gaps in the research which I later address in the findings section.

Chapter 3: Review of the Literature

In this chapter, I explore the literature that helps to situate my study by examining research connected to learner engagement. I first provide an explanation as to how I am defining concept of the engaged learner. I then explore factors that can contribute to student disengagement and examine some trends relating to this problem. Lastly, I analyze the research on MicroSociety as an experiential learning program, and the approaches used within this program that provide ways of engaging and involving learners. I examine and discuss the existing research and literature in the context of three themes: (a) The Engaged Learner, (b) The Disengaged Learner, and (c) The MicroSociety School: A Real World Experience. Lastly, I share what I believe are gaps currently present in existing research, which have guided my inquiry.

The Engaged Learner

The question of how students experience learning in schools has been explored through multiple perspectives for many years. In this section, I explore the current research available on how to improve student engagement in our schools, many that can be linked directly to the philosophies of Dewey and Bruner. First, I provide a variety of interpretations of what it means to be an engaged learner.

Understanding Student Engagement

The concept of student engagement is not a simple construct, for a variety of other words are commonly found when trying to define its meaning: motivation, attention, interest, participation, enjoyment, and involvement. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) coined the term “flow” to describe activities that “have as their primary function the provision of enjoyable experiences” (p. 72). When one is in the flow zone, a student’s skill level is matched with the level of challenge in the activity so that a student experiences positive emotions, rather

than anxiety or boredom, and becomes fully invested in the activity. This flow zone is a "deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically interesting" (Willms et al., 2009, p. 12) and is so engaging that one loses track of time. Optimal experience or flow occurs when there is a balance of skill and challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 31). The intrinsic motivation that results from flow is "affected by individuals' personal interests as well as their sense of choice and control" (Harris & Cullen, 2010, p. 46).

Prochazka (1995), an experienced consultant in experiential learning activities, wrote about *internalizing learning*, where "the learner takes the information inside themselves to a deep, personal, feeling level, a level deeper than that of cognitive recall" (p. 145). This internalized learning leads students to create something with the new information they have acquired, "a responsibility to take the information and integrate it into their life, and act upon it" (Prochazka, 1995, p. 145).

Others have examined engagement with a focus on what the learner is doing. Schlechty (2002) used the term *authentic engagement* to describe a "task, activity, or work the student is assigned or encouraged to undertake . . . that has clear meaning and relatively immediate value to the student" (p. 1). VanDeWeghe (2009) stated, "engagement is the key to a lifelong love of learning" (p. 2), which should be the ultimate goal of all educators. A recent student poll (Gallup, 2017) used to capture the voice of U.S. students in helping to measure school success, simply defined engagement as "the involvement in and enthusiasm for school" (p. 1). Quaglia and Corso (2014) stated the difference between engagement and entertainment: "An entertaining teacher is the center of attention, whereas a teacher who engages students provides tools and resources in order for them to be the attentive center of their learning" (p. 85). Student-centered learning and

student engagement can be viewed as strongly connected, as to be academically competent, "students need to engage with the curriculum" (p. 39). In Quaglia and Corso's (2014) words:

> Engagement happens when students are deeply involved in the learning process as characterized by enthusiasm, a desire to learn new things, and a willingness to take positive, healthy steps toward the future. Students are meaningfully engaged when they are emotionally, intellectually and behaviorally invested in learning. (p. 24)

Hume (2011) claimed, more specifically, that engagement is "concerned with an investment in learning" (p. 6). Similarly, VanDeWeghe (2009) described this type of learning that leads to deep meaning as motivated by "personal drives for genuine understanding . . . and intrinsic motivation" (p. 43). Deep learning, as opposed to surface learning, "relates previous knowledge to new knowledge from other courses, to knowledge of the real world, and organizes the knowledge into larger coherent structures" (Harris & Cullen, 2010, p. 52).

A common word used in the descriptions of engagement is deep or deepen. While surface learning is characterized by words such as "memorizing . . . facts . . . unreflective . . . external imposition" (Weimer, 2013, p. 31), deep learning allows students to transfer or relate new learning to what they already know and have experienced leading to a deeper and richer experience: one that makes a "qualitative change in a person's way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualizing something in the real world" (Ramsden & Marton, 1988, p. 271). Kelm and Connell (2004) wrote, "Regardless of the definition, research links higher levels of engagement in school with improved performance" (p. 262). For my research purposes, I used a definition of engagement that is a composite of the descriptions provided in this section, in which students are actively involved in creating meaning through experiences that are intrinsically motivating, enjoyable, and which, most importantly, lead to further learning.

Measuring Student Engagement

Researchers of the *What Did You Do in School Today* study explored the issue of student engagement and discovered new insights on this topic (Dunleavy et al., 2010). This 3 year study was a national initiative sponsored by the Ed Can Network (formerly the Canadian Education Association) that grew out of an "emerging awareness of the complex challenges facing adolescent learners, and a commitment to work with school districts to explore change strategies that respond to how their own students are experiencing school" (Willms et al., 2009, p. 6).

Launched in 2007, the initiative was designed to "capture, assess and inspire new ideas for enhancing the learning experiences of adolescents in classrooms and schools" (Willms et al., 2009, p. 6). The study was anchored in the belief that, "in order to raise the achievement levels of all students and to narrow the gaps between students, we have to guarantee that all young people are engaged in their learning and that *all* receive effective and intellectually challenging instruction" (Willms et al., 2009, p.1). The researchers used an expanded framework for thinking about student engagement that went beyond indicators such as attendance and dropout rates. Using online surveys provided to school districts, students at participating schools filled out the surveys at least once a school year. According to the researchers, this survey measured "aspects of social, academic and intellectual engagement, as well as student wellness and . . . classroom and school climate" (Willms et al., 2009, p. 9). Measures used allowed the researchers to explore what students did in schools, how the students felt about their learning experiences, and whether they contributed to their learning.

This multiyear study involved the surveying of over 60,000 young adolescents in 10 school districts throughout Canada. It was designed to explore the relationships among student engagement, achievement, and effective teaching. This exploration included an analysis of the

three dimensions of student engagement: social engagement as shown by a sense of belonging and participation in sports and clubs; academic engagement as measured by school attendance; and intellectual engagement, which the authors defined as “a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher-order thinking skills to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge” (Willms et al., 2009, p. 7). The researchers explored patterns in student engagement and found that students in public schools reach a peak of intellectual engagement in elementary school (Willms et al., 2009, p. 18). They found that students’ sense of belonging in school remained consistently high throughout the middle and secondary school years (Willms et al., 2009, p. 18), but intellectual engagement, participation in sports and clubs, and attendance steadily declined as grade levels increased.

Other researchers have explored the matter of motivation as a component to student engagement. In his research on student motivation, Pintrich (2003) stated, “students who believe they have more personal control of their own learning and behavior are more likely to do well and achieve at higher levels that students who do not feel in control” (p. 673). By examining various studies, he concluded that providing students with a perceived sense of control would lead to more student engagement in school and would lead to intrinsic motivation in which students would learn “for its own sake, enjoyment and interest” (Pintrich, 2003, p. 673).

Researchers for Civic Enterprises, an American bipartisan company focusing on innovative initiatives to support domestic and international policy, worked with students who had dropped out of school. They found connections to student engagement and relevancy. Through surveys and focus groups the 500 students involved in the study were asked how to improve teaching and curricula to make school more interesting. They found that “four out of five (81%) said there should be more opportunities for real-world learning . . . and experiential

learning" (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. iv). Likewise, they found that "81% of survey respondents said that if schools provided opportunities for real-world learning (internships, service-learning projects, and other opportunities), it would have improved the students' chances of graduating from high school" (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 12). The researchers concluded that to improve teaching and curriculum, schools needed to make learning more relevant and engaging for students, and to enhance connections between school and work.

In Alberta, information about student engagement has been examined closely in the past. Ministry of Education researchers from 2008 until 2015 used an Alberta Education initiative called Speak Out that enables Alberta's youth, 14 to 19 years of age, to share their ideas and experiences about education. Through tools such as online discussion forums, surveys, blogs, forums, and conferences, these high school students were able to help the Ministry better understand today's learners. In its 2012 annual report, information collected indicated that "students learn at their best through their peers, when teachers are facilitating interactive lessons [and when they] take ownership of their education" (Alberta Education, 2012, pp. 8–9). In the 35 Speak Out focus group sessions held throughout the 2013–2014 school year, 40% of students reported that "effective, engaging teaching methods" (Alberta Education, 2014, p. 10) would help improve education. This information is highly valuable when considering how best to design learning experiences to engage today's learners.

Improving Student Engagement in Today's Schools

In their review of various studies on student engagement, Parsons and Taylor (2011) concluded that to create student engagement, our schools needed "engaging pedagogy and engaging curriculum" (Parsons & Taylor, 2011, p.18). They suggest that if we wish to engage learners "we need to change how we teach as well as what we teach" (Parsons & Taylor, 2011, p.

18). To do this, they recommend a move “from didactive to constructivist pedagogy” (Parsons & Taylor, 2011, p. 18) that also includes the use of interdisciplinary curriculum with “cross subject exploration and collaboration” (p. 20) and a focus on skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration (Parsons & Taylor, 2011, p. 26).

Conrad and Hedin (1981) explored experiential education programs that offered unique perspectives on how to educate and engage our young people. In their national assessment of experiential education programs using both qualitative and quantitative research, they found that “ninety-five percent of the participants in experiential programs rate their own program as either excellent (49%) or good (46%)” (Conrad & Hedin, 1981, p. 382). The authors concluded by stating that the “clearest and most significant conclusion of this study is that experiential programs are a powerful educational vehicle for promoting personal and intellectual development and can do so more effectively than classroom instruction” (Conrad & Hedin, 1981, p. 382).

Headden and McKay (2015) studied the research available on psychological and behavioral sides of student motivation including how students responded to incentives to learn, how they saw themselves as learners, and how they viewed their role in the schools they attended. They concluded that there were many factors contributing to motivation and engagement in schools. They learned that what was important was a student’s belief that they were able to do the work and have control over it, and that they had an understanding of importance of their work as well as how their work contributed to others (Headden & McKay, 2015, p. 4). Critical to student motivation were the instructional design decisions made by the teacher as to “how academic content is taught and how students interact with and practice that content” (Headden & McKay, 2015, p. 4). Equally important was the understanding that

motivation is “affected by life experiences both in and out of school” (Headden & McKay, 2015, p. 4). The authors recommended that a “thoughtful, integrated curricula” (Headden & McKay, 2015, p. 24.) with simple interventions would improve student motivation. The responsibility for this, they concluded, “lies properly with adults” (p. 24.).

Providing students with choice also appears to lead to motivation and engagement. Following their analysis of over 6,800 assignments given to middle school students in U.S. schools, Dabrowski and Marshall (2018) found 10% of assignments in the core subject areas offered students authentic choices in content, process, or product. They also found that relevancy in assignments, which they described as being “useful for their [students’] lives — present or future” (p. 5) was rare. They recommended that young adolescents be provided with choice for “when students make decisions about their work, they are empowered to own it” (p. 1). They also suggested that learning tasks “be relevant, using real-world experiences and examples for students to make connections with their goals, interests, and values” (p. 1). These findings have clear implications for teachers, for although they often do not usually determine the curriculum, they have control over the instructional design decisions in planning and delivering learning experiences, including the assignments that students are to complete.

Dunleavy and Milton (2009) explored the concept of student engagement and its implications for teaching and learning in Canada. Their study based on data collected from over 30,000 Grade 5 to 12 students throughout Canada included the use of qualitative surveys with a multitude of questions. When students were asked to imagine a school that fully engaged them in learning, they described a place where students would “solve real problems . . . engage with knowledge that matters . . . see how subjects are interconnected . . . learn from and with each other and people in their community . . . and connect with experts and expertise” (Dunleavy &

Milton, 2009, p. 10). These researchers stated that designing learning experiences that focused on engagement required particular instructional choices made by the teacher. This included an emphasis on "opportunities for students to work with authentic ideas and problems" (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009, p. 13). This kind of learning requires "high levels of student participation" with "time for in-depth work," and work which is "relevant, interesting, and connects with students' aspirations" (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009, p. 14). They also recommended that teachers design learning experiences that "promote students' sense of ownership and responsibility for their own learning" including inviting "students to be co-designers of their learning in classrooms that support student voice and autonomy" (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009, p. 14). Through their work with young adolescents sharing their views about schooling and their experiences of learning, the Canadian Education Association (CEA) concluded:

> Students want to experience work that is meaningful, not easy: they want to work with ideas that matter, solve real problems, learn from each other, people in their communities, and experts in the subjects they are studying, engage in dialogue in their classes, and know that their learning contributes to making a difference in the world. (Dunleavy et al., 2010, p. 1).

Many of the recommendations on how to improve student engagement, echo suggestions that Dewey and Bruner provided educators following decades of their own research. Dewey's work in laboratory schools throughout the United States modelled progressive teaching practices that provided students with more opportunities to be involved, to collaborate, and to learn actively through play, work opportunities and projects within the community (Dewey, 1915). Bruner's work in designing his own MACOS curriculum using his concept of the spiral curriculum demonstrated not only what to teach using an interdisciplinary manner, but more importantly,

how to teach (Bruner, 2006). Through inquiry, reflection, and problem solving, students were actively involved in their learning. In contemporary times, researchers Quaglia and Corso (2014) remind that if students are to "achieve their aspirations and not just dream about them, they must be actively engaged in the learning process" (Quaglia & Corso, 2014, p. 79). However, the problem of student disengagement continues to exist not only in Canadian schools, but is also a topic of international concern.

The Disengaged Learner

Student disengagement, as based on a student's lack of interest and enthusiasm about schooling has existed in schools throughout the decades. Both Dewey and Bruner spoke of this problem many years earlier, and more recent research studies (Quaglia & Corso, 2014; Willms et al., 2009; Yazzie-Mintz, 2009) also indicate that disengagement is still prevalent in our schools in the middle years and high school level of instruction. There are a variety of factors that impact unsuccessful and disengaged learners in our schools. Some issues such as a student's involvement with drugs, a need to earn a living/work, racism, intergenerational trauma, and medical or health issues, may be out of the realm of control for most educators (Alberta Education, 2001, 2015; Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2005; Rumberger, 1995; Wolk, 2011). However, there are aspects of schooling within the control of educators and these warrant further investigation.

There is ample research supporting that what happens in classrooms can impact student engagement or student disengagement (Hume, 2011; Jukes et al., 2010; Marzano & Pickering, 2011; Quaglia & Corso, 2014; Schlechty, 2002; VanDeWeghe, 2009). In this section, I examine the literature providing a variety of different factors for the problem of student disengagement.

Student Disengagement and the Curriculum

The curriculum and how that content is taught is one key factor contributing to student disengagement. Dewey (1915) was critical of how students experienced curriculum with its "isolation of studies" and recommended that schools be an "organic whole" where learning was connected so that "what the child learns in the school is carried back and applied in everyday life" (p. 55). Bruner (1971) often wondered "why traditional education . . . so often emphasized extensiveness and coverage over intensiveness and depth" (p. 65).

Like Bruner and Dewey, Wolk (2011) also argued that the curriculum in U.S. schools needed reform. He stated that "much of the emphasis of the current reform movement is on better teaching, better instruction. But we know that no matter what we teach, students will not learn what they don't want to learn" (p. 104). His recommendations were anchored in principles of personalized learning where "students play a significant role in designing their own curriculum, which usually emphasizes real-world learning" (p. 101). Wolk (2011) believed the "traditional core curriculum with typical academic courses and rigid schedules" was the "antithesis of personalization" (p. 101), and needed to change to better suit today's learners. This was a concern in Alberta over a decade ago with the release of the Inspiring Education position paper (Alberta Education, 2010), indicating schools needed to work better at personalizing and adapting school for students.

Researchers Quaglia and Corso (2014), writing from an American perspective, also suggest curriculum with standardized assessment is too prescriptive and impersonal and limits students' opportunities to construct personal meaning and focus on interests that might create more relevancy. The researchers argue that students are not "achieving because school is not connecting to their interests, imaginations or impulse to take a chance" (Quaglia & Corso, 2014,

p. 87). They indicated that disconnection with the curriculum is a major contributor to student disengagement as students find it difficult to connect learning from one subject to another. They recommend schools adopt a curriculum more attuned to the needs of the 21st-century learner that focuses on competencies such as collaboration, creativity, and communication. They were critical, however, that educators "in the rush to raise proficiency, performance and implement 21st-century goals" tended to "neglect the perspective of those who belong squarely in this century . . . the students" (Quaglia & Corso, 2014, p. 162). They suggested curriculum be redesigned to include not only "classes in creativity, collaboration, communication, global awareness, and technology" but opportunities for students "to be creative, work together, make meaningful decisions, respect one another, and use the technology that is such an embedded part of their world" (Quaglia & Corso, 2014, p. 167).

A standardized approach to curriculum in which high-stakes tests are used to measure learning is prominent in many schools in the United States and has been found to contribute to student disengagement. Au (2007) concluded these "tests have the predominant effect of narrowing curricular content to those subjects included in the tests . . . and compelling teachers to use more lecture-based, teacher-centered pedagogies" (p. 246) that are not typically as engaging as learner-centered approaches advocated by Dewey and Bruner, such as cooperative learning, role-playing, and inquiry-based learning. In a qualitative meta-synthesis study on the impact of high-stakes testing on curriculum, Wolk (2010) stated standardization is to blame, as it holds students to similar content standards, moves them through common curricula with little say in their own education, and forces them to take standardized tests that are not closing the achievement gap. Quaglia and Corso (2014) also stated how there is a connection between standardization, high-stakes testing, and student disengagement: "The sheer number of tests" (p.

45) that are part of a student's school experience have an "inevitable impact on student engagement" (p. 45). In Canada, many educators have also expressed concerns on how this standardized approach to curriculum, instruction and assessment could impact learning in Canadian schools. Reforms in Alberta brought on by the Inspiring Education position paper (2010) also recognized the need for change, and this was reflected in adjustments to the provincial testing program made over a decade ago.

Student Disengagement and the School Experience

A range of studies on how students experience learning in schools has also indicated problems (Quaglia & Corso, 2014; Willms et al., 2009; Yazzie-Mintz, 2009), showing that the majority of middle years and high school students do not feel engaged with the learning that occurs in their schools. In the United States, The Gallup Student Poll administered to students in Grades 5–12 uses a qualitative survey to measure the hope, engagement, and well-being of students. Results in 2013 indicated 55% are engaged (Gallup, 2013) and the most current Gallup student poll indicated that 74% of students in Grade 5 are engaged, but these engagement levels slowly decline and reach a low of 32% in Grade 11 (Gallup, 2017).

The High School Survey on Student Engagement (HSSSE) was administered by Indiana University's Center for Evaluation and Education Policy to 134,000 high school students in the United States in 2007–2008. The survey, designed to capture the ways that students may or may not be engaged in the life and work of a school, found that two out of three respondents reported being bored at least every day in their high school classes, and approximately one out of every six students reported being bored in every class (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009, pp. 5–8). When questioned further, the reasons why the students considered school boring included "the material wasn't interesting," "the lack of relevance of the material," "work wasn't challenging enough," and the "work was too difficult" (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009, pp. 5–8).

Subsequent research on student engagement by Indiana University was carried out with the National Association of Independent Schools Association (NAIS). From 2013 to 2015, more than 90 independent schools participated in HSSSE to gather data about the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of students about their schoolwork, the school learning environment, and their interaction with the school community. Although the results in the independent schools were slightly higher than their public counterparts, the findings were similar. Of the 12,000 Grade 9–12 students who were surveyed, 82% of NAIS students answered that they are sometimes (49%) or often (33%) bored in class (NAIS, 2014, p. 23). The main reason for students feeling bored was that the "material wasn't interesting" (p. 23). In a similar report in 2017, administered to approximately 3,000 middle-years students in Grades 5–8, 72% of 2017 respondents answered that they were bored sometimes (45%) or often (27%). The major reasons for student boredom were that the material and the teaching methods were not interesting (NAIS, 2017, p. 20).

Internationally, there is also research available to indicate that student disengagement is an issue in other countries. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) uses questionnaires to measure and report on performance and information about the learning environment and students' attitudes towards school. Based on data collected from 15-year-old adolescents throughout the world, PISA indicates that "roughly 25% of students in all participating OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries are unhappy with their school experience" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 14). In subsequent years, PISA specifically examined areas such as student engagement, drive, and self-beliefs (OECD, 2013). In its 2012 study, data were collected through questionnaires from over 500,000 15-year-olds in 65 participating countries. Engagement with and at school was measured

using indicators such as punctuality, absenteeism, sense of belonging, and attitudes toward school, while drive and motivation were measured by qualities such as perseverance, openness to problem-solving, locus of control, and intrinsic motivation. As reported, 88% of students felt school was useful; however, 71% felt schools prepared them for adult life. Overall, Canada was a bit above average in the 2012 study (OECD, 2013) in areas such as the percentage of students who reported being happy at school. Still, the country also had a higher than average number of students who reported skipping classes compared to other countries (OECD, 2013), but by 2015 this number had dropped (OCED, 2015), and more recently, Canada is now on par with the average OECD rate (OECD, 2019).

The 2016 study by the World Health Organization (WHO), *Health Behavior in School-Aged Children,* from 2013–2014 also provided valuable international information. Over 200,000 11-, 13-, and 15-year-old students in 42 countries were surveyed on a variety of topics relevant to the health and well-being of young people, including relations with peers and school. The researchers found that when it comes to students liking school, “the highest proportion was found among 11-year-olds, with a decrease by increasing age” (WHO, 2016, p. 52). The international average in this specific age category was 41%, with countries like Canada being below average with 37% (WHO, 2016). As students aged, this number decreased to an average of 23% by age 15, with Canada again below average at 20% (WHO, 2016).

In Canada, similar data is also available. Survey results reported in *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being* (Boyce, 2004), which analyzed surveys completed by 11-, 13-, and 15-year-olds, saw that the percentage of students liking school decreased from Grade 6 to Grade 10 (p. 10). These same students found that as they advanced through school, their classrooms became more of a “teacher-centered place, with fewer opportunities for students to

have input into how class time was used" (Boyce, 2004, p. 43). The researchers concluded that school satisfaction was related to "good teacher, peer and parent relationships, lower pressure to achieve at school, higher self-esteem and increased student autonomy at school" (Boyce, 2004, p. 49). As a study that is over 15 years old, a similar survey today may yield different results.

In Alberta, student engagement was a primary focus for educators and education ministerial officials over the last several years. Alberta Education results, as shown through annual accountability measures in the form of student, parent, and teacher surveys, have consistently stated that target goals for student engagement have not been met, including its most current 2019 report (Alberta Education, 2019a). In the 2019 Annual Education Results Report (AERR), the lowest reported area by students in Grades 7–9 was that 70% found their schoolwork interesting (Alberta Education, 2019b). There was also low student agreement regarding "the extent of student involvement in decisions made at their school," which has been consistent for the last 5 years (Alberta Education, 2019b). As reported in the 2017 Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey, another low area was that for the past 5 years, 73%–79% of students felt the subjects they learned at school had practical applications in the real world (Alberta Education, 2017).

Additional data indicate that Alberta stakeholders have other concerns regarding what is taught in schools, which could provide insights into the problem of student disengagement and a lack of student interest in their schooling experience. As indicated in the accountability pillar results, the performance measure target called "preparation for student success through lifelong learning, world of work, and citizenship" (Alberta Education, 2019a, p. 194) was not met, with 49% of parents satisfied that high schools were able to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for learning throughout their lifetime.

Student Disengagement and Agency

Others have explored the issue of student disengagement by considering the role that the student has in schools, how involved they are with school decisions, and to what extent their voice is heard. In their book *Student Voice: The Instrument of Change,* Quaglia and Corso (2014), who have done extensive research on this topic in U.S. schools, defined student voice “as occurring when students are meaningfully engaged in decision making and improvement-related processes in their schools” (p. 170). In a U.S. national survey of over 50,000 Grade 6–12 students, 46% felt they had a voice in decision-making at their school (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). The fundamental question these researchers used was, ‘What do students think about school?’ Based on their research, Quaglia and Corso (2014) argued: “when students are given a voice, boredom decreases and engagement increased” (p. 90). Their findings conclude that “students who believe they have a voice in school are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not believe they have a voice in school” (Quaglia & Corso, 2014, p. 90). These findings are similar to those of a U.S. survey in 2007 of more than 1,800 middle years students that reported that 90% of students felt that “being given choice in their classroom was important to them” (Kinney, 2007, p. 36), but 40% responded that “their school never or rarely included their ideas in decisions that affected them in the classroom” (p. 36).

The Education Trust, an American research organization that focused on student engagement and motivation, examined the roles that choice and relevancy have on young adolescents. The researchers analyzed over 6,800 classroom assignments designed by almost 100 teachers in Grades 6 to 8 English language arts, science, and social studies classes. The researchers viewed assignments as a “powerful lens for viewing the day-to-day experiences of students” (Dabrowski & Marshall, 2018, p. 1). In a 2015 study, the researchers found that

"attempts to motivate and engage students were simplistic" and that assignments "lacked rigor and complexity" (Santelises & Dabrowski, p. 4). They also found "opportunities for students to engage in relevant academic discussions rarely appeared" (Santelises & Dabrowski, 2015, p. 4). Through their analysis, they found 9% of students were given choices in their assignments, and 11% of the assignments provided a sense of relevance for students (Santelises & Dabrowski, 2015, p. 6).

Trends in Student Disengagement

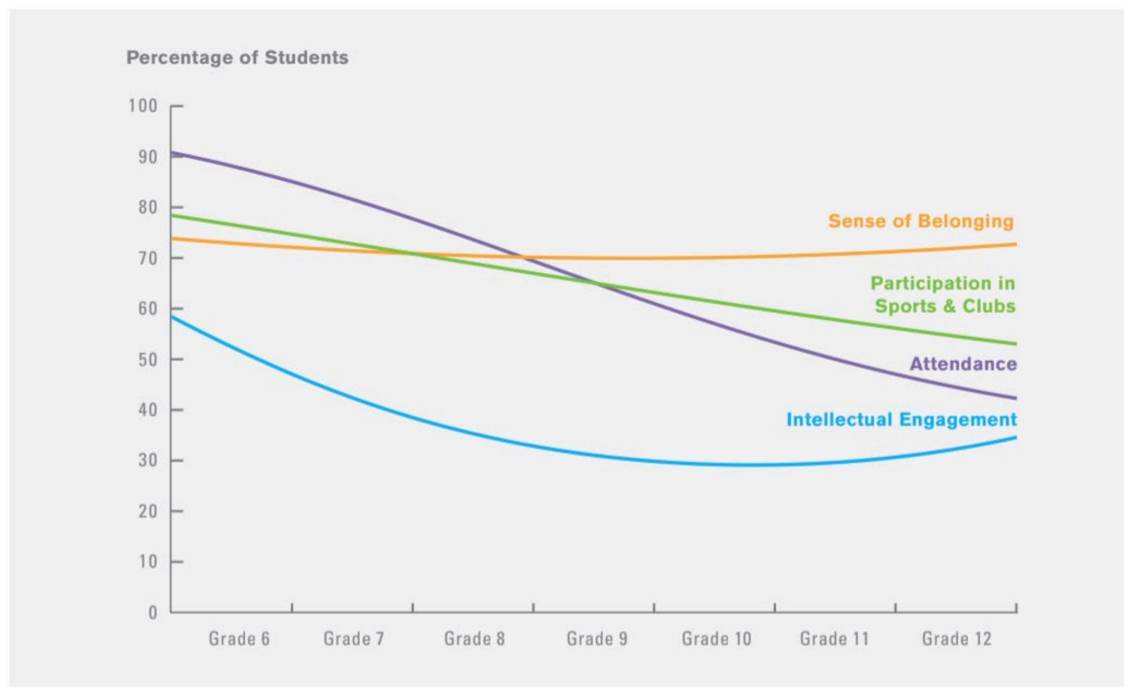
Based on the studies and surveys that I have described, there appear to be several key factors that lead to student disengagement centered on how the students experience the curriculum, to what extent they are provided with choice and a sense of how they feel heard in their schools. In addition to these specific areas, there are age-related trends to consider around student disengagement. Rumberger (1995) found students who achieved low grades in the early years of school often performed poorly in later years. However, this could be related to other influences, such as learning disabilities and poverty. Wolk (2011) stated that many students become disengaged in their middle years of schooling, most likely "rooted in the failure of students to learn to read" (p. 77), which inhibits students from learning the more complex concepts that are typical of middle years curriculum. Hume (2011) stated, "disengagement is a particular issue for young adolescents, especially those in Grades 7 through 10" (p. 8). Those claims are backed up by several other sources (Gallup, 2017; Willms et al., 2009; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Researchers Headden and McKay (2015), who also explored the matter of motivation as a component of student engagement, concluded that "the more years students spend in school, the more disengaged they become" (p. 3).

Student disengagement has also been explored internationally with young adolescents. Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children, a collaborative cross-national study by the WHO (2016), provided information about the health, well-being, social environment, and behavior of young adolescents ages 11 to 15. Based on findings from the 2013–2014 survey, their latest international report collected data from almost 220,000 young people in 42 countries in Europe and North America, including Canada. Findings from this report indicate a significant decrease in students liking school as they get older (WHO, 2016).

The researchers of the multiyear Canadian study *What Did You Do in School Today,* noticed that patterns in student intellectual disengagement began in Grade 4 and continued in a downward trend until rebounding again in Grade 12 after a large portion of the disengaged students had left school (Willms et al., 2009). They also discovered that as students advanced through school, they began to describe their classrooms more negatively, using words such as “boring, hectic, stressful, and disconnected from the real world” (Willms et al., 2009, p. 9). Upon sharing and examining the study data, “educators were particularly struck by the low levels of intellectual engagement experienced by middle and secondary school students” (Dunleavy et al., 2012, p. 3). Comparison data from 2007, the first year of the study, to 2010, indicated there were improvements from 37% to 41% with “students’ experiences of intellectual engagement” (p. 5), and these gains “were larger in middle schools that in secondary schools” (p. 5). Willms et al. (2009) concluded large percentages of students are not engaged in Canadian schools, whether that be social engagement (sense of belonging/sports and clubs), academic engagement (attendance), or intellectual engagement (see Figure 1). This research also concluded that the more students remain in schools, the more disengaged they become.

Figure 1

Percentages of Students, Based on Grade Level, Engaged in School



Note. From "What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement," by J. D. Willms, S. Friesen, and P. Milton, 2009, p. 18. (https://www.edcan.ca/articles/what-did-you-do-in-school-today-transforming-classrooms-through-social-academic-and-intellectual-engagement/) Copyright 2019 by 'EdCan Network/Canadian Education Association. Reprinted with permission.

Many factors impact a student's decision not to complete high school: disability or illness, family poverty, or a need to find employment. If failure to complete high school is an indication of potential student disengagement, there is evidence in this area as well that should be considered. A longitudinal study done in U.S. schools by Barrington and Hendricks (1989) compared 651 high school graduating students with student dropouts. In investigating additional studies, the researchers were able to provide a picture of the typical dropout and nongraduate:

> Compared with those who will graduate, the future dropout shows a clear indication of academic problems by the third grade. . . . The poor attendance and underachievement increases as the student goes into middle school, and by seventh grade failing grades are present. By ninth grade a pattern of high absences, failing grades, and a low overall GPA is well established, and it continues until the student drops out of high school. (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989, p. 316)

The researchers concluded that discipline problems, lack of success, and high levels of absenteeism are three of the most important early indicators of student disengagement that may lead to students dropping out of school.

In Canada, Audas and Willms (2001) also examined the research on those students who did not finish high school. The researchers concluded that “one of the dominant findings of this literature is that children who have poor academic achievement and behavior problems are more likely to leave school before graduating” (Audas & Willms, 2001, p. 44). Their meta-analysis study also suggested that “engagement in schooling, which is characterized by the extent to which students participate in academic and non-academic activities, and identify with and value the goals of schooling, is an important precursor to dropping out” (Audas & Willms, 2001, p. 44). In the study, *Engaging Middle Years Students in Learning*, Manitoba Education (2010) concluded that “the sharp decline in school connectedness for many adolescent students indicates that the time to prevent high school leaving is at the Middle Years” (p. 7).

In Alberta, as in the rest of North America, data indicate that approximately 20%–25% of students do not finish school. In 2012–2013, Alberta Education (2013) reported that 74.9% of male and 81.7% of female learners completed school. Evidence would suggest that these rates are improving with Alberta’s 3-year high school completion rate increasing to 79.1% in 2017–

2018 and its 5-year completion rate increasing to 84.8% (Alberta Education, 2019a). Particularly significant are the increases since 2010 for Alberta students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (10%), Indigenous students (8%), and English-language learners (4%); Huncar, 2016, para. 5–6).

Although high school completion rates have improved over the past 5 years, it still indicates a problem that could be centered on student disengagement. Through its high school completion framework, Alberta Education (2015) examined this major issue by developing five core strategies, including one targeting student engagement. This framework "addresses the challenges students face in finishing high school and helps ensure all students are given the opportunity to succeed" (Alberta Education, 2015, para. 3). With increases in high school completion rates over the last 5 years, it appears the framework is beginning to make a difference (Alberta Education, 2019a).

Student lack of interest in school has been a centuries-old problem. Dewey (1915) stated, "The commonest reasons advanced by pupils for leaving school is that they did not like it, and were anxious to get some real work to do" (p. 311). The reality in Dewey's time period also required many students to enter the workforce early to support their families. Today the problem of disengagement at school remains an issue. As an experiential program which "gives children greater command of the school world" (Richmond, 1973, p. 199), the MicroSociety program also warrants a deeper examination in its potential to offer such alternative approaches.

The MicroSociety Program

Dr. George Richmond was the founder of the MicroSociety program. As a first-year teacher in a Brooklyn public school in 1967, he invented the model for what eventually became the MicroSociety program. After obtaining his doctorate from Harvard University and publishing

his thesis, *The MicroSociety School: A Real World in Miniature* in 1973, Richmond launched the first school-wide MicroSociety program in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1981, which led to improvements in student attendance and academic success. Following the success of this school, he and his wife and business partner, Carolynn King Richmond created MicroSociety Inc., a not-for-profit organization that provides resources and professional development for educators using the MicroSociety program in their schools. George Richmond died in 2004, and his wife continues to oversee efforts to improve and expand the MicroSociety program initiatives throughout the world. In this section, I explore the research available that focuses on the MicroSociety program. I first provide a bit of background information about the program. To provide additional context to this study, I provide more in-depth background information regarding how the program operates at my chosen research site in Chapter 5.

The MicroSociety School: A Real World in Miniature

Richmond conceived of the idea for MicroSociety over 50 years ago. It was many decades after the initial production of his book *The MicroSociety School: A Real World in Miniature* in 1973 before the program would gain recognition as a popular experiential program focusing on real-world learning. Due largely to grass-roots efforts by parents, teachers, and students, MicroSociety has been implemented in more than 300 elementary and middle schools throughout the United States, with new schools recently opened in Bermuda, Canada, Indonesia, and South Korea.

The MicroSociety International Organization provides an extensive list of resources to help schools transition into a MicroSociety school. *The MicroSociety Handbook* (Richmond & Richmond, 1996) is a colossal document of over 500 pages that describes the program's history, philosophy, and structure, providing tips on how to start the program and process. The handbook

describes the essential elements of the MicroSociety program, including program components such as providing jobs with marketable skills, creating a market and an internal currency, offering meaningful contact with adults, real-world evaluation measures, and integration of experiences and academics. All MicroSociety schools are guided by the 10 maxims Richmond created for the program, outlined in *The MicroSociety Handbook*. These include an acknowledgement there are many ways to build a miniature society, but central to the program is that it is student-run, with students taking responsibility for their education. The best teacher is one who plans instruction and provides students with opportunities to perform meaningful work and to learn from their mistakes (Richmond & Richmond, 1996, p. v).

Although each MicroSociety school is different, instructional programs are typically organized around six strands: economy, citizenship and government, humanities and arts, heart, technology, and academy. The economy strand "comprises the production, sale, and distribution of goods and services in the community" (Richmond & Richmond, 1996, p. 25) and includes such topics as accounting, employment services, and taxation. The citizenship and government strand "relates to the establishment of government and the creation of institutions, laws, traditions and customs that make governing possible" (Richmond & Richmond, 1996, p. 25) and includes the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government. The humanities and arts strand focuses on integrating culture and the arts into the miniature community with the primary goal "to ignite the child's imagination and creativity" (Richmond & Richmond, 1996, p. 26). While the heart strand "focuses on children developing a social consciousness and a sense of responsibility to the community" (Richmond & Richmond, 1996, p. 26) through community service projects, the technology strand identifies tools and processes that help to facilitate problem-solving. The academy strand, with its focus on learning, is an essential component of

any MicroSociety program. Courses on job training skills, hobbies, and interests are integrated alongside the core subjects and academic disciplines. An underlying theme throughout these six strands is the belief that “power is shared between the professional staff” and students who “are constantly challenged to accept increasing responsibility for the institutions of their miniature society” (Richmond & Richmond, 1996, p. 27). This concept of shared power and responsibility is critical to the success of MicroSociety schools.

The *MicroSociety Handbook* (Richmond & Richmond, 1996) described in detail the program's emphasis on skill development for young people. Within each strand and integrated throughout the program, 10 dominant skills are included. These skills include data collection and analysis, cooperative learning, numeracy (estimation, money, measurement, arithmetic, data collection), literacy (reading, writing, grammar, spelling, vocabulary), oral communication and listening, creative expression, critical thinking, problem-solving, organizational skills, and technology skills. Skills were described in detail throughout the handbook and are also critical features of all aspects of MicroSociety, and are linked to mandated state/provincial curriculum standards/learning outcomes. These skills are assessed and evaluated through both traditional and authentic measures, including journals, presentations, financial reports, and portfolios which document each student’s path to workplace readiness and contributions to citizen building.

In addition to *The MicroSociety Handbook,* the program has offered other resources for educators. *The MicroSociety Administrative Handbook* outlined the roles and responsibilities for school administration and staff, provided timelines of how to operate a typical MicroSociety year, described how to set up the school building for MicroSociety, and provided an implementation “dos and don’ts” list. Surveys, rubrics, and supply lists have been included. Venture guidebooks described in detail how different business ventures can be set up. Whether

operating a wellness center, a bank, or a warehouse, each venture guidebook provided a description of the different jobs available in each venture and an explanation of the responsibilities and skills associated with each job. Templates have been provided to help students create business proposals, ledgers, and payroll sheets, and tools to aid in assessment and evaluation of the various ventures are also provided. Teacher manuals were also available with lesson plans ranging from topics such as resume writing and how to get a business loan, how to vote, and how to pass a bill through the government. Teacher lessons contain objectives tied to the standards of the common core curriculum found in U.S. schools. All MicroSociety resources have been available through the organization's website (https://www.microsociety.org/).

Research on MicroSociety Schools

Although available research studies focused on MicroSociety programs are limited, there have been examples of studies of several schools that have used this approach. As the majority of MicroSociety schools can be found in the United States, the available research is primarily from American sources. As a result, many of the findings also refer to approaches typically used more in American schools (e.g., standardized achievement tests, civic education) than Canadian schools. Needless to say, the MicroSociety program in American schools focuses more on the American federal republic system and market-driven economy as compared to Canada's constitutional monarchy and mixed-economic system.

Earlier, I referred to the Lowell School, Richmond's first MicroSociety school. It is considered the model MicroSociety school that has provided a working model for other schools. Mesquite Elementary School (a pseudonym) was considered by Cherniss to have an effective program providing "an opportunity for children to create a miniature society in the school" (Cherniss & Fishman, 2003, p. 81). In this school, "instruction is adapted to 'real world'

experience, which is viewed as highly motivating for students to learn the relevant knowledge and skills required to make their community function" (p. 81). According to Cherniss (2006), Mesquite stands out for several reasons: quantitative data that suggest the program has had a positive impact academically; the program has endured and is still going strong 10 years later; the school has been able to sustain a high level of implementation for an extended period with the program running 5 days a week for almost the entire school year; and it has an unusually high level of teacher commitment to the program (Cherniss, 2006, p. 112). Cherniss felt the most important element of Mesquite's success was that "the school allows the students to run their own society" (p. 112).

Grote (2002) used a case study approach in her doctoral dissertation to gain an understanding of how a specific school (Sonoma School) implemented the concept of MicroSociety. Although she stated there was "strong evidence of an association between a school's participation in the MicroSociety program and improvement in aggregate median test performance" (Grote, 2002, p. 15), she felt the most important factor was "the strong instructional leadership of the principal who embedded best practices into the instructional program of the school prior to the introduction of the MicroSociety program" (p. 157). Grote's (2002) case study demonstrated that if the "learning environment is in place and if the curriculum and assessment systems of a school are aligned properly, the students will be successful" (p. 157). She concluded her study by recommending that if students "are to survive the real world," they will need "an education that is reconnected and takes place largely in that world" (Grote, 2002, p. 6).

Ibarra's (2001) study, *MicroSociety: Civic Education, Academic Achievement, and Higher Education Aspirations Through Experiential Learning*, focused on what former students

thought about MicroSociety. Her study was limited to one school in El Paso, TX, and involved 92 students who participated in the MicroSociety program. Through the analysis of data obtained on surveys, it was shown that “student attitudes about MicroSociety were very favorable” towards the program (Ibarra, 2001, p. 77). Using a student questionnaire to gather data, Ibarra (2001) stated that students’ general opinions were 89% very favorable, and 11% favorable, with 98% recommending the program to others. By analyzing students’ perceptions, Ibarra concluded the program had a positive “impact on civic values and participation” (Ibarra, 2001, p. 122), and stated the program was “effective in attaining positive academic achievements such as higher SAT scores and grades than those students who are not in the program” (Ibarra, 2001, p. 127). Despite this data, the study was limited in that it did not show to what degree students were involved in the program, what they liked or disliked about the program, or how they would describe their learning experiences within the program. Ibarra (2001) concluded that “the MicroSociety program . . . produces higher educational aspirations in students, as evidenced by the number of students attending college and the influence that the program had in relation to future career aspirations” (p. 127). If, as Dewey (1916) stated, “the only adequate training for occupations is training through occupations” (p. 228), then the MicroSociety experiment in El Paso, TX, was successful in meeting its outcomes.

Hurt’s (2019) study *The MicroSociety Model: An Assessment of Civic Engagement Outcomes Amongst Fourth and Fifth Grade Students,* also examined the area of civics engagement. Her qualitative research study investigated data collected through a survey administered to 115 Grade 4 and 5 students at two different MicroSociety schools. Her findings suggest these students “reported higher average levels of civic engagement when compared to a national sample” (Hurt, 2019, p. 4). This evidence suggested that “the MicroSociety program has

a positive effect on the civic engagement attitudes and behaviors of students who are involved with the program" (Hurt, 2019, p. 40). She concluded that MicroSociety is "a working model for teaching civics that may translate to increased civic engagement later in life" (Hurt, 2019, p. 4). Hurt recommends further studies be conducted with students to better learn how MicroSociety affects their civic engagement later in life.

Research on specific schools using the MicroSociety program that I could uncover indicates they have been successful. Many factors contribute to a school's success, however, including school leadership, school composition, community engagement, and teacher commitment. These broader studies provide additional perspectives about the MicroSociety story.

School Change and the MicroSociety Program

Several studies have documented positive changes that have occurred following the implementation of the MicroSociety program in schools (Arete Consulting, 2002; Cherniss, 2006; Kutzik, 2004). Cherniss (2006) spent considerable time researching the effectiveness of school change through the implementation of reform movements like MicroSociety. His research took him to over 12 different schools, including both elementary and middle schools. Cherniss spent 2 to 5 days in each school and collected data from a variety of sources, including individual and group interviews with teachers and principals, observations, and archived materials (e.g., newspaper articles, grant proposals, meeting notes). He also examined previous research available on the MicroSociety Program, which culminated in the publication of his book *School Change and the MicroSociety Program* (2006).

Data from Cherniss's (2006) study indicate that MicroSociety has been successful in a variety of ways. In one nationwide survey, principals of MicroSociety schools "reported

improved attendance and reduced disciplinary infractions after program implementation" (Cherniss, 2006, p. 19). Cherniss (2006) stated that the MicroSociety program "improves school attendance and student conduct in school" (p. 17). In referring to a survey from Arete Consulting (2002), Cherniss found that 9 out of 10 schools reported attendance increases (p. 9).

Much of the research regarding the implementation of the MicroSociety program has been based on academic performance. Cherniss stated that MicroSociety "can help students to master the academic skills measured by standardized achievement tests" (Cherniss, 2006, p. 17). Cherniss also relied on research studies carried out between 1996 and 2002 by an independent research organization (Arete Consulting). This organization reported that in MicroSociety schools, there was "an average improvement per year of 29% in reading and 42% in writing" (Cherniss, 2006, p. 18) and that "the average improvement in math was 35%, and in science, it was 158%" (p. 18).

Cherniss (2006) stated the MicroSociety experience had a positive impact on parents and teachers. For parents, "it provides a vehicle for positive parent involvement" and in more impoverished communities can even "help parents develop some of the same academic and practical skills that their children are learning" (Cherniss, 2006, p. 20). For teachers, MicroSociety appeared to be rejuvenating and made teachers "more enthusiastic and committed to teaching" (Cherniss, 2006, p. 20). This was especially true for teachers who were "dissatisfied with teaching in the traditional classroom" and were looking for "an alternative source of fulfillment and an antidote to burnout" (Cherniss, 2006, p. 20).

When the MicroSociety program was well structured for learners and implemented effectively, it could "have a positive impact on both academic and nonacademic courses" (Cherniss, 2006, p. 22). Cherniss's (2006) view was that "the MicroSociety program is a

valuable approach to making schools more interesting and productive places for both teachers and children" (p. xxi). However, Cherniss's study was limited in that he chose to study 12 schools, did not involve the students in his study, and focused most particularly on successful program implementation, and measured program success through indicators such as standardized tests and attendance reports.

Kutzik's (2004) study, called *Capitalizing on MicroSociety: How Students Profit from Real-World Learning,* examined the impact of MicroSociety program implementation over 3 years (1999–2002). In addition to identifying the program's strengths and weaknesses, Kutzik and associates were to provide recommendations to improve the practice of MicroSociety. The study involved qualitative and quantitative approaches with 14 schools across the United States. This included an analysis of standardized test results, an analysis of student absenteeism, observations in MicroSociety schools, a survey of 2,000 Grade 5 students, and focus groups with principals, coordinators, and teachers (Kutzik, 2004).

Kutzik (2004) concluded that there were many positive results in those schools using the MicroSociety program. He stated that there was a "sizeable and significant increase in student scores on reading and math tests" and "there was a sizeable decrease in absenteeism" in three out of the four schools studied (Kutzik, 2004, p. 3). Most interesting, however, were the data gathered regarding student satisfaction with the program. Kutzik (2004) reported, "students overwhelmingly report that they like the MicroSociety program" (p. 3). Survey data stated 88% of respondents to the student survey looked forward to MicroSociety and 79% thought "Micro is one of the best things we do in school" (Kutzik, 2004, pp. 3–4).

In exploring the reasons for the high levels of student satisfaction, Kutzik (2004) concluded that the work students were expected to carry out in the program and the focus on

real-world learning made the most significant differences. Regarding MicroSociety jobs, it appears that the more challenging the work, and the more engaged the students were: “the level of involvement and challenge inherent in the job is a major factor in determining student satisfaction and the extent to which students reap the benefits of the program” (Kutzik, 2004, p. 4). Students appreciated how the program “prepares them for adulthood . . . because they are learning to apply academic knowledge and skills to jobs that mimic those in the real world” (p. 4). Kutzik (2004) summarized his findings by suggesting that the MicroSociety program offered enormous potential to “promote student motivation to be in school, to become successful in their miniature societies, and to learn to deal with the complexities of working within a vibrant and multi-faceted society” (p. 5).

Evidence suggests that if implemented well, the MicroSociety program can contribute to student academic success. However, measures such as attendance reports and standardized test results only tell part of the story. In synthesizing the various studies, I noted that most data used were collected from teachers, administrators, and parents, with few studies indicating the researchers considered the viewpoints of the students. I also noticed that most of the studies were quantitative in nature and failed to acknowledge how others experienced the program and what it meant to them as students, parents, teachers, or community members. In the next section, I explore some research that focuses on the challenges and criticisms of the MicroSociety program. Following this, I determine the gaps in the literature which have driven my study.

Challenges and Criticisms of the MicroSociety Program

Although a number of studies document some of the successes of MicroSociety programs, there remain specific challenges for schools in using this experiential program, along with noted criticisms from other stakeholders. Of the MicroSociety schools he studied, Cherniss

(2006) found the schools that discontinued the program shared similar characteristics, and he concluded, "the impact of the program depends on how well schools are able to implement it" (p. 22). Schools that appeared to have the least success were those that did not have sufficient teacher buy-in, had difficulty funding the program, had changes in administration, or did not have a culture of experimentation. In these schools, teachers viewed MicroSociety as an add-on that required a lot of extra work that took away time from the prescribed curriculum (Cherniss, 2006). According to Cherniss (2006), the most "intrusive mandates involved the growing emphasis on testing and standards in the public schools" (p. 28). It is interesting to note that in the study, little attention was given to how the students experienced learning in schools where a MicroSociety program was not successful. Lastly, a clear limitation of the research from Cherniss is that it was based on 12 schools.

A strong theme in the research collected and carried out by Cherniss (2006) dealt with control and the MicroSociety principle of student empowerment. He wrote, "Many teachers found it difficult to give up the control that was customary for their role" (Cherniss, 2006, p. 29) in MicroSociety. Even though "the essence of the MicroSociety program is that students are empowered to create and manage their own society" (Cherniss, 2006, p. 42), many teachers were not able to let go and "allow the students to take control of their own society" (p. 107).

Others have studied the effects that the MicroSociety program has had on truancy and student engagement. Pitts (2016) studied the effect of using MicroSociety as a truancy intervention program on the attendance within four elementary schools in a south Texas school district. Pitts analyzed research studies that advocated that higher engagement leads to decreased truancy; he was curious as to the effect the MicroSociety program had on Grade 4 students in elementary schools. By examining attendance patterns, he concluded that participation in

MicroSociety had “no meaningful effect on student attendance” (Pitts, 2016, p. ii). He recommended that school districts “should not use MicroSociety solely as an attendance intervention strategy without more research” and that “a district dealing with student attendance issues may want to investigate other programs that have substantial empirical evidence showing an effect of increased attendance” (Pitts, 2016, p. 75). Pitts stated several potential reasons to explain the lack of relationship between MicroSociety participation and the number of student absences, including a lack of student interest, lack of strong school leadership, adequate resources, and lack of teacher buy-in to the program (Pitts, 2016, p. 77). Pitts’s quantitative study only considered 1 year of attendance data and did not provide opportunities to consider other factors, including the students’ own experiences. Through an exploration as to what students had to say about the MicroSociety program using surveys or focus groups, perhaps he would have gleaned a more in-depth understanding as to why students chose not to attend school.

Despite reported improvements in student achievement as indicated in other studies, Hattie’s (2009) meta-analysis of three studies using MicroSociety reached different conclusions. Hattie concluded that MicroSociety, as an example of school reform, appeared to have a low effect on reducing the achievement gap between at-risk students and their more advantaged peers. The primary sources of data used in these studies were tests Hattie (2009) stated were “particularly effective at measuring surface features, somewhat effective at measuring deep learning, but rarely effective at measuring the construct representations that students build from their classroom experiences” (p. 249). Further information on which studies Hattie chose to analyze was not available, so the basis for his conclusions is unclear.

In examining the literature, I encountered a few published criticisms of MicroSociety. This lack of critique may be due to the limited number of schools using this experiential program

or simply a lack of access to research in such schools. Newspaper headlines such as "MicroSociety Plan Doesn't Make Sense" (Shaw, 2000) and "Ipsville MicroSociety: Is Unique Program Serving Purpose?" (Behrendt, 2002) highlighted some of the concerns of parents, community members, and even teachers. These critics of MicroSociety felt the program took away valuable time from reading, writing, and math instruction, and that it was costly for teachers to purchase materials. Some teachers also felt the program was "developmentally inappropriate at the elementary level" as "students are asked to perform tasks that are too challenging for their age" (Shaw, 2000, para. 2). In the schools highlighted in these newspaper articles, students were reported to be in favor of the program. Critics, however, stated that was because students perceived MicroSociety to be "easier than regular class work" (Shaw, 2000, para. 3).

Other critics were worried about the capitalistic nature of the MicroSociety program. The idea that MicroSociety would create a "cynical dog-eat-dog sort of capitalism devoid of morality and responsibility to the community" (Grote, 2002, p. 30) was something Richmond encountered early on in convincing others to use his program. Suspicious school board members said that the program focused solely on teaching "children to value financial success above all else" (Grote, 2002, p. 30), and that Richmond was being used by the business community to "control children's behavior with fake money" (p. 30). Originally, Richmond's (1973) program focused on the extrinsic rewards the mini-economy provided for students:

> It's simple. We pay you for the same reasons that the school pays teachers. Teachers come to school. So do you. Teachers work here. So do you. Teachers get paid because taxpayers value their labor. Well, we value yours. Most people run away from work. But

> someday maybe you'll discover that one measure of a man [*sic*] is in the work he [*sic*] does; it's what you do with your life. Work gives dignity. (p. 85)

The idea of rewarding students with fake currency did not appeal to everyone. Researchers like Bennett (1976), who investigated four models on how to build miniature societies in schools, did not like "Richmond's emphasis on paying for academic performance" (p. 164). Eventually, it became apparent to even Richmond (1973) "that the traditional incentive system was not working" (p. 111) and "unless school activity was interesting and compelling in its own right, extrinsic rewards simply wouldn't sustain student interest" (Richmond, 1973, p. 246).

In addition to being based on an economic structure, MicroSociety programs also are organized around a political system. Although the program was initially created to enable students to experience democracy within a free enterprise economic system, eventually, Richmond (1996) broadened his perspective to put children in touch with any ideology they wished to pursue, including socialism. Richmond (1996) stated the "objectives of the political process will be the formation of state, of republic, or democracy, of dictatorship, or, if we are realistic, of something in between" (p. 211). In all MicroSociety schools currently in operation, the majority are using a free enterprise or mixed economic system along with a democratic political system. As Richmond (1996) indicated, "the form of government that emerges will . . . reflect the biases of the particular community in which it grows" (p. 211). Richmond believed communities chose the MicroSociety program because it promised to make teaching and learning more enjoyable and productive and that it also prepared students for the responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society (Richmond, 1996).

From the research available, MicroSociety is an experiential approach that requires a "reorientation of the nature of schooling" (Quaglia & Corso, 2014, p. 92). As Dewey and Bruner

recommended earlier, schools need to change from places "that teachers do to, or for students" to places "that teachers do with students" (Quaglia & Corso, 2014, p. 92). This reorientation may lead to more "productive learning that connects with real world problems and events" (Fried, 2001, p. 45), and perhaps to more engaging learning for young adolescents. Having analyzed the literature about the MicroSociety program, I next describe the gaps I observed that helped me approach this research study.

Identifying the Gaps in the Literature

As I have outlined earlier, existing research has indicated many children become disengaged as students in the classroom, a problem that appears to surface early in the middle years of schooling and continues onto high school (Gallup, 2017; Willms et al., 2009). As noted in some studies, relevancy and a curriculum that lacks connection to the real world may be partially to blame (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). Others (e.g., Hume, 2011; Marzano & Pickering, 2011) stated student disengagement is based on the pedagogical decisions a teacher makes in the classroom. In my review of the literature, I noticed several gaps. Creswell (2011) suggests that it is important to recognize these in approaching research. There is insufficient understanding as to how to best involve and engage students deeply in ways that allow them to personally construct meaning based on their interests, talents, and skills, while acquiring and being assessed for the content and competencies needed to be successful learners.

There is limited research that captures the experiences of learners of the middle-years classroom (Grades 4 to 9) in experiential learning programs. In its earlier vision for education called *Inspiring Education*, Alberta Education (2010) identified a need for "greater emphasis on experiential learning both in and outside of the classroom" (p. 24). Considering the middle years are when students start to become disengaged, and when they are already starting to think about

dropping out of school (Gallup, 2017; Jukes et al., 2010; Willms et al., 2009), examining student experiences within an experiential program such as MicroSociety could provide a unique perspective to the available research on student disengagement.

Regarding the MicroSociety program specifically and the multitude of studies I examined, I was unable to conclude how this experiential program engages learners. This becomes more obvious when I examine the research that primarily focused on program implementation, student achievement levels, and student attendance rates, with little focus on the students themselves or how they have experienced MicroSociety. Additionally, at this time, no published research examines MicroSociety schools within a Canadian context.

In the 2016 framework for designing and developing the kindergarten to Grade 12 provincial curriculum, a vision for Alberta students was clearly stated: "Students are lifelong learners inspired to pursue their aspirations and interests; achieve fulfillment and success; and contribute to communities and the world" (Alberta Education, 2016, p. 3). Research is needed to find the kinds of learning places that honor the values of this vision centered on democracy and citizenship, belonging and identity, integrity and respect, perseverance and excellence, and innovation and stewardship (Alberta Education, 2016). With its focus on real-world learning, the MicroSociety program provides a place where students can experience learning centered on these values. It is important to uncover how students experience this kind of learning.

My examination of the literature began with a careful look at studies that reported on student engagement and disengagement. From here, I was able to examine some of the patterns and reasons for student disengagement as well as some of the characteristics of learning experiences that appeared more engaging for students. Following this, I set out to explore the

research specific to the MicroSociety program. By examining the literature, I noted missing components that warrant further investigation.

To help fill the gaps I have uncovered in the literature, my thesis aims to provide opportunities for some students who have experienced MicroSociety to share their perspectives. I took an exploratory research approach as it is well suited to experiential learning. As described by Creswell (2011), exploratory research is open-ended to build theories, to look for patterns and relationships, and to possibly propose new questions and new ways to look at the issue of student engagement in today's middle-years classrooms. In the next chapter, I describe the methods used in my research, the research site, and the interview participants.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Dewey (1915) was concerned with the "awakening of schools to a realization of the fact that their work ought to prepare children for the life they are to lead in the world" (p. 288). MicroSociety is an innovative program that has intended to provide children with "activities [that] have some educative content . . . and reproduce the conditions of real life" (Dewey, 1915, p. 292). The adult perspective is valuable in determining the effectiveness of experiential programs like MicroSociety, but I was interested in the student's perspectives, as insiders. Thus, five questions guided my research:

1. How did former students experience the MicroSociety program?
2. How did these participants interpret their learning experiences of MicroSociety as real-world learning?
3. How were students empowered (or disempowered) in their participatory roles within the MicroSociety program?
4. How did the participants experience being part of the MicroSociety learning community?
5. And lastly, how were these experiences interpreted as engaging or disengaging by the participants in this MicroSociety program?

In the following section, I outline my rationale for utilizing qualitative research and interpretive inquiry methodology through the lens of the case study method. I describe ethical considerations, research sites used, participants of my study, and methods used to collect and process data. And finally, I describe the analysis and interpretation of this data.

Case Study and Interpretive Inquiry

Qualitative research is well suited to inquiring into experiential programs. In examining

these programs, the use of a case study as informed by interpretive inquiry interviews has provided tremendous value to my research based on the descriptive data obtained from participants. Ewert (1995) stated, “All too often research in experiential education becomes an exercise in data generation rather than the production of meaningful findings” (p. 352). Interpretive inquiry has provided me with a deeper understanding of how the research participants experienced learning in a MicroSociety school. If the goal of educational research is, as Creswell (2011) suggested, “to further our collective understanding of all aspects of education [to] contribute new knowledge to the field” (p. 2), then I must first act as a researcher to better understand how today’s learners experience learning within the current curriculum.

For my research study, I used a qualitative approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described qualitative research:

> [It is] a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform The World. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. (p. 3)

In examining over 30 different programs in the Evaluation of Experiential Education Project, which focused primarily on pre and posttests and questionnaires, Conrad and Hedin (1981) recommended that when examining experiential learning programs, “additional techniques must be developed and used. Interviews, observations, analyses of journals, ethnographies and case studies could be used to . . . see beneath the findings from paper and pencil measures” (p. 402). In my own experience, using several methods, such as preinterview activities, student artifacts, and interviews, has yielded comprehensive results for my study. These methods are described later in this chapter.

I used a case study approach to conduct my research. Merriam (1998) stated that because it is “anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon” (p. 41). Stake (1995) defined the case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances (p. xi). Because case studies can be focused on a single program, “it allows the evaluator the time necessary to collect and analyze detailed qualitative data” (p. 412). According to Creswell (1998), researchers use the case study approach to conduct an “in-depth analysis of a case, often a program . . . or one or more individuals” (p. 14).

Using case study, I examined how six former students, now in Grades 7–12, including one in college, experienced MicroSociety throughout their elementary education years. I desired to “understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions” (Yin, 2014, p. 16) that were useful to gain insights from my case. A case study approach allows the researcher to dig deep to understand the single phenomenon being studied: “We do not study a case primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this one case” (Stake, 1995, p. 4). I decided to employ a single case study approach to provide depth into my investigation, as this can “represent a significant contribution to knowledge and theory building by confirming, challenging, or extending the theory” (Yin, 2014, p. 51).

To gain a deeper understanding, I approached my research through a constructivist paradigm that centered on criteria such as trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009). Because I believe that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed by people, I needed to encourage the participants to reconstruct their thoughts and ideas about their own MicroSociety school experience. To

approach my research with a constructivist framework, I used some of the following principles as paraphrased from the work of Hittleman and Simon (2006):

1. I developed, changed, and refined my questions throughout my study.
2. I looked for emerging issues as I explored the problem.
3. I used open-ended questions.
4. I selected the participants purposefully.
5. I developed tools to carry out my interpretive inquiry. This included questionnaires, interview guides, interviews, and an examination of artifacts.
6. I carried out my interpretive inquiries in several stages. Initially, I got to know the participants, and as I continued to want to know more, I gained a deeper understanding that came through follow-up interviews.
7. To analyze the data, I needed to return to it on many occasions by identifying themes, and providing explanations and interpretations as my study progressed.
8. I chose to showcase the results in the best way to represent the voices and experiences of those who participated in my research. This included personal narratives, visuals, and artifacts. (pp. 8–9)

There were other considerations that I needed to employ as an interpretive inquirer. I believe the most important aspect of my research was aiming to capture some of the evidence of how students experienced learning within the MicroSociety program. Each of the six participants had a story to tell about their experience in MicroSociety. By using qualitative data with its "rich and ambiguous moments of actually living our lives with children" (Jardine, 1992, p. 124), the participants helped me understand their MicroSociety experiences. I discovered that through this process, the "voice of so-called qualitative research emerges" (p. 124).

Ethical Considerations

Throughout all stages of the research process, one must remain diligent regarding ethical considerations. Creswell (2007) has stated it is "especially important as we negotiate entry to the field site of the research site; involve participants in our study; gather personal, emotional data that reveal the details of life; and ask participants to give considerable time to our projects" (p. 44). As there are limited MicroSociety sites currently available within a Canadian context, it was important I explored the possibilities of the site I hoped to work with early on in my study. I was able to gain agreement from the individuals in authority to provide me with access to the research site and the study participants. I discussed my proposed study with the school superintendent of the school division that operates the MicroSociety program and the principal of the MicroSociety school. Both provided support for my research based on knowing the opportunity for participants to talk about past learning experiences could lead to improved learning for other students. Likewise, helping students construct their own meanings as to what engaged learning was for them might lead them to have more successful learning experiences in the future. The results of the study could also be beneficial for school and district administrators in considering the value of different school programs in providing authentic learning experiences that may enhance student competencies, increase student engagement and potentially help retain more students in schools. Following this initial support of my research project, I then took necessary steps to obtain ethics approval to continue my study involving the student participants.

After receiving ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board in the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education, I once again contacted the school superintendent along with the principals of the designated site schools so I could begin making plans to recruit the interview participants and host the interviews on the various school sites. Because of the limited number of

MicroSociety programs in Canada, I chose not to provide geographical details, nor would I be identifying the schools/school district throughout this study. Once the research site(s) were on board, I then began to prepare documentation to aid me in participant recruitment. I provided an information letter (see Appendix A and B) and consent forms (see Appendix C) for the parents of the students I wished to interview, so these children had permission from their parents or guardians to participate in my study. I also provided a letter of assent (see Appendix D) to potential student participants. My assent form included a description of my study and its purpose, an identification of any foreseeable risks and potential benefits, and information about how the findings from my study would be shared with others. As participation in my study was voluntary, I informed the participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Also, I stated that any data collected from participants not wishing to participate would be left out of my study. Lastly, I asked those participants who volunteered to take part in my study to create a pseudonym that would be used throughout the study as a tool to protect each participant's privacy.

Regarding data management, all digital evidence collected from student participants has been stored in my secure Google Drive account with the University of Alberta, and the folder that contains this data was encrypted with a password. Hard copies, including my observation notes and all permission documentation, are contained in a locked filing cabinet in my office at my work site.

Research Site

All interviews were conducted at a school site with the permission of the school principal, and I took precautions to work with school staff in finding a suitable location in which to conduct the interviews. I completed most of my research study at an urban elementary school

where the participants experienced the MicroSociety program when they were elementary-age children. These interviews were conducted on site, which was helpful for the students in recalling their learning experiences in the MicroSociety program, particularly as they looked at photos or artifacts around the school. As this was not possible for all participants, I also made arrangements to conduct interviews at a local middle school and two different high schools where three students were enrolled. Interpretive inquiry interviews were conducted primarily during after-school hours, although I did have a couple of interviews with one participant during lunch at a local middle school due to her after school commitments. School administrators of the various schools were helpful in determining ideal locations for me to conduct interviews that offered some privacy to the participants.

Research Participants

I consulted with the MicroSociety program coordinators as to the best ways to communicate information about my research study to former students. A window of opportunity was created because the school was planning a special event and had recently created a student alumni group to help organize celebrations. One of the MicroSociety coordinators talked to the student president of the group, and my research request was added to the agenda of their first planning meeting.

I first met potential participants at the initial meeting of this alumni association, and I was greeted with polite responses. Students appeared willing to help with my research, and I handed out approximately 20 research packages. My research package provided students and their parents/guardians with supporting documentation including an information letter (see Appendix A and B). As the participants were between the ages of 11 and 17, an assent form (see Appendix D) was also provided to help clearly explain my research study to them. A consent form (see

Appendix C) was provided to the parents/guardians of the student participants. I also provided the students with a preliminary MicroSociety questionnaire (see Appendix E). This short questionnaire gave participants an opportunity to reflect on their MicroSociety experience while thinking about whether they wished to be involved in the study. I considered the variety of reading/grade levels of potential participants when creating my student documents.

In the package, I also included an invitation for parents and students to attend an information session. It was my intent that the questionnaire, consent form, and assent form could either be completed at the information session or dropped off at the school office during the next business week. From reviewing the completed questionnaires, I would then shortlist the participant pool to four students—optimally two boys and two girls—and I would choose two additional students as alternates, in case any of the selected participants were not able to complete the interviews. I hoped to receive approximately 10 interested participants within a week's time and would base my shortlist on student availability and age.

Prior to the documentation deadline, I hosted a parent information session at the school site to help student participants and their parents/guardians feel more comfortable. I was hopeful for a good turnout; however, the only parents or guardians to attend were current staff at the school who were already aware of my research needs. Over the following weeks, however, I did receive expressions of interest from six participants. I had interest from one male student, limiting my opportunity to have gender balance in the interview process. I also ended up needing to expand the age range to include three students who were in high school. My initial proposal was to interview students in middle school (Grades 7– 8) as I thought that having older students would complicate the process due to them no longer attending schools in the area and having other commitments such as work. I also felt that because these students had been away from the

MicroSociety program for several years, it may have been more difficult for them to recall their MicroSociety experiences. Yin (2014) has stated, however, that alternative perspectives should be sought when doing case study: “The examination of the evidence from different perspectives will increase the chances that a case study will be exemplary (p. 203). Despite my initial concerns, the addition of these older participants would prove to be fortuitous to my research because I acquired some unexpected conclusions. Although two high school students were chosen as alternates, I decided to interview them due to the depth of their information provided, along with their enthusiasm to contribute to my research.

Participants of my research study were six adolescent students: one male and five females who experienced the MicroSociety program during their elementary school years (Kindergarten to Grade 5). These students, ranging from Grades 7–12, were now attending middle schools and high schools in the same local area as their elementary school; one recently graduated and is now attending a local college in the area. Three participants were current middle-years students who attend three different neighborhood schools. Two were Grade 7 students who participated in MicroSociety for all 6 years of their elementary education, and one was a Grade 8 student who attended the same MicroSociety school and also participated in the program for all 6 years of her elementary education. The three high school students provided further context to my study as each had additional school and life experiences to consider, including high school, work, volunteering, and in one case, graduation. At the time of the interviews, two participants were Grade 10 students in two different local high schools. One of these participants joined the MicroSociety experience in Grade 5, and attended for only 1 year of the program, while the other has been involved in MicroSociety since kindergarten. My final participant was a Grade 12 student who graduated from her local high school in the spring of 2019. She was one of the

original MicroSociety students when the program began when she was in Grade 3. Additional descriptions of each of my participants will be provided in Chapter 6.

Before I began data collection through interviews, I needed to start getting to know the participants. Brenner (2006) provided the explanations for this: “Because qualitative interviews are based on a personal interaction, whom a researcher is and how informants view the researcher are likely to influence the kind of information received in an interview” (p. 362). I needed to get to know my participants and develop rapport with them, so once I received parental permissions, I scheduled my first meeting to be an informal one. Childress (2000) stated that when researching with teenagers, there is value in getting to understand who they are, what they think, and what they believe about the places in their lives (e.g., school, work, local hangouts) and that we must be open to learning from them.

I used my first meeting as an orientation for my participants, and for them to get to know me as a researcher. With each participant, I outlined the research process, reviewed their short introductory questionnaire (see Appendix E), showed them the recording tools I would be using, asked if they had any questions, and introduced them to the idea of a preinterview activity. Participants asked a few questions about my work and about my research plan, but generally were fairly quiet; a couple inquired about the recording devices I was using. At the close of our first meeting, I stated that I would be acknowledging their participation in my study with two small $20 gift cards and asked them to provide me with some recommendations from local retail stores and fast-food restaurants. The participants appeared to enjoy our first meeting and appreciated the gesture of a gift. I too felt comfortable with them: “[The teenagers]—ignorant of the rules of research and thus wiser than I—taught me what I needed to learn by the simple

human effort of trying to make friends with this strange person who roamed among them" (Childress, 2000, p. xviii).

Research Methods

For this study, the primary sources of data came from the interpretive inquiry interviews with the student participants that took place over several months. In addition to these formal interviews centered on my structured questions, I used other methods, including preinterview activities, informal conversations, photographs, and artifacts—some created by the student participants. These proved helpful in enhancing our guided discussions.

Preinterview Activities

As Harper (2002) observed, using visual materials such as student drawings or photos invites "information, feelings, and memories" which "evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words" (p. 13). In a study by Ellis et al. (2013), the researchers "identify important aspects of interviews and examine the helpful contributions of using pre-interview activities" (p. 1). I used preinterview activities to "support memory and reflection in interviews" (Ellis et al., 2013, p. 1) and to open the avenues for conversation and to build rapport with the student participants. To allow the participants to construct their own meanings, I integrated preinterview activities during my interpretive inquiry process. These activities included giving the participants choices to write, draw or talk about past learning experiences, including those that took place as part of the MicroSociety program (see Appendix F). The preinterview activities helped students recall experiences that they found engaging and/or disengaging, and helped them personally to construct meaning as to what engaged learning or real-world learning meant to them. I found that the use of preinterview activities confirmed what Ellis et al. (2013) concluded in that they helped "the interview have a good beginning," and that they helped to

build “capacity to invite stories as opposed to requesting reports” (p. 19). However, most participants were not particularly proud of their drawings and commented that they were not good at drawing. Perhaps this was because they were young adolescents who were concerned about being judged. Although I benefited from using the preinterview activities, I found participants were already willing to engage in conversations and needed little prompting through other means.

The Interview Process

As a researcher, my role was primarily to listen to participants in my study and to ask questions to help me better understand the meanings behind their experiences with MicroSociety. Following the introductory meetings, the next stage was to carry out the full interview process with participants (see sample questions in Appendix G). I was able to complete four interviews with most participants, which ranged in time from 40 to 60 minutes in length. I was able to adjust my plans when two of my participants were sick and unable to attend our scheduled interview; as a result, we only completed three interviews. All interviews were spaced out with 1 week in between each one and the data collection took approximately 6 weeks to complete. An additional month was used to interview the two student alternates.

I had to give careful consideration to the questions I created for the interview process (see Appendix G), for it is “the ability to pose and ask questions . . . that is a prerequisite for case study researchers” (Yin, 2014, p. 73). A challenge was in “asking questions that encourage[d] the informants to talk expansively on the interviewer’s topic” (Brenner, 2006, p. 362), so I found myself constantly needing to reframe my questions. These “questions need[ed] to engage children and adolescents and draw from what they know from within their frame of reference” (Brenner, 2006, p. 365). Although I created a predetermined set of questions, I also realized that

“this approach does not allow an interviewer to follow up on unexpected topics or individual differences that emerge during an interview” (Brenner, 2006, p. 364). Thus, I found myself adding new questions throughout the interview process depending on what each participant had to say. I found the open-endedness of this process to be enlightening, for participants often shared experiences that were not part of my script of predicted responses. Because this differed with each participant, I found this to be one way to develop a deeper understanding with each participant individually. I also found the use of a few grand-tour questions, as suggested by Seidman (1991), was helpful for each interview in providing focus and purpose to each meeting.

While carrying out the interpretive inquiry interviews with the adolescent participants, my main roles were listener, observer, and recorder. I purposefully designed open-ended questions (see Appendix E, F, and G) that allowed the students to, as fully as possible, share their stories based on their MicroSociety experience. This allowed the student participants to fulfill their “role of a storyteller, of constructor of narratives about a life” (Bruner, 1990, pp. 111–112) they experienced while participating in MicroSociety.

Personal Artifacts

Interviews provided the major focus of my study on how students experienced MicroSociety. However, to provide a complete picture of participants’ MicroSociety experiences, I also planned to collect other evidence from the participants, the sort of evidence identified by Yin (2014) as “documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts” (p. 103). This primarily took the form of photographs and student-created artifacts that participants were willing to share and helped in furthering our conversations in our interviews (see Appendix H and I). These artifacts highlighted work they were proud of or that was memorable for them during their MicroSociety

experiences. Yin's (2014) recommendation to "use multiple sources of evidence" (p. 118) showed how critical this was in my case study research as I discovered that students were excited to talk about their personal artifacts.

Data Collection Tools

Boostrom (1994) identified six roles of the qualitative researcher: video camera, playgoer, evaluator, subjective inquirer, insider, and reflective interpreter. In my study, whether listening to the participants answer the questions or examining their artifacts of learning, I tended to act as the reflective interpreter who listened, analyzed meaning, and determined significance. Throughout this process, I used a variety of tools for data collection. I used a digital audio recorder during the entire length of the interpretive inquiry interviews and I took observation notes using a tool called an Echo Smartpen that uses transcription software to record while at the same time allowing me to take notes. Following a test run of a speech recognition program called Dragon Dictate to record text into a document, I decided that having three recording tools was too distracting and decided not to use this third tool. I also used a digital camera to record photographs of student artifacts and to take photos of MicroSociety school events and artifacts shared with participants to help them recall their MicroSociety learning experiences. For the three participants whose interviews were conducted at the MicroSociety school site, this was substituted by simply walking the halls of the school after hours and having conversations about what students viewed.

I also purchased an online transcriber tool, Transcribe (https://transcribe.wreally.com/), to quickly transcribe the interviews. Although not entirely accurate, it helped provide an overall picture of what was said during each interview setting. I used it to summarize and paraphrase the

transcripts to the participants at subsequent interviews. Although time consuming, this initial transcription helped to "inform[s] the early stages of analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Bruner (1990) has stated that "It is only through the application of interpretation that we . . . can do justice to the world of culture" (p. 137). Data analysis and interpretation took place throughout the data collection process, but once my interviews were completed, I explored the collected information from my interpretive inquiry interviews on a much deeper level. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) have suggested that one begins the analysis process by first reviewing the research proposal. With this in mind, I revisited my candidacy proposal with a particular focus on my research questions. Because "qualitative data analysis is a complex, laborious, and demanding set of procedures" (Kolb, 1991, p. 40), this was helpful in guiding my focus on the purpose of my research.

Paradigmatic Thought: An Analysis of Narratives

Bruner (1986) spoke about two modes of cognitive thought: paradigmatic and narrative, and I was interested in what both modes had to offer when analyzing data and sharing my findings. I was influenced by the work of Polkinghorne (1995), who referred to paradigmatic reasoning as an "analysis of narratives" in which "researchers collect stories as data and analyze them with paradigmatic processes" to provide "descriptions of themes" (p. 12).

The analysis of data took place both during the interview process and after I had collected all the data. Merriam (1998) has stated, "data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity" (p. 151). Interpretation is the heart of qualitative research; Bruner (1990) described this method of "negotiating and renegotiating meanings by the mediation of narrative interpretation as . . . one of the crowning achievements of human development" (p. 67). There were several steps

identified by Braun and Clarke (2006) that influenced my analysis process following the collection of the data: (a) familiarizing oneself with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, and (e) defining and naming themes (p. 87).

Following each individual participant interview, I began to familiarize myself with the data and started to look for key ideas and potential themes as soon as possible after the interview and prior to an interview with another participant. I found it helpful to highlight relevant and interesting ideas as I initially mined through the data. This aspect of thematic analysis "provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Initially, I reviewed my recorded conversations and field notes and began to organize the data when I noticed "patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). With subsequent interviews, I began to look for similar patterns. This helped me to seek clarification on the meanings gathered during the data gathering stage and to identify any questions to consider adding in future interviews.

I completed a total of 22 interpretive inquiry interviews with participants over a 3-month period. Upon completion of the interviews, I hired a professional transcriber to aid in the transcription process and to ensure accuracy. Once those transcripts were completed, I again analyzed and reviewed the data to determine if the same themes and patterns were still emerging to support the proposed research questions and whether there were additional findings I did not notice earlier.

I used a couple of text-analysis tools in the data analysis process. A word cloud program called *Tagul* allowed me to enter all the data from a single participant and then create a word cloud visual highlighting the most prominent words spoken throughout the entire interview

process. The use of another text-analysis tool called Voyant was helpful in this final theming process. This tool provided a quick visual of the most commonly used words by the participants, and it allowed me to code and correlate patterns of frequently used words and phrases in the finalized transcribed documents of all participants. From this process, I received six dominant ideas and combined them into several prominent themes. I revisited the interview transcript texts and color-coded the prominent words based on the big ideas or themes that were starting to be revealed and were connected to my research questions. Following this, a second but less technological tool was the use of a large word table with two axis points: (a) a vertical list of the six participants and (b) a horizontal list of the color-coded themes. Yin (2014) suggested that a word table can be used as a synthesis tool to help compare the data collected using a unifying framework (p. 167). This process was used to narrow and finalize the most prominent themes that had emerged from the data and which were linked to my research questions about MicroSociety. This table was helpful in examining "repeated patterns of meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86) and further helped me to clarify how participants described their MicroSociety learning experiences. After all, analysis "involves a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that you are analysing, and the analysis of the data that you are producing" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86).

Through the analytical process, I was able to remove some potential themes that, despite being of interest, I would not attempt to interpret during this study. One such theme was the teacher's role in designing instruction to engage students in the MicroSociety program. As Stake has suggested, "After getting lots of good observations, it is important to identify the best, and set the rest aside" (p. 84). I felt this last theme was less focused on how the student experienced MicroSociety. Thus, I concluded the analysis by choosing three dominant themes centered

around how participants experienced the real world through MicroSociety, how they developed agency and confidence as a participant of MicroSociety, and how they learned as part of a MicroSociety community of practice. Once I had determined these themes, I then created additional wall posters to capture the essence of each theme as constructed by quotes by the student participants themselves. This step would prove helpful in writing the chapter on my findings and results.

Throughout the examination of these themes, the concepts of student engagement, student disengagement, and real-world learning were viewed in as holistic of a manner as possible. Likewise, I also tried to view my findings through the lens of experiential learning theory and constructivism to determine if there were relevant links between these concepts and the data from the participants. Lastly, using the wall posters once again, I revisited my primary research questions and identified how they connected to my three prominent themes.

Narrative Thought: A Narrative Analysis

Like Bruner (1996), Polkinhorne (1995) also spoke about narrative analysis. Even though I had a strong sense of emerging themes from the participant data, I was concerned about what was potentially missing from this study for the reader; the story behind the data or the background information about this MicroSociety school. I was once again influenced by what Polkinghorne (1995) described as narrative analysis, in which "researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesize . . . them by means of a plot into a story" (p. 12). This time I went back to the data and organized it into a chronological description for each participant gathered from their individual interviews. What emerged was a clearer picture of how this MicroSociety school operated and who each of the participants were as unique individuals. Even

though the participants had a common shared experience in attending a MicroSociety school, they had many other perspectives to offer towards my study.

The goal of my research is to provide a deeper understanding of the MicroSociety learning experience as interpreted from the words of the student participants, and more explicitly, to explore the constructs of engagement and disengagement through the perspectives of these students. As Bruner (1996) stated in *The Culture of Education*, “The object of interpretation is understanding, not explanation; its instrument is the analysis of text” (p. 90) by telling the story of what something is about. Knowing this, I move forward in providing the story of the MicroSociety school, which was the basis of my study. In the next chapter, I provide a description of the setting and the events which were typical of this MicroSociety school. Following this, I will introduce my participants and share, as findings, how each one experienced the MicroSociety program. I then organize and analyze my findings into themes relevant to how my participants experienced the MicroSociety program. Lastly, I provide the denouement of this research study by presenting reflections, recommendations, and conclusions in my final chapter.

Chapter 5: Background Information—A MicroSociety School

In this chapter, I offer background information to help provide a clearer picture of how the MicroSociety program operated at the research site. I believe this will provide additional context for when I later describe the experiences of the research participants. To present this information, I begin with a vignette of the events unfolding at Academy Elementary School, a pseudonym for the research site used in this study.

It is the end of another typical year at Academy Elementary School, but this place is anything but typical as it is a MicroSociety School. The red carpet has been rolled out, and local dignitaries and parents have arrived. Students are seated and dressed in their best outfits. There is excitement in the air as two students take the stage and speak into the microphone: "Welcome to the annual MicroSociety Awards!" With that, the crowd erupts in cheers, and for the next 2 hours, these hosts, along with several other student award presenters oversee recognizing the many achievements of this MicroSociety school and its students. Teachers are present, but they remain in the background, aiding the student leaders only if needed. Winners are announced and speeches, awards, music, and photographs highlight the award winners.

I was able to attend this year-end event, but before describing it in more detail, I wish to provide some background information about the MicroSociety program that operates at my chosen research site.

Bringing Real Life to Learning

My interpretive inquiry journey began several years ago when I found out about an experiential program called MicroSociety operating at an urban elementary school which I refer to as Academy Elementary School, a pseudonym I use throughout this dissertation. Following numerous school site visits, attending special MicroSociety school events, and engaging in

conversations with the school administration, student participants, and MicroSociety school coordinators, I began to form a picture of how this unique program operated at this school. I also drew from readings about the program from the perspective of MicroSociety creator Dr. George Richmond, and spent time researching the MicroSociety International website (https://www.microsociety.org/). To help describe this program, I draw on observations and interpretations, photographs, and other evidence, including Richmond's writings. Following this background information, I introduce student participants in Chapter 6, and share findings in relation to how they experienced learning in this MicroSociety school.

The Academy Elementary School MicroSociety Program

The MicroSociety school, which informed my research study, is a small K–5 urban school with approximately 250 students. All of these students and the 20 or so staff members (teachers, administration, support staff) were involved in the MicroSociety program. One of the teachers acted as the MicroSociety Coordinator along with two others who helped to run the program. MicroSociety is an integral component of the school's program. The school believed the MicroSociety programming enhanced student learning while preparing them to become responsible leaders and productive community members. In my observations of this school, I saw evidence of all six strands of the MicroSociety program described earlier in Chapter 3. However, some, such as the economy, the academy, and citizenship and government, appeared more front and center. I also saw evidence of skill development, although these were referred to as competencies and aligned with the Alberta Curriculum.

The school is located in a lower socioeconomic area of the city and has experienced high absenteeism, poor student achievement results, and community disengagement. As a solution to curb these problems, a staff member originally suggested the MicroSociety program after he saw

a television news clip about a MicroSociety school. After learning more about the program, staff members believed it would be a good fit in helping to provide students with the necessary skills to succeed in the world beyond school. The school staff started on this project by working collaboratively with the support of the school division and the school's parent council. A staff member, who was also a former businessman, was given the responsibility of being the school's first MicroSociety coordinator. Slowly, the school began on the path to becoming a MicroSociety school.

The school staff continued to learn more about how the MicroSociety program operated. MicroSociety International sent trainers to the school, which provided resources such as *The MicroSociety Handbook* (1996) and Richmond's original text *The MicroSociety School: A Real World in Miniature* (1973). Staff also attended the annual MicroSociety International Conference. The school adopted the overriding objectives of the program as first suggested by MicroSociety creator Richmond. These were to "(1) to engage students in society building as a means for sustaining individual and community growth, and (2) to connect children early with a variety of careers and with meaningful kinds of work" (Richmond, 1973, pp. 117–118). The staff created and were committed to their motto of "bringing real life to learning." The school community set out to make a difference in the lives of their students by redesigning their school. As Richmond (1973) suggested, to prepare students for life, students need to be schooled in "institutions that resemble society" (p. 277).

Initially, funds were provided through the school district and parent council to support the program and to pay for expenses such as field trips and release time for the MicroSociety coordinators. In subsequent years, the school sought to become more self-sufficient by writing grant proposals which helped to purchase specific MicroSociety equipment, such as student

uniforms, signs to advertise student businesses, and larger expenditures such as hydroponics equipment, fish tanks, the pollen garden, and a greenhouse. Financial donations and sponsorship from local school supporters and businesses were used to purchase products, supplies and to complete specific projects. Community volunteers helped to build facilities such as the recently completed urban chicken pen. In addition to attracting outside support from the local community, the school also raised money through events such as bottle drives and battery drives.

Academy Elementary School has been in existence as a MicroSociety School for several years. It has been the recipient of several international and national awards, including recognition from MicroSociety International as an exemplary model of MicroSociety. At Academy Elementary School, this experiential program operates as a cross-grade and cross-curricular project, and approximately two afternoons a week are dedicated to the program. This dedicated time is used for MicroSociety events such as job fairs/interviews, training through Micro University, production of goods, elections for government structures in the school, and market days where students purchase goods and services from their fellow students. Service learning is also required of every classroom for the staff believe, as did Richmond (1973), “children have the means available to make an impact on the world that lives inside what we call school” (p. 190). In addition to teaching the prescribed Alberta program of studies (i.e., English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Physical Education and Health), teachers work to embed literacy and numeracy throughout the entire curriculum by integrating real-life examples and connections to MicroSociety concepts. This approach extends and connects the students’ learning in the simulated world of MicroSociety to material covered in the various subject areas in the provincial curriculum. Providing this experience of applied intellect was modeled after

Richmond's philosophy as outlined in his text *The MicroSociety School: A Real World in Miniature* (1973):

> Instead of writing composition exercises, children in the Society School pen letters, articles, and books for each other's benefit and consumption. Instead of limiting arithmetic study to its mechanics, students apply arithmetic concepts in pursuit of professional or business capacities; accountants, bookkeepers, taxpayers, and shopkeepers compute, well architects and city planners measure. Similarly, the reading program serves the developmental goals of school society: students read what other students write. (p. 181)

Although the MicroSociety program at Academy Elementary School has changed from its initial inception, it continues to offer a structured program designed to meet the school's purpose of bringing the real-world into children's lives. Like other schools, staffing has changed over the years. Though the original school MicroSociety coordinator and principal of the program have retired, their legacy of providing learning through real-world experiences lives on. I now offer some description of a typical year in the MicroSociety program at Academy Elementary School.

A Year in the Life of a MicroSociety School

The first major MicroSociety event of the school year was the September election campaigns launched on the first day school resumed in the Fall term. The purpose of the election was to establish the new MicroSociety government of student members. The political system and government structures at Academy Elementary School changed from year to year but were generally based on the Canadian democratic system. Modifications included that all students in the school vote directly for the position of prime minister and that there are no political parties.

Students interested in becoming part of the school government were given a week to submit nomination forms with at least six signatures of support. This was followed by a week of campaigns consisting of the creation of posters and speeches presented prior to the elections. The children voted to choose their leaders and to elect grade representatives. Positions such as deputy prime minister and the prime minister were held by the older children in Grades 4 and 5, and these students carried additional responsibilities such as being spokespersons for the school, having input on important school decisions, acting as hosts to guests, and providing tours around the school.

Students from each classroom were elected to serve as local representatives, and they formed the government, which helped to make decisions and create bills at the school level—decisions that also had to meet the approval of the school's governor, the principal. According to participants, the school eventually switched from a federal to a provincial political system so students now elect a premier and other members of the Legislature; this change has helped students better understand the provincial system of government as part of the current Social Studies Curriculum in Alberta.

Following an official swearing-in ceremony by a judge from the local provincial court, and the lieutenant governor (formerly the governor general), the new government would begin operating their school-based society with opportunities for students to be in charge. In the past, these opportunities have included creating a MicroSociety school constitution which is still in place today. In addition to debating policies and passing bills, the government also needed to ensure their MicroSociety ran well. Rules were created by government leaders, and both a police force and court system run by students ensured that the laws were followed. The Royal Academy Mounted Police, or *RAMP*, was the enforcing agency that issued tickets for minor incidents such

as running in the hallways or failing to wear the school uniform on market days. A court system with students acting as lawyers, judges, and witnesses for more serious offenses (e.g., stealing) was also in place to help develop student citizenship and to "take steps toward a new approach to school conflict and its resolution" (Richmond, 1973, p. 166).

In addition to a political and judicial system, society requires an economic structure to function. Once the government was in place, the next decision for students to consider was to what extent they wanted to be involved in helping to run the MicroSociety economy. Did they wish to be an owner of a business venture and purchase an existing business from funds remaining in their bank accounts from the previous school year? Did they want to create new businesses and perhaps take out a business start-up loan from the bank to get things going? Rather than being a business owner, did they prefer to be a manager who supervised others? Perhaps they would instead choose a position of support such as salesclerk, bookkeeper, or advisor? Decisions needed to be made before the end of September, and everything was decided through the next big MicroSociety school event, the Micro Job Fair.

The MicroSociety program at Academy Elementary School was built on a market-based economy made up of producers, consumers, and business owners and workers. Students created their business ventures and offered products or services to the other student customers during market days. Venture owners were required to obtain a business license and create a business plan to be approved by the elected government. Owners could rent space from the school's real estate agency or obtain a loan from the bank to help them with their venture. Once the ventures were in place, the owners then hired their employees through a job fair, including positions such as manager, accountant, clerk, and craftsperson. In addition to these opportunities, there were also nonprofit organizations where the students could apply to work.

To help students decide on their career path, they would first look at the positions and descriptions available in the school's want ads (see Appendix H: The MicroSociety Experience—Background Information). Available ventures and jobs were decided collaboratively, sometimes by the adults and sometimes by the students. Many ventures were carried over from previous years, and because most students were returning from their prior grades, they had some familiarity with them. The students could choose to be part of these or they could also start a new venture. To do this, they would write up a business proposal and present their ideas to the MicroSociety Coordinator. Following initial support from the coordinator, the proposal would then be presented to the MicroSociety Committee consisting of students and staff. The committee could choose to accept, decline, or send a proposal back for revisions. Anyone could be an owner of a business, but typically they were the older students who had previous MicroSociety experience and the needed capital to fund it, including funds that might be required for purchasing production materials and paying employee wages. Once a wide selection of ventures was in place, an adult facilitator was assigned to oversee each enterprise and to assist the students in their work duties.

Each student in the school chose their preferred three jobs from the advertised positions and completed an application form for each position in hopes of receiving a job interview at the upcoming Micro Job Fair, which took place near the end of September. The first positions to be hired were business managers. The decision to hire a manager was made collaboratively between the adult facilitator and the business owner after potential candidates were interviewed and resumes were examined. The managers then set up displays for the job fair and encouraged citizens to apply at their ventures.

The job fair took place soon after all managers were in place. The event occurred in the

school's gymnasium with tables set up for interviews and was run entirely by the student leaders. Managers sat at the tables and examined resumes and application forms from the pool of applicants. While some positions would have many applicants and the manager needed to create a short list of potential applicants to interview, others had only a few applicants, and some might not receive enough to fill all the positions needed to operate a particular venture. Despite these challenges, decisions needed to be made. During the interviews, each applicant was asked standard job interview questions. When the decisions were difficult, the manager would seek counsel from the venture owner, staff facilitator or even from the MicroSociety Coordinator. Students who were not successful in obtaining their preferred positions of employment were invited to choose a position from the ones not previously filled. In some cases, the MicroSociety Coordinator would consult with a child's teacher to ensure a suitable job placement was found for each student. All students in a MicroSociety school were provided with jobs, although it was expected that a student would apply for a new position every year so they could obtain as much career knowledge as possible. As Richmond (1973) stated: "In the traditional school, children have one role: student. In a Micro-Society, children are real-estate managers, brokers, transportation managers, auditors, accountants . . . bookkeepers, and so on. In the process they become students in the genuine sense—that is they learn" (p. 193).

A big part of the MicroSociety experience involved opportunities to help contribute and build a society. In addition to the many opportunities for employment in the business world of ventures and economic production, students could also work to provide service, including applying for a government position, being involved in the judicial system, or working with a nongovernmental organization such as the Helping Hearts Foundation which ran fundraising

events to help address problems in the community. In the past, these events have included raising money for the local SPCA and donating socks for community members in need.

Regardless of their position, all employed MicroSociety citizens received a monthly salary in the form of the school's currency (make believe paper bills which included a picture of the school's mascot, and which were available in small denominations modeled after the Canadian currency system). Salaries varied in amounts, but generally, the more responsibilities a position carried, such as manager or government minister, the higher the salary. A "minimum wage bill" passed by the student government ensured wages were fair; minimum wages were typically between $3 to $5/hour. In the MicroSociety private sector, wages were determined by venture owners and typically ranged from $8 to $10/hour. For the public sector positions, the government would vote for their salaries and these were generally higher than in the private sector. One year the government voted for a salary that ranged from $40–$50/hour. This proved to be an unpopular decision amongst the student population and was soon rescinded.

As in the adult world, taxes were deducted from salaries to pay for government and other not-for-profit services. The tax rate was determined by the newly elected student government, which created the "income tax bill," which typically ranged from 30%–35% of a person's income. The Goods and Services Tax was also in place, and as in the Canadian GST, has held steady set at 5% for the past several years. Following tax deductions, a student's salary was deposited monthly into student bank accounts in their Academy Branch. This money could then be withdrawn to be used at MicroSociety market days. Prior to these events, however, employees needed to learn about their jobs so they could create the goods and services that would be available for purchase at these market days.

Work-based education was provided to the student employees of MicroSociety through several channels. In addition to learning from their teachers and venture facilitators, community members provided their expertise as entrepreneurs and government leaders. Often this was done through a structure known as Micro University, where specific skills were taught to the students in relation to their ventures. These skills would include accounting and learning skills such as writing cheques, applying for loans, and creating a budget with spreadsheets. If a student was a manager or worked in the judicial system, they would learn personal management skills such as how to deal with difficult people. If students were involved in government, they would learn about decision making from guest speakers such as the mayor of the city. Students who worked in a food-based venture had to take a food safety course before being able to produce and sell food items. Typically, Micro University took place in November after the school job fair was completed and before production days. The first Micro Market would typically occur before the December school break.

In addition to the Micro University training program, there were other ways to learn about the world of work. Micro Reading College and Micro Math College were offered three times a week throughout the year to help students learn the essential literacy and numeracy skills of the curriculum, and which were applied to their various work opportunities. In addition to this, all Grade 4 and 5 students participated in the Canadian Junior Achievement Program, which prepared youth to succeed with a focus on financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and work readiness skills. Further learning was also done by examining real-world businesses like the Hershey and Apple companies. Frequent community field trips to government organizations, nonprofit organizations, and local businesses also provided a real-world context to the simulated

world of MicroSociety. Additional learning took place through on-the-job training during the production process from adult facilitators and peers.

Once all employees received initial training to carry out their job responsibilities, the next step in the business cycle was to create a product or service as outlined in the various business proposals, which generally took place in November and early December. Before operating the business venture, each owner would get a business license from the government and create a mission statement outlining the specific goals of that business. All business licenses and mission statements were required to be displayed at all times at the entrance to a business to avoid a government fine. Once these businesses were approved by the government, it was time to begin production. The products and services tended to be wide ranging and included everything from food to science experiments to craft products, and included services such as massages and manicures, and participating in wellness activities. For some examples of the business goals and licenses and the products and services produced at Academy Elementary School, please see Appendix H: The MicroSociety Experience—Background Information.

A market economy is designed around the key concepts of producers and consumers and decisions around supply and demand for goods and services. Business ventures at Academy Elementary School were created to make products or services. The businesses were established by the owners, who then hired managers and other workers to help create and deliver the products to market. Business owners made decisions regarding what types of products or services would be offered. The owners met with employees and brainstormed to help make decisions on the materials needed to purchase to produce products. Materials were purchased at the school's warehouse. Other expenses, such as rent and employee salaries, had to be considered when determining the prices of the products or services to be offered. All of the

production preparations took time and collaboration, but because of this, these children were given a “greater command of the school world” (Richmond, 1973, p. 199).

The success of the students’ hard work on production days would be determined at the school’s first MicroSociety Market Day which generally took place before the December school break. Students were divided into two groups and wore different colored t-shirts to indicate their group affiliation. For one half of the market day, the students worked at their jobs and for the other half, they participated as consumers in the marketplace. Students would visit the Academy Branch of their bank to take out their school currency and then peruse the marketplace to decide how to spend their hard-earned money. Students were given a choice to spend their money on market days or save their earnings for later use. Students could pool their monthly earnings and save them until the end of the year to purchase larger items at the school’s Micro Auction in May. Students could also choose to keep their profits for the following year or use their money to purchase shares or reinvest back into their ventures.

I attended several market days, and my observations on those days have helped me have a deeper understanding of how the MicroSociety program operated. During visits to different Micro Market Days at Academy Elementary School, I have appreciated the effort and creativity students put into selling their products and services. Their business sense was shown through their confidence, interpersonal skills, and the level of seriousness they provided in carrying out their work responsibilities. Over the years, some businesses have come and gone. Both Penguin Avenue and J and A Smoothies, which provided food services, have been replaced by the Academy Cafe. Cherry Sweet Jewelry no longer operates, but now the Academy Spa and Salon sells student-made jewelry to its customers. These ventures are similar to those in Richmond’s MicroSociety school, which had “students involved in a great many enterprises including

working at the post office, making and selling comic books, and producing and selling candles" (Richmond, 1973, p. 181). Every year, the program was different, reflecting the imagination and interests of the students.

Following market day, business owners examined their profits and made production decisions based on how well their goods or services sold. Market days normally took place bi-weekly for the remainder of the school year. Feedback was provided throughout by managers, business owners, adult facilitators, peers, and government members who carried out monthly inspections. Failure and mistakes were considered an essential part of the learning experience in MicroSociety. As in the real world, business failures sometimes occurred. These generally happened when businesses did not make a profit and the owner could no longer afford to make products or pay their employees. Businesses that did not respond to feedback or make good decisions generally ended up going bankrupt and closing. When this happened, the employees become unemployed and had to find work elsewhere.

Students could also be fired for not carrying out their employment responsibilities. If a student were not doing their job, an owner would work with the manager and sometimes the adult facilitator to improve the student's performance. Although rare, students who did not perform in their chosen jobs might be fired. This typically was done by the MicroSociety coordinator after consultations with the manager and owner. Students then would go to the employment office to work on their resume, complete new job applications, and meet with an employment agent who arranged job interviews for them in hopes of securing new employment. Students who were temporarily unemployed did not receive a salary, which limited their spending power on market days. Some years, depending on the decisions of the student government, students could secure unemployment insurance after filling out an application form.

Sometimes, as in the adult world of work, students may not have enjoyed their job and would want to change. When this happened, the first step was generally to talk to the manager or owner in charge and work to see if changes could be made. If changes were not feasible, the adult facilitator would work with the MicroSociety committee and the employment office to help the student find a new job.

One of the school year's most popular events was Micro Night, held later in the school year. This event opened the Micro Market for visitors, community members, dignitaries, and current and former parents and students. I have attended Micro Night on several occasions, and each time I have been given the equivalent of $20 in school currency—enough to purchase several items. Micro Night was generally a crowded affair, and items in high demand sold quickly. In the past, I have purchased plants from the greenhouse, smoothies and popcorn, and more substantial items like student-made birdhouses. Former students who had previously purchased shares in companies returned to check on the progress of their investments, sometimes selling their shares to current students interested in purchasing a venture. All shares expired once a student graduated from high school.

The MicroSociety Program at Academy Elementary School concluded near the end of the school year. The Grade 5 students were given special treatment as they would soon leave elementary school and join a new middle school before heading on to high school in Grade 9. In addition to what is often an emotional farewell ceremony, the Grade 5 students took part in a special Market Day in which a professional auctioneer was invited to the annual Micro Auction. Students, anxious to spend their year's earnings, would bid on items ranging from Tim Hortons' gift certificates to sports equipment to Microsoft X-boxes that were purchased through the school. While the students in the other grades looked forward to another year of "Micro," Grade

5 students reflected on their time in the program and how it brought real-world learning into their school lives.

Academy Elementary School has welcomed many visitors throughout the years. The school has had visits from former and current Ministry of Education officials, school district delegates, representatives from MicroSociety International, and recently, an international team of teachers visited for a few days to learn more about the program. City council members, judges, business people and other experts have helped with special celebrations such as the Swearing-in Ceremony of the new government, the Micro Auction, or the year-end Micro Awards where local dignitaries, school officials, parents, staff, and students would gather to celebrate the hard work accomplished throughout the year. I conclude this chapter with another vignette describing this special occasion.

The Micro Awards: A Celebration of Student Engagement

It is the end of the school year, and the year-end Micro Awards ceremony is about to begin. The students are buzzing with enthusiasm, and guests and parents are talking among themselves about the unique nature of the MicroSociety program. Teachers are sitting with their students in their various ventures. The school administration and MicroSociety coordinators are watching from the sidelines, and once again, it is the students who are in charge.

True to spirit, the awards ceremony is run entirely by the students. The adults, including teachers, parents, and special guests, sit back and enjoy the award celebrations. The Master and Mistress of Ceremonies describe how preparations started several weeks earlier when a Micro-Awards Committee of students and staff was established. This committee assigned businesses to different categories and decided which businesses were the best in each category. We learned about how the committee nominated three ventures for each category, and how all the students in

the school voted for those they felt were most deserving. The MicroSociety adult coordinators tabulated ballots and the results were sealed in an envelope, soon to be opened at the day's official ceremony.

As an attendee, I watched the drama unfold as envelopes were opened and awards were presented to the entire staff of a venture, including the adult facilitators. The participants all took the stage and the manager, on behalf of their team, would offer an acceptance speech in which they thanked the customers, employees, and the adult facilitators. With applause and an award in hand, the winners would leave to have their photos taken on the red carpet. As the ceremony progressed, they would eventually return to their seats to celebrate with the other award victors. This year's awards included categories such as: Most Inviting, Most Educational, Best Customer Involvement, Best Handmade Products, Most Team Spirit, Most Creative, Most Entertaining, Most Professional, Best Nonprofit, Best Value Prices, Best Customer Service, and awards for Promoting Healthy Lifestyles and for being Friends of the Environment. The award ceremony included the presentation of gifts to special guests and sponsors, energetic music, and slideshow presentations. The ceremony concluded with a formal speech by the MicroSociety Coordinator, who encouraged the students to continue to be agents of change in their communities and to always seek ways to improve not only themselves, but the world in which they lived.

Attending the year-end awards ceremony was a valuable experience for me. I observed how enthusiastic, appreciative, respectful, and attentive students were throughout the ceremony. I was intrigued by the level of student engagement during the 2-hour program, and I was reminded of the complexity of experiences that the MicroSociety program at Academy Elementary School provided for children. In the next chapter, I reintroduce my participants and

present the findings of my research by sharing their stories about how they experienced the MicroSociety program.

Chapter 6: Findings—Participant Accounts of the MicroSociety School Experience

In this chapter, I relay my participants' accounts of how they experienced the MicroSociety program. These accounts describe "events that have already occurred" (Ellis, 2010, p. 484) as elementary-aged children at Academy Elementary School. Ellis (2009) stated, "analysis and interpretation of case study data entail the crafting of narratively written portraits of participants" (p. 486). Although my participants were similar in that they all experienced being students in a MicroSociety school, they were diverse in their backgrounds and experiences within the school. Some were involved in business ventures, while others were involved in government roles and service organizations. Some experienced the school for all 6 years of elementary school, while another only attended the program for 1 year. Three participants are now middle years' students and three are now high school students, including one who recently graduated from Grade 12. All but one of the participants who agreed to be interviewed were female.

I present findings by sharing the accounts and experiences of participants. For my dissertation, I focused primarily on the four participants involved with MicroSociety for all 6 years of their elementary education. For each participant, I describe how they experienced the MicroSociety program, including their roles and responsibilities during the program and what they felt they learned by participating in the program. I present participants' experiences in chronological order from the start of the program in kindergarten until they left at the end of Grade 5. I conclude each participant's account with a brief description of how they have been involved with the MicroSociety program while attending their other middle schools and high schools.

Winter's MicroSociety Experience

Winter was a cheerful participant who arrived early for interviews with a friendly smile. Winter was a Grade 7 student in a local K–8 school. She was an exuberant participant who was able to vividly describe the MicroSociety program that operated at Academy Elementary School. She participated in MicroSociety for 6 years, and has attended two different schools since leaving her elementary school. Winter said that she enjoyed her MicroSociety school more than the other schools because she loves learning and hard work. Winter said she initially experienced frustration in the program, but with experience and training, she started to enjoy it. Her roles, such as bank manager and being elected member of the legislature and appointed to the ministry of business, provided increased responsibilities and challenges and helped her develop confidence.

Early MicroSociety Memories: "Nobody Would Hire Me"

Winter's experience with MicroSociety began in kindergarten. She recalled how she was put into a venture called Center City, which she described as "basically a place where you got to go play games" (October 16, 2018). In this venture, Winter was a cashier, but she did not recall having enough responsibility at the time. She found this job to be menial and looked forward to when she was older and could take on more jobs allowing her to be creative and have more responsibility.

Following kindergarten, Winter continued to experience frustration with the employment aspect of MicroSociety. Most students who applied for jobs at the MicroSociety Job Fair were hired in one of the three jobs for which they interviewed. Winter did not experience this feeling of being selected for one of her preferred jobs. She described how employers "want to know everything good about you and everything bad about you" (October 16, 2018) and believed she

did not receive employment because other students did not like her. She expressed how "I was really sad because I thought that nobody would hire me, nobody wanted me to work for them" (October 16, 2018). She expressed how "it really hurts to know that somebody thinks . . . you're not a worker, you're not the kind of person that we want in our venture" (October 23, 2018). She said these experiences were reflected in how confident she felt early on in the program: "I didn't like the job interviews . . . cause I was always scared of what people would say about me" (October 23, 2018).

For several years, Winter was denied employment in the positions for which she applied. She desired to have a job where she could make products, be creative, and use her artistic talent, which she felt was her greatest asset: "I wanted to create my own job but I never got to" (October 16, 2018). Winter wanted to work in ventures such as Busy Beavers and Mad Lab, where students made products to sell to other students. Instead, she said she was assigned to ventures that no one else wanted by the adult coordinators of the program. One role was a clerical position in Grade 2 as assistant bookkeeper in the bank. Even though Winter "wanted to work at these really cool places . . . they kept putting me in the bank" (October 16, 2018). As an employee, she felt she did not have a choice and that the coordinators "would just assign me to a job" (October 23, 2018).

With additional experience and confidence, Winter began to embrace her new role in the bank and was appointed the head bookkeeper in Grade 3. Winter completed additional training through Micro University, where she learned about new responsibilities and was taught to make decisions as part of her work. Winter described the process: "You'd learn how to do it. So, you'd show them [the other employees] how you do it, and how it's supposed to be" (October 30,

2018). Winter enjoyed this supervisory role and the opportunity to teach others about how to do their work, which helped her to believe more in herself and her abilities.

Although it was not her initial preference, Winter learned to appreciate working as a bookkeeper in the bank because of the responsibility and challenge. She said she worked hard to feel "kind of confident in myself" because "I wanted to . . . set a good example for the smaller kids who were working with me" (October 16, 2018). Winter felt that because she was older and a role model for the younger children, she needed to demonstrate more self-assurance in knowing how to do her job well.

Winter's comments about her early experiences in the MicroSociety program reflected mixed feelings. Being appointed to positions that were not preferred choices impacted her negatively though she felt she had specific talents. Her lack of self-assurance might explain why, despite wanting to work in more creative areas, Winter did not take the risk of developing a venture or purchasing one already in place. To deal with these disappointments, Winter's parents encouraged her and helped her see that despite the interviews, she was still a creative person with a good work ethic. They reminded her that these new opportunities were providing her with additional talents she would be able to use in the future, as demonstrated in the leadership role Winter acquired during her Grade 4 year.

Managing a Bank: "Kind of Like Learning it Twice"

As Winter gained more confidence and skills in bookkeeping and supervising others, she assumed more responsibilities in the MicroSociety program when she became a bank manager in Grade 4. Her new role provided Winter opportunities to develop her leadership skills through decision making, working with others, and modeling for other children.

Winter described some decisions she had to make as bank manager. These responsibilities included hiring employees:

> I was manager in the bank so I'd get these envelopes and each would have a kid's name and they would say they wanted to work here, and I would choose the top 10. . . . I always felt bad 'cause I knew I needed to pick the people I could trust, the ones that wouldn't be fooling around. (October 23, 2018)

Perhaps based on her feelings and negative experiences with job interviews, Winter was sensitive to this process. She had previously felt she was not successful in interviews because people did not take time to get to know her and the talents she possessed. As a result, she gave due diligence to the interview process so applicants could clearly describe why they were suitable candidates. Winter understood that positions of power carried more responsibility, but she did not want students to have the same "bad Micro experience with the job interviews" (October 23, 2018) as she had when she was younger.

With a new position, Winter needed to further her learning. Additional training was provided through Micro University, guest speakers, and community field trips, which were a component of every MicroSociety venture. Because she was bank manager, she was able to tour local banks and ask questions to bankers about their jobs. Visiting the banks and talking to actual bankers provided a sense of relevancy for Winter and helped her begin to see connections between her role and the business world in her community.

Working with other children in her new role was a huge benefit to Winter. She described how, in the role of manager, she taught other students how to do things, such as counting money or using technology to create spreadsheets. Teaching others was helpful for Winter's learning. She suggested, "it was kind of like learning it twice. You already learned it once, and now you're

teaching other kids and you're learning from what they're saying" (October 23, 2018). She found with younger children who lacked experience, it was advantageous to "pair them up, like a bigger kid and a younger kid so they'd teach them how to work" (October 23, 2018).

Winter's confidence grew with additional work and responsibilities of being the bank manager. She was able to "make a decision on who would be employee of the year . . . and I got to assign everybody a different job" (October 16, 2018). She determined employee wages, typically without adults. As grown-ups stepped back to watch how issues were addressed, Winter could move forward and feel a sense of agency through decision-making and added responsibilities.

The MicroSociety philosophy of empowering students to solve problems was a benefit for Winter. She described how adults were there to supervise and observe how things were progressing; they would only intervene when things were not going well. Winter explained:

> They want us to do this by ourselves because basically the whole point of Micro is learning about the job experience, the life experience, the obstacles, the challenges you need to go through . . . and they just didn't want to influence our decisions. (October 23, 2018)

Being a manager meant trying to lead others and working well with employees. Winter tried to demonstrate attentiveness to her employees, and even when they were not working well, she would give them "a second chance . . . to work" (October 23, 2018) so that they could do their best to prove themselves as good workers. As a manager, Winter thought it was important to be open to having her employees approach her if there was a problem, such as when students did not work well with others. She stated she would "try to make it work but I'd always advise

them [the employees] to not be fooling around and distract others" (October 23, 2018). Being in charge of other students, however, could sometimes be intimidating. Winter initially:

> felt quite scared like "oh no, what if I mess up! What if my whole group is not going to listen!" But I kind of felt in charge, I had a responsibility on my shoulders. I had a big responsibility. I had to be responsible. I had to be very smart about it and I had to prove to myself that I know this and that I can do all this when I grow up. (October 23, 2018)

Winter spoke of the benefits of learning to work with people who are not your friends and who can be difficult. She felt this was important as "It's just learning to understand the person, getting to know them more" (November 6, 2018), which in turn would lead to more successful work experiences for everyone. As in the adult world, people in positions of power and responsibility often have to carry out actions to help influence those who are not contributing or who are "slacking off" (October 30, 2018). Winter provided a good description of how she dealt with this matter:

> I had some kids that would just sit there and be like, "what do I have to do?" I'd just sit there and give a little discipline, "why aren't you doing your job? I gave you a specific job." Usually I tell them why they're not doing it, and then I tell them "do you need some help?" If they need some, I'd help them with that so they'd get used to it. So I'd basically go up to them and be like "let's do some work. You know you need to be involved. You need to be more active. You wanted this job so you have to work for it." (October 23, 2018)

Winter valued her position as a manager and working collaboratively with others. As an active person, she described how "I like to get busy. I like to do something. I want to get doing and do more to the business that we're in" (October 16, 2018).

Working in the Government: "I Won't Need Help"

In subsequent years, Winter became more involved in her MicroSociety school, and she carried on with her move into government for her final year at Academy Elementary School. After her election to government, Winter was appointed as the minister of business. She was excited not to be an "employee anymore," and when she received the position, it was the "best day ever" (October 16, 2018). She felt her government position gave her a different perspective than previous roles, and she took on high profile responsibilities, such as providing feedback to different ventures and selecting the Business of the Year Award. Through this position, she felt respected, which she said further helped to develop her confidence.

As minister of business, Winter quickly realized the difference in being a government member when compared to an employee. She described how her perceptions changed:

> I was never in the government before . . . but once you get to really be in it, you know all the responsibilities. Before I would be like "all the government does is announce what time it is," walk around, make sure everyone's doing their job, but it's more important than that. It's kind of a small group where we're learning, yet we're in-charge. We're trying to teach other people how this is going. (October 23, 2018)

The MicroSociety government of student leaders debated policies, passed bills, and ensured their society ran effectively. In her role as minister of business, Winter learned about how the government operated:

> We learned . . . how the whole process went . . . I learned how the bills were passed . . . We got to design what bills we should make and what rules would be good for Micro . . . just the whole operation of how the government went. It was really, really, really, really cool and I just enjoyed that experience. (October 23, 2018)

For Winter, the most rewarding parts of the MicroSociety program were field trips in the community. As a government member, she was one of three students chosen to go to the Legislature in Edmonton. She was honored by this opportunity:

> I felt really rewarded because I knew that people thought that I'm a hard worker and I appreciate my job . . . it was really, really honouring to know that I was one that was working the hardest, that I was proving that I could do this work on my own, that I don't need anyone else helping me. (October 23, 2018)

In other words, she felt this experience helped her to see herself in a more confident light, as a person who was respected and appreciated for her contributions to her school community.

As minister of business, Winter provided feedback to other students. She explained to me how her work was to rate businesses and give them suggestions on how to improve. She felt valued when advising others who listened to and considered her ideas. Likewise, she found it valuable to receive feedback from her fellow government members. Winter believed receiving suggestions on how to improve was helpful because "When we get the feedback, we want to learn from those mistakes" (October 30, 2018). Her favorite responsibility as minister was evaluating different ventures and deciding which ones to nominate for the year-end Micro Awards. Winter chose the businesses to be nominated and would generally nominate three in each category. All students were then allowed to cast votes. True to the spirit of MicroSociety, the awards ceremony was run entirely by the students, so the adults, including teachers, parents, and special guests, could sit back and "soak in the MicroSociety experience" (October 23, 2018).

Winter cherished the additional leadership responsibilities provided during her final 2 years at Academy Elementary School. As manager of the bank and minister of business, she believed "we were all basically leaders of the school; we are influencing younger children on

their actions" (October 16, 2018). These roles provided her with knowledge and skills that gave her a "huge advantage on how the future will be because I know all this stuff. I won't need help" (October 30, 2018).

Life as a MicroCitizen: "You Lose Track of Time"

Winter described her 6 years with the MicroSociety program as "extraordinary . . . a learning experience" (November 6, 2018). She spoke about how time moved fast when doing MicroSociety because it was fun, interesting, and always changing. She appreciated how "Every year you'd feel the same except you have a different position, you have a different job" (November 6, 2018). The constant change within the program was exciting for Winter. In addition to changing roles every year, Winter treasured other aspects of the MicroSociety program, including various initiatives designed to provide service to the school and local community. Winter was fond of ideas like the sock drive and battery recycling and saw these occasions as important ways to help take care of others.

In addition to having a variety of work-related roles and responsibilities, Winter was a MicroCitizen at Academy Elementary School. She shared many incidents of what it was like to live in her school's minisociety. One of her earliest memories of kindergarten was when she ran across the hall and was given a ticket by the Royal Academy Mounted Police (RAMP). Although upset, she paid her fine and believed the student-run police force was necessary for her school. She believed "we have to respect our surroundings, we have to be polite, we have to act appropriately" (October 16, 2018). Despite this feeling of support, she admitted that "RAMP was a scary thing" (October 30, 2018), and whenever she saw student police on patrol, she vacated the area.

Winter shared that her favorite part of the MicroSociety program overall was participating in market days. She described how quickly time passed when participating in these experiences. Her words captured this feeling:

> With Micro, when you'd go shopping, you wouldn't want it to stop. You feel like you've been shopping for 5 minutes, when it's already been a half an hour. It's just an experience where you get to learn new things, you get to feel like you're in the real world, like you're actually in a job and you're actually getting paid. When it comes to Micro shopping, you get to withdraw your money. You get to hang out with your friends, shop, and it's kind of just really fun. You lose track of time obviously, like all the time. (November 6, 2018)

Market days provided a sense of freedom and choice, which were important to Winter. She appreciated "how you got to shop for whatever you wanted" and "how you had the freedom to go out" (October 23, 2018). During one interview, Winter brought one of her favorite purchases to show me; a creative hair tie made entirely out of duct tape. Winter indicated she liked having the choice of how she spent her earnings and the freedom to go shopping with her friends. She appreciated having the ability to decide not to spend her money and instead saved it for future markets or experiences, like the year-end Micro-Auction.

Winter's final year at Academy Elementary School went by quickly but ended with much celebration. She remembered the excitement of bidding for large and more expensive items at the Micro-Auction. This event was followed by the year-end awards ceremony. Winners were announced in an elaborate ceremony with speeches, awards, music, and plenty of photographs to highlight the victors; as Winter described, it was "kind of like the Grammys" (October 23, 2018).

The year concluded with the Grade 5 farewell, an event that Winter found sad, as she did not want to leave school.

Winter's enthusiasm in describing her MicroSociety experience provided a strong sense of how she felt she grew through the program. During her years in the program, Winter learned "that you need to work harder to be smarter" (October 16, 2018), and that this can be accomplished through collaboration, leading, and teaching others. Winter's confidence grew through MicroSociety as she discovered new talents and feelings of empowerment through choice and increased decision making.

Winter has continued to be involved with MicroSociety, and has been involved in special event celebrations at the school. She returns to Academy Elementary School every year for Micro Night and more "Micro shopping time" (October 23, 2018). She enjoyed that her little brother was now attending Academy Elementary School, and she relished hearing about his experiences. Winter liked to provide him with tips so that he could have the best MicroSociety experience possible.

Eva's MicroSociety Experience

Eva was an energetic student who was often out of breath when arriving for our interviews. She lived in the neighborhood, so foot power was how she got around, and often she was coming from home, volleyball practice, or a student leadership activity at her K–8 school. Eva was equally as energetic in our conversations. She was chatty in nature, which was sometimes hard to keep up with as she switched from topic to topic with little room for pause. Our interviews tended to run over, and we rarely got through all my questions.

Like Winter, Eva was a Grade 7 student who had participated in the MicroSociety program for all 6 years of her elementary education. She was a participant with a capacity to

describe, in detail, her past experiences as a student of the MicroSociety program offered at Academy Elementary School. She was a boisterous and confident participant who was willing to share information during the three interviews we had together in Fall 2018. When asked why she remembered MicroSociety so well, she simply stated it "has been . . . a big part of my life, from the time that I was 5 years old, all the way 'till like even now" (October 17, 2018). Eva commented on how she generally liked school, although her best learning experiences were when she was part of MicroSociety.

Early MicroSociety Memories: "Everything Was Being Done for Us"

Eva joined the kindergarten of Academy Elementary School several years after the MicroSociety program was established. It was customary for the kindergarten class to run the post office venture. Eva recalled having to deliver school mail throughout the building, wearing her post office uniform. While holding hands with her kindergarten friends, they would push the postal cart from room to room, ensuring on-time mail deliveries.

Another one of Eva's earliest memories was running for government in Grade 1. She recalled making campaign posters with her Mom "because I was 6 and couldn't draw" (October 17, 2018). In addition to making a poster, she had to give a speech. Eva was not elected but told me she was not disappointed by this experience and eventually would try again to work in government in the future because she preferred to be involved as much as possible.

Eva found it difficult to recall her early years in MicroSociety. She found the program to be fun for the most part, but she remembered some negative experiences. She did not like it when "everything was being done for us" (October 17, 2018) by the adults and recalled a particular teacher who was "really, really over-controlling" (October 17, 2018). Eva felt students were not provided with as many responsibilities as she thought they could have handled. She was

not sure if this was because the students were too young to handle the duties or because the program was still in its infancy stages, and some teachers were not yet comfortable having the children do the work. For Eva, this lack of ownership over her learning in her early years gave her some mixed feelings about the program, and she said it would cause her to seek out future roles with more autonomy.

Learning About the Business World: "MicroSociety Makes Life Lessons Fun"

Eva was provided with opportunities to take more responsibility in Grade 2. Rather than applying for jobs in the annual job fair and waiting for someone to hire her, Eva decided to take a risk and purchase a venture. This role typically went to older students with several years of experience in MicroSociety. She became one of the youngest venture owners ever in Grade 2 when she purchased Penguin Avenue with a partner from Grade 3. This venture was a cafe style business that sold tasty treats to customers on market day, such as grilled cheese sandwiches, hotdogs, popcorn, cookies, fruit, and vegetables. With so much responsibility at such a young age, Eva found that "it was stressful, but it was stressful in a good way" (October 17, 2018). According to Eva, the time invested in doing the work of MicroSociety was well worth it because even though "We would lose class time for Micro . . . we wouldn't lose our education" (November 15, 2019).

Eva's little restaurant venture was so successful it won a Best Business Award at the end-of-year Micro Awards. She and her partner were interviewed in an article for a local magazine, an artifact she shared with me at one interview. She proudly read the entire article to me, and felt honored to be interviewed for the article. She was featured on the cover of the magazine. Eva expressed that she enjoyed being an owner because she preferred to be the boss and take charge.

As a business owner, she felt she had more power to make decisions without feeling controlled by someone else, whether another child or an adult supervisor.

Eva took on adult-like responsibilities through the MicroSociety program, which gave her a sense of being in charge. She described how MicroSociety was like the real world because "You got to get a job. You got to make a resume and an application" (October 27, 2018), and "it seemed more relevant" (November 15, 2018). As a business owner, Eva described how "We had to fill out the paperwork . . . to get a loan from the bank" (October 17, 2018), and just like in the real world, the bank charged business owners interest. She appreciated learning about the real world and "how nothing in life is free" (October 27, 2018). She believed not only did "MicroSociety make life lessons fun" (October 27, 2018), it made her feel more grown up.

Developing New Skills in Government Work: "More of a People Person"

As a Grade 3 student, Eva decided to try a different role. She was elected as a member of Parliament and became minister of business, a role that was also usually given to older students. Her new role involved a lot of public speaking outside of the school and Eva recalled presenting to local businesses and service groups. Although she was nervous at first, it was through these experiences that Eva learned she was good at public speaking. Although there was not an actual script for the presentation, Eva did recall practicing beforehand, so she felt confident with the content and the questions the audience would ask her. She enjoyed making these presentations on her own, but also appreciated the fact that the teachers were nearby. Eva commented that she "definitely learned communication skills" (October 27, 2018) from MicroSociety, which gave her confidence "that I can do so much more than I actually think that I can" (November 15, 2018).

One of Eva's favorite roles as a government member was touring visitors around the school on special Micro event days, such as market days and Micro Night. On these days, the school would open to visitors who would, upon entrance to the school, be directed to the Government office. Eva would welcome them, provide a short history about the MicroSociety program, and then take groups around to visit various ventures. Eva felt these kinds of responsibilities "definitely makes you more of a people person . . . cause you're interacting with people every time you're in Micro" (November 15, 2018). Eva valued working with a variety of different people during her time in government. She appreciated this social interaction because "time always goes by really quick [*sic*] because we have a lot to do and a little amount of time" (October 27, 2018). Despite enjoying working in government, Eva returned to the business world once again in Grade 4 to further develop her entrepreneurial skills.

Returning to the Business World: "You Got to Do Hands-On Learning"

In Grade 4, Eva was an owner and bookkeeper of the Academy Spa and Salon. One of her key reasons for purchasing a business was the opportunity to talk and share ideas. She treasured how "You got to do hands-on learning" (October 27, 2018), which, in her new business, included doing manicures and coloring hair for customers. She preferred being able to "move around instead of sitting in the desk all day" as with her regular classes.

Eva described herself as a visual and physical learner who liked to experience learning firsthand. As an active learner, she appreciated learning about how businesses operated through field trips, guest speakers, and by examining different business companies through mini-research projects. She recalled studying how the Apple Company and Hershey Company got started and why they became such successful businesses. Eva particularly regarded those responsibilities that she felt were useful, including how to do payroll, how to write cheques, how to pay rent and

G.S.T., and how to deal with employees. Eva described these kinds of experiences as "hands-on," which allowed her to "get deeper into learning" because "it's more fun" (November 15, 2018). Although owning a business was hard work, it was Eva's favorite part of MicroSociety.

As both the bookkeeper and owner of the Academy Spa and Salon venture, Eva found there were some aspects of being a businessperson she did not like. One of the worst aspects of owning her own business was that the adult coordinators sometimes "forced us to hire" students who "nobody wanted to hire, because they weren't very good employees" (October 17, 2018). She preferred to make those decisions herself but understood the idea that all students needed to be employed.

Eva valued the feeling that came from the hard work in her venture but emphasized it was challenging at times. She found it demanding and "a little overwhelming because I had things to do with Micro, and I had things to do with school, and I had things to do with myself like just my free time" (October 17, 2018). She mentioned, however, she eventually was able to find a balance.

For her final year at Academy Elementary School, Eva returned to work in the government and was heavily involved in various leadership roles throughout the school. She was voted member of Parliament for Grade 5. Eva told me she felt validated, feeling she had a voice in her school. She often represented her class in discussions about school-based concerns brought forward by other students or staff and helped make decisions on running the school.

Life as a MicroCitizen: "Embedded in Your Brain"

Eva enjoyed her 6 years at Academy Elementary School and felt the MicroSociety program provided many benefits. She described the MicroSociety program as "a truly innovative way to learn" (October 27, 2018), and she attributed this experience to helping her become more

outgoing, confident, and communicative. Eva appreciated how the program was "Fun . . . hands-on . . . interactive . . . interesting" (November 15, 2018) and felt the program motivated her to work hard as a student. She explained, with MicroSociety, "you're engaged in your work and you're focused in your work" (November 15, 2018). Eva believed MicroSociety "really wasn't a break" from school "it was just like a way to learn . . . a different perspective" (November 15, 2018).

Eva treasured the real-world applications of the MicroSociety program. She relished how "we actually learned what it's like to earn money" to "be a working person and earn money and . . . spend it" (October 17, 2018). Of course, this also included paying taxes and bills, but Eva appreciated this aspect too. The opportunity to make business decisions and have a voice in her community had an impact on Eva. When describing MicroSociety as real-world experience, Eva gave it a "49 out of 50" (November 15, 2018) for having a curriculum focused on life skills, such as financial literacy, leadership, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication skills.

Eva valued the structure of the MicroSociety program, which may have been why she recalled the experience so vividly. She was attuned to the integrated nature of the MicroSociety program and how subjects were fused into the MicroSociety concept: "There was Math, but you don't recognize it as Math, you recognize it as Micro . . . they kind of sneak math in there" (November 15, 2018). Other subjects, like language arts, were integrated through Micro College and Micro University. For Eva, MicroSociety was a holistic experience; it was "embedded in your brain . . . It's just stuck there . . . It's how you process things . . . because you learn them so much and you do them so much" (November 15, 2018).

Eva benefited from the MicroSociety program and its focus on real-world learning. She credited her strong communication and math skills to what she learned in the program and saw

the benefits of these skills as a student in her new school. Eva preferred the many opportunities in MicroSociety to work with her hands, to collaborate with others, and to experience additional learning through field trips and guest speakers. She appreciated taking on adult responsibilities and roles, and preferred when the adults would be hands off and let her make the decisions. Even at a young age, Eva liked to be in charge. She experienced some setbacks in the program but seemed to be resilient and confident in seeking out new opportunities that helped her develop confidence.

For Eva, MicroSociety was "just a normal part of your life" (October 27, 2018). Even though she was no longer a student at Academy Elementary School, she has still been involved in the program. Eva is part of the MicroSociety Alumni Association, made up entirely of former students, who work with the MicroSociety Coordinator to plan special activities throughout the school year. Most recently, she was elected President of the Alumni Association.

London's MicroSociety Experience

London was a Grade 7 student who participated in the MicroSociety Program for all 6 years of her elementary education. I first met London during lunch hour at her current middle school. From the first few minutes of our interview, it was clear to me that London was a confident student who conducted herself in a mature, business-like manner. She let me know time was limited due to her involvement in several activities in and out of her school, including leadership, sports, dance, and drama productions. Despite her full schedule, she was excited to contribute to my study, and we were able to squeeze in four interviews over her lunch hours. Although these interviews were a bit shorter than others, London provided valuable data to my study, and in particular, the aspect of the program regarding the role of adults, and the responsibilities that made the students feel like adults. She explains: "They wanted the kids to be

in-charge. They wanted the kids to learn what it's like to be in charge . . . to be more of a speaker and a leader" (October 22, 2018). With her strong communication and leadership skills, London articulated insightful views about the MicroSociety program.

Early MicroSociety Memories: "The Kids Weren't Really In Charge"

London held a variety of positions while participating in the MicroSociety program. She began as an employee in the post office in kindergarten, a job she did not like because "you had to do it, you didn't have a choice" (October 22, 2018). She was not sure if the post office had changed since she was a young student, but at the time, "whenever you went into kindergarten, you had to be a part of the post office" (October 22, 2018). London did not recall what responsibilities she had in Grade 1 and described it as "a complete blur" (October 15, 2018).

London fondly remembers working in the popular Penguin Avenue restaurant in Grade 2, where she helped to prepare food items to sell on market day. She preferred this kind of job because it involved working with her hands, and students in the venture got to eat leftover food not sold at the market. One disappointing aspect of the job was her feeling that "The kids weren't really in charge" (October 22, 2018). She believed this was evidenced by how much assistance children needed from adults. London preferred when adults would provide instructions and then step back and let the children work. Things began to improve for London when she began working in Busy Beavers in Grade 3.

Busy Beavers: "It's an Actual Job"

London enjoyed her 2 years in the Busy Beavers venture where students made crafts, such as birdhouses and Christmas ornaments, sold at the marketplace. She was grateful for the opportunity to work with her hands and treasured the choices provided in this venture. As part of Busy Beavers, "we'd have a lot of choices because the warehouse would be full of . . .

birdhouses, canvases, rocks to paint . . . it was great" (October 22, 2018). She appreciated how, when doing a project, "we'd have a choice to do the project in a group, a duo, trio, or solo" (October 15, 2018). She felt more valued in this role because the employees helped make decisions for the venture: "We would make ideas of what to sell for next day, what not to sell, or to what to save for Micro Night" (October 22, 2018). London preferred this aspect of her work as she relied less on adults and more on herself and friends. Opportunities like this gave London a feeling of being in control and in charge.

London cherished the additional responsibilities when she became a manager of Busy Beavers in Grade 4. She appreciated a role that made her feel more like she was in the adult world. She preferred how being a manager seemed like "an actual job" where "You'd have the profit, the income, the loans and all that" (October 15, 2018). She learned how to operate a business by taking courses in Micro University and through first-hand experiences. As manager, she created a budget, hired employees, created work schedules, and obtained supplies, and if "we did not have enough to buy [supplies] from the warehouse . . . you would get a loan for that" (October 15, 2018).

Managing money and workers was an area in which London experienced some frustrations at first. She found it "too much" when she was "managing all those kids screaming and running around" (October 29, 2018), but eventually learned to cope by ensuring there was lots of work for them to do. As manager, she had to pay her employee's salary and learned that if you borrowed too much money from the bank, "you were in debt. You couldn't take out anymore" (October 29, 2018).

Sometimes, being treated like an adult meant learning by making mistakes. London recalled such an incident: "There was one time where I spent over my limit . . . I was in the

negative for the whole year" (October 15, 2018). London described how owing money to the bank was difficult because even though "There were shopping days . . . you had to work" (October 29, 2018). Experiencing real-life consequences was not always pleasant for London, but she believed mistakes were evidence that you were working hard to learn.

Helping Hearts: "Their Time to Be a Leader"

For her last year in the MicroSociety program, London worked in Helping Hearts, a nonprofit service organization that provided service to the local community. After a year as manager of Helping Hearts, she was a bit reluctant to take on the additional responsibilities of being an owner of this venture in Grade 5, due to increased workload. She eventually appreciated the opportunity, when she realized, "It was my last year. . . . I thought I might as well do what I've always wanted to do and . . . take the chance to do it" (October 29, 2018). Thus, London took a risk and became an owner and manager of Helping Hearts in Grade 5, a position she cherished as it "felt good for helping people who needed it" (October 22, 2018). Her work in organizing fundraisers to help the school and community agencies, like the SPCA and community food bank, made her not only feel important but that she could make a difference.

London treasured the challenges of being an owner and manager at a level beyond what she experienced as manager of Busy Beavers. Her favorite part of Helping Hearts was "working with a lot of people" and "teaching them new stuff" (October 22, 2018). She seemed to relish the process of fostering collaboration in others, as she described how she would provide time for her employees to work together and brainstorm: "We would write something on the Smartboard and then we would talk about it, discuss it and see if it was a good idea" (October 15, 2018). London was grateful for how everyone was involved and contributed to the venture and felt it was a way to develop leadership skills amongst her employees. She explained how working like this was

"their time to be a leader; that's their time to make ideas that would help the business" (October 22, 2018).

London described herself as an independent person who preferred when the adults left her alone and in charge. Like the other participants, London worked with an adult facilitator who "wanted me to make all the decisions . . . he was just there to support and help . . . he wasn't there to make the decisions" (October 22, 2018). London's facilitator, who was a MicroSociety Coordinator, frequently dealt with paperwork and other aspects of running the program. London described how when "he was out of the room . . . I was put in charge" (October 22, 2018). London felt privileged through this additional sense of agency:

> I was one of the students that was allowed places that other students weren't like the photocopier room. I would always go down there and grab things . . . I was allowed in the backroom of the library . . . I was just allowed a lot of places where I didn't think I'd be allowed. (October 29, 2018)

London valued opportunities provided to her as an owner and feelings of being treated like an adult, which she felt gave her additional confidence to pursue other leadership opportunities in her future.

Life as a MicroCitizen: "I Was Never Tired of It"

London found the MicroSociety program to be engaging and enjoyable "because it's fun" and "you can have so many opportunities" (November 5, 2018). She affirmed that MicroSociety was "definitely not boring" (October 29, 2018), and that it was "educational," "unique," and "fundamental" (November 5, 2018) to her learning. London appreciated how there was always something to do during MicroSociety, and during her 6 years in the program, "I was never tired of it" (November 5, 2018). London described how much she missed the program, but when

asked specifically, she spoke generally. Whether talking about field trips, shopping in the market, or the various roles and responsibilities she held, London stated, “I kind of liked all of it” (October 22, 2018).

It was difficult for London to leave her MicroSociety school at the end of Grade 5. She expressed her feelings about attending the year-end farewell:

> I was really sad to leave. . . . At the farewell assembly, I didn’t want it to come. . . . Just leaving such an amazing school, knowing that I’m going into middle school . . . and I’m not going to be having this much help, and not much of an opportunity to find out about the real world like after college or university. (October 29, 2018)

I gained a lot of valuable information from my conversations with London. Even though she was in Grade 7, she was extremely confident in her abilities. London acknowledged how the benefits from MicroSociety have helped prepare her to enter the working world. As a babysitter, she believed she could seek out new jobs because she “already know[s] about the profit, the income, what to do when this happens like a . . . solution for a problem” (October 15, 2018). As London explained, it was because of MicroSociety “I know what to expect, the application, what job would fit me, the pay, the days I have to be there, the days I can work, the days I get off . . . all that stuff that would be important in a job” (October 29, 2018). When asked if there were things she learned in MicroSociety that were not valuable, London simply replied, “No, I kind of needed everything from MicroSociety” (October 15, 2018).

Because of her strong feelings for her former school, London has continued to associate with the staff and students at Academy Elementary School. She visits once or twice a week, and enjoys reconnecting with students she worked with in the ventures: “I would always visit there, it’s just an amazing school . . . I have kids across the hall coming up to hug me. I just like going

there" (October 29, 2018). She has continued to attend the annual Micro Night, where she meets up with her friends to shop. She was the secretary of the MicroSociety Alumni Association and helped to organize special events for the school by taking minutes for meetings and making posters. Most recently, she was interviewed for a video production created by MicroSociety International and used on the organization's website.

Shawn's MicroSociety Experience

Shawn was a high school student and was originally chosen as one of two alternate participants. As an older student and the only male participant in my study, I was interested to hear about his perspective in experiencing MicroSociety. Interviews with Shawn began in November after I had completed the first set of interviews with the other four participants. I noticed Shawn found it more difficult to recall earlier MicroSociety experiences. Perhaps this was because our interviews were held later in the school year and life was busier for Shawn at this time. Although not as expressive and lengthy in his comments as other participants, Shawn's contributions further enhanced my study and provided some additional information.

Shawn was quieter than the other participants in my study, but what he said struck me deeply. Not being prone to extensive amounts of conversation, he was pointed, and at times, witty in his responses to my questions. Sometimes he answered questions with a simple yes or no response, and other times he would pause for several moments and then provide a statement that revealed much depth. Shawn told me he preferred more hands-on work as opposed to government or service work. He described himself as creative and musical, as demonstrated by his many musician roles in several local and school bands.

Similar to my previous participants, Shawn has been involved in MicroSociety since kindergarten. He felt most successful in the production and creative side of the business world as

manager of the Photos and Buttons venture and later as owner and creator of VicPics, an enterprise in which he could apply and develop his computer and technical skills. He was a member of Parliament for a short time but preferred the creative, hands-on jobs to a desk job. When recounting his former school, Shawn described how “all the kids are happy and energetic ‘cause they get to do Micro” (December 3, 2018). Shawn compared much of his learning at Academy Elementary School to his other school experiences in middle school and high school. He commented he has never seen as many students as energetic and excited as those in his former elementary school.

Early MicroSociety Memories: “It Was a Desk Job”

Shawn found it difficult to recall memories from his first couple of years in the MicroSociety program other than being in the post office. He did, however, recall his job as a member of Parliament in Grade 3, a position he found tedious. Using his preinterview activity, Shawn stated that although he was a big fan of MicroSociety, his job in the government was not as enjoyable. Even though government work paid more than other jobs, he was challenged in this role because “it was a desk job, whereas I like to get out and do the work” (November 26, 2018). He described how the position involved a lot of meetings and discussions, and it sometimes took a lot of time to decide on passing bills and approving business licenses. Through his work in government, he learned about “micromanagement and how there are deadlines on certain things” (November 19, 2018), which he found frustrating at times, as he preferred to set his own pace. For a person who favored working with his hands, Shawn did not find government work best suited his needs and often felt “trapped into one desk where I couldn’t go out and produce something” (November 26, 2018). His Grade 3 teacher, who was his favorite teacher and the

adult facilitator of the government, would find jobs to keep Shawn busy and make his government experience more tolerable.

Shawn said his Grade 3 teacher had a strong influence on him. He described her as his favorite teacher because she was fun, joyous, and willing to help. From this same teacher, he learned "that no matter what situation you're in, you can always find someone to help" (November 19, 2018). Shawn remained in his role as member of Parliament for the rest of Grade 3. Even though he had the choice to quit and find new work, he decided to stay because his peers elected him and he valued his teacher's opinions. For the next year, however, he decided to explore different work opportunities that he felt best suited his talents and abilities, and that would better allow him to use his hands for learning.

Being a Craftsperson: "I Like to Do Hands-On"

Three important life moments happened to Shawn in Grade 4. First, his family moved to another part of the city, which meant that Shawn was no longer in the same neighborhood as Academy Elementary School. His parents decided they wanted Shawn to continue in the MicroSociety program, so every day, his mother would drive him back to Academy Elementary School for his last 2 years of elementary school. Second, Shawn learned to play keyboards in a noon-hour school program, which provided him with the desire to learn additional musical instruments, including percussion, trombone, saxophone, trumpet, and bugle, and provided him with tremendous confidence as a musician. Third, he became a craftsperson in the MicroSociety program with a new position as manager of the Photo and Button Studio. It was evident Shawn was looking for opportunities to enhance his creativity and technical skills. His talents were reflected in his commitment to music and in new ventures in which he worked.

As manager of the Photo and Button Studio, Shawn appreciated the challenge of this

creative enterprise. He and his fellow employees would construct buttons for candidates to use in their election campaigns. Other business owners would request their services to design business lapels. Sometimes they would create fun buttons for customers who relished the silly captions matched with different photos.

Shawn described how there was a lot to learn in the new venture. He appreciated acquiring new technical skills such as “learning how to use the button maker” (December 3, 2018) and using the school’s digital camera to take photos to insert into the buttons. He described how he and the other employees were taught by adult experts for several days on how to use the button-maker, but once they figured it out, “the teacher just stood back and watched to see how you did” (November 19, 2018). Shawn valued continually learning about new and interesting things. He was motivated because “you want to spend more time learning how to do it so then you can teach others” (November 19, 2019), which he found made time go by quickly.

Shawn appreciated the chance to “create and make things” in the Photo and Buttons Studio. He frequently stated, “I like to do hands-on” (December 3, 2018) when it comes to learning. He believed he was more engaged when he was “involved in the task that is at hand” because “it is fun and you are also learning” (December 10, 2018). Although his role in the Photo and Buttons Studio was a lot of work, Shawn said, it “actually felt kind of good because then you had control in what you did and how fast you could make them [the buttons]” (November 19, 2018). He commented that he never felt bored when making buttons “cause you learned how to do it in different ways” (November 26, 2018).

In addition to the creative and technical aspects of button making, Shawn also valued the collaborative aspect of this work. Shawn described how teachers were “showing you at the start how to do it” (November 19, 2018). As students began to figure things out on their own, the

adults "sort of stepped back . . . and assist where needed" (November 26, 2018). In the Photo and Button Studio, Shawn described how students were "collaborating together to figure it [the problem] out as a group. Then they learn it together, so they can do it independently" (November 19, 2018). Shawn stated, "making merchandise" and "making new friends by creating and selling the merchandise" (November 26, 2018) were his favorite aspects of working in the Photo and Button Studio.

Becoming A Businessperson: "It's Harder to Be a Leader Than a Dictator"

Shawn acquired a strong business sense from his work in the Photo and Button Studio. As a manager, he found it sometimes frustrating to work with others less motivated than he was. He felt it was "harder to be a leader than a dictator," and he did not enjoy having to tell employees "to get back to work" (November 26, 2018). Thus, in Grade 5, he once again turned to his favorite teacher for help. She encouraged him by providing advice he needed to take a risk and create his own business. As a result, Shawn approached the school's vice principal in his final year to formulate a plan to invent his own business.

Shawn became the sole proprietor of VicPics in Grade 5. This venture relied heavily on his creativity and technical skills, and because he was the only employee, his ability to work independently. Because the business designed personalized digital posters, Shawn was able to transfer a lot of the skills he learned in his previous role in the Photo and Button Studio. Instead of crafting buttons for election campaigns or business ventures, he designed professional-looking posters for advertising purposes, which included creating personalized hockey cards and magazine and comic-book covers for customers. Additional skills were needed to use different and more complex equipment, including the computer, digital camera, and various digital programs. Shawn created his business because "I just wanted to have a venue of my own"

(November 19, 2018). He described how he approached the vice principal with his idea and wrote out a “whole plan on what we wanted the business to have” (November 19, 2018). He found this process to be “scary” because “it has to go through the government . . . to get approved” (November 19, 2018). Shawn’s business is still in operation and he feels “pretty good” because “I built a business from its foundation and it’s still standing today” (November 19, 2018). Shawn still holds shares in the company he created, frequently checking its progress on the online Micro Stock Market. He proudly stated it was still making a profit several years later, which he hoped to capitalize on when he cashed in his shares before graduation.

Shawn appreciated the role of being an independent business owner and the many facets of this kind of work. Not only was he involved in making the products, but he was also responsible for promoting, advertising, and selling his products. His favorite part was marketing “because you get to go out there, meet new people, and sell your product to help profit your business” (November 19, 2018). He preferred feeling in charge and carrying out the adult-like responsibilities that came with being an actual businessperson. He learned about economics and how “profits rise and fall, depending on how well the business is doing” (December 3, 2018). As his profits increased, Shawn learned to invest in the Micro Stock Market, which provided him with additional real-world opportunities. Shawn described the process:

> There's the online stock trade. When I cash in some of the stocks that I have, whatever amount they're sitting at when I decide to sell them, I get that amount of money. I can deposit that into my bank account. (December 3, 2018)

As sole owner of a venture with no additional employees, if Shawn’s business were successful, he would reap the benefits from all profits. There were, however, other aspects that were not as enjoyable.

It was not easy for Shawn to be independent and in charge. He stated maintaining a business "took a lot of time and effort" (November 26, 2018), but he rose to the challenge. As a business owner, Shawn did not like writing out goals for his venture but realized it was part of working in business. He complained about "paying taxes and room rental fees" and how "the inflation of prices" (November 26, 2018) impacted his bottom line. Through this authentic situation, Shawn acquired the business sense of knowing that if "you don't have an unlimited amount of money in your bank account, you can go into debt." However, he learned that to stay viable, "you have to continue earning money to spend it on stuff that you need or want" for the business (November 19, 2018). Through experience, Shawn learned, "It's always good to have a little bit of backup money in your bank account. That way, if things go south, you can still have a little bit of money to use" (December 3, 2018). As Shawn spoke about his venture's success, it was clear that taking the risk to do something on his own paid off for him, not only helping to develop his confidence and leadership abilities but also his strong financial acumen. Shawn attested to how this skill was an asset in his personal life. He described how he acquired saxophone reeds by purchasing them in bulk through his bandleader rather than going to the local music store, where he noticed inflated prices.

Life as a MicroCitizen: "Nothing Burned Down"

Shawn expressed a deep appreciation for the MicroSociety program and its impact on his life. It was evident Shawn valued real-world applications acquired because of MicroSociety and felt, "I have a much broader horizon" (December 3, 2018) than had he not participated in the program.

In addition to his strong business sense and ability to work independently, the MicroSociety experience provided Shawn with opportunities to work collaboratively and

develop interpersonal skills. Shawn attributed his leadership skills to MicroSociety and found the program to have been “very, very useful” (November 19, 2018) 5 years later. As a member and assistant leader of a local community band, Shawn sometimes has had to step in to support the adult band leader but said, “Micro helped me to cooperate with other kids to get stuff done” (November 26, 2018). Shawn appreciated the mentorship process used in MicroSociety in how the “teachers step back and let the kids figure it [the work] out on their own” (December 3, 2018). Shawn described MicroSociety as “a big learning experience” but confidently affirmed that “the kids know what they’re doing” (December 3, 2018). When I asked him whether having students with this much control caused confusion and chaos, he jokingly stated, “nothing burned down” (December 10, 2018).

Shawn appreciated the creativeness of MicroSociety and how it was like real life. He noticed how there were always new ventures in development such as “Penguin Avenue, Creations, and Cherry Sweet Jewelry” (December 3, 2018), which created unique products and had creative signs and displays to enhance their ventures. He cherished how his school was similar to the real world with currency and services, such as the post office. Shawn appreciated how the program taught him to “learn from my mistakes” (December 10, 2018). Although he did not regard it as beneficial at the time, Shawn even learned the benefits of multitasking, which he has used to juggle the many practices and concerts as part of being an active member of four different school and local community bands. Even though Shawn found MicroSociety challenging at times, he valued the opportunity to explore different work situations to find ones best suited to his likes and interests. He has found this useful in high school, where he has freedom in choosing different courses.

Through his MicroSociety experience, Shawn grew to understand himself better as a learner. Shawn attributed his positive feelings of the MicroSociety program to hands-on learning activities. Shawn stated, “If it’s hands-on learning, I like to do it a lot” (November 19, 2018). Shawn believed it was by working with his hands to create things that he would experience success in high school. His favorite classes in high school included Science, where he gets to participate in experiments by starting fires with Bunsen burners. However, he expressed frustration, feeling most teachers did not provide him with these kinds of learning opportunities. When asked why, he stated that in high school it is “more of a dictatorship . . . ‘cause you’re being told what to do” (November 26, 2018). Compared to his MicroSociety experience, he believed high school teachers were more in charge and made most decisions. He felt MicroSociety teachers “let you enjoy your classes more” because “they don’t teach the book as much as it’s more activities” (December 3, 2018).

Of his schools, Shawn treasured his MicroSociety school the most and used words such as “fun,” “learning,” and “engaged” to describe his experiences (December 10, 2018). Like other participants, Shawn has still been involved in his MicroSociety school: “I’m on the alumni committee and we’re planning stuff” (November 19, 2018) for special event celebrations. Shawn has held onto his shares for several years and participates in Micro Night. He has enjoyed how he could still return to his former school and “withdraw money from your bank account . . . and buy more shares or you can sell some of your shares and get your money” (November 19, 2018) to spend at the market. As a student-alumni member, Shawn visits and attends MicroSociety events, even though it has been 5 years since he left the school.

Concluding Comments

I learned by spending time with my participants. As former students of a MicroSociety school, they were unique in their talents and skills, which provided them with different experiences, not only during their elementary school years but afterward, as they continued their involvement in the program. In my next chapter, I provide a discussion centered on the common elements I have gleaned from my participants' accounts of MicroSociety. I revisit the theoretical underpinnings of Dewey and Bruner and explore how their beliefs connect to my research findings. I reconnect with literature about MicroSociety and share recent research findings regarding student engagement and disengagement. This analysis helped address my earlier research questions along with new questions and discoveries that surfaced during the analytical process.

Chapter 7: Discussion

In this chapter, I discuss the dominant themes present in my findings. According to van Manen (1984), themes can be described as “knots in the webs of our experience, around which certain experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (p. 59). I primarily examined findings from participant interview data and discuss these in relation to literature from Dewey and Bruner, along with additional current research. Although I had been analysing and making sense of data throughout this research process, the final purpose was to articulate what I learned from my interpretive inquiries. Through this analytical process, I identified “themes connecting [to] a number of topics in ways that reveal . . . characteristics, motivations, values, interests, or preoccupations” (Ellis, 1998, p. 41). I structured these interpretations around the following three topical themes:

1. Experiencing the real-world through MicroSociety
2. Developing agency and confidence as a participant of MicroSociety
3. Learning as part of a MicroSociety community of practice

Following a discussion on these three themes, I provide summary comments on how the participants in this study experienced learning as engaging while MicroSociety program members.

Experiencing the Real-World Through MicroSociety

In the previous chapter, I provided descriptions of how MicroSociety brought real-world learning experiences to my participants. In my discussions within this chapter, I refer to this concept to mean the experiences students had that mirrored adult experiences in outside-of-school settings, such as holding jobs, managing money, and voting in elections. I acknowledge that all experiences in school are real, but I use this term to point to similarities to outside-of-

school experiences. Dewey (1915) stated, “it would be most desirable for the school to be a place in which the child should really live, and get a life experience in which he [*sic*] should delight and find meaning for its own sake” (p. 37).

As the MicroSociety program is designed to prepare students through real-life experiences, I was intrigued as to how this aspect contributed to my participants feeling engaged as learners. For these young people, they interpreted the concept of real-world learning as those relevant learning opportunities they believed helped better prepare them for life beyond school. Because the participants were school-aged students, I was curious as to how they would interpret their experiences as real-world and if they felt these opportunities would prepare them to live successfully in the outside world. Participant responses were more detailed and in depth than I anticipated based on the number of years that passed since their MicroSociety experience. Participants clearly detailed insights regarding the benefits and challenges of learning authentically about the real world through the MicroSociety program.

The Simulated World of MicroSociety: “How Life Works”

The MicroSociety program, as described previously in Chapter 5, provides a simulation of North American society complete with a political, judicial, and economic system; it is, as described by one participant as “how life works.” Grote (2002) described the MicroSociety program as a “school-based replication of the real world. Its intent is to foster an understanding of, and appreciation for, and connectedness to the social and economic systems students and their families shape and depend upon for their lives and livelihood” (p. 9). In defining the concept of simulation, Armstrong (1994) stated it “involves a group of people coming together to create an ‘as-if’ environment” (p. 81). The MicroSociety program provided “the context for getting into more immediate contact with the material being learned” (p. 81). Students in this study learned

about today's society through first-hand experiences and by making mistakes in what was a safe context to do so. Adults played a key role in providing experiences that helped children feel empowered to make decisions and to feel like adults in the simulated world of MicroSociety. Throughout the process, and according to what they reported in their individual interviews, students acquired a variety of skills that provided them with a sense of agency, which helped develop their confidence.

Playing in the Adult World: "A Place to Learn Adulting"

Participants in this study recounted their enjoyment of opportunities to play in the adult world through the MicroSociety simulation. Years earlier, Dewey (1915) stated, "The work and play of school should be children's work and play; that the children should enjoy school" (p. 41). My participants enjoyed their MicroSociety experiences, but they communicated how they treasured what one participant described as "a place to learn adulting" (October 31, 2018) because it provided them a sense of what some adults did in their lives. MicroSociety offered a place to learn about the perks of adult life, such as having a job, being able to purchase goods and services, and voting. However, it offered experiences of unpleasant aspects of adult life, such as getting loans, paying bills, and borrowing money to cover expenses.

With the MicroSociety program's motto of "bringing real life to learning," some MicroSociety program aspects were not as pleasant as others. For the participants, this included experiences, such as paying rent and taxes, receiving less desirable jobs, and dealing with the costs of inflation. These realities impacted their ability to save money and purchase goods and services in the MicroSociety marketplace, a favoured activity. If students broke the law, there were consequences through tickets and fines from RAMP and the MicroSociety court system. Other adult-like experiences experienced by participants included working with people they

might not get along with, having supervisors who were too bossy, being unsuccessful in applying for a job they wanted, or not winning an election. Although these real-life tribulations were challenging and, at times, recounted as frustrating for my participants, it did not appear that such experiences caused them to lose interest in the program or to become disengaged as learners. If anything, interview responses by participants suggested that some setbacks helped to develop their self-confidence and ability to take risks. These attributes are explored later in this chapter.

Participant responses in this study indicated an appreciation for the ability to learn some aspects of adult life at a young age, rather than having to figure it out when they were older. In research on best teaching and learning practices, Zemelman et al. (2012) stated, “kids want to know how the world works and how they fit in” (p. 11). By being immersed in MicroSociety, participants said they learned first-hand how economic and political systems in Canada and Alberta operated. In examining student interview findings, participant data affirmed that MicroSociety provided a way for participants to be “playful and serious at the same time,” which Dewey (1910) described as the “ideal mental condition” (p. 218). Participants treasured playful program aspects, such as using their school currency to purchase goods at the MicroSociety marketplace, touring guests during special events, or going on field trips in the community. Yet, many times, they had to conduct themselves in a serious manner, such as when creating business proposals or loan applications that had to be approved by the proper authorities. Experiencing this adult world seemed to provide these young people the confidence in knowing, as one participant expressed, “that I can do all this when I grow up” (October 23, 2018).

Hands-On Learning: “A Way to Motivate Kids to Learn”

Hands-on learning was a descriptor used by participants when recalling what they valued about MicroSociety. They referred to this learning as a way to acquire knowledge and skills

about the world in which they lived in contrast to more conventional approaches to learning, such as reading textbooks and taking notes. Dewey (1916) would refer to this as learning by doing, which is visible in many Canadian schools today through project-based learning, technology integration, and makerspaces. At this MicroSociety school, learning by doing was demonstrated by the products and services created by the participants. It was also shown by the speeches they wrote and delivered, the meetings they organized, and the laws they constructed to help run their school. Dewey (1916) stated that if educators "Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results" (p. 154). Likewise, Bruner (2006) expressed that educators need to "shift emphasis from the intake side to the output side, to make learners do something with what they have learned" (p. 35). Hands-on learning was demonstrated by what participants said in interviews, such as creating products for the marketplace like the buttons in Shawn's Photos and Button Studio and in the numerous artifacts shared during our interviews.

From what was recounted in interviews, it was clear participants relished the opportunity to use their hands to learn and as a way to create evidence of learning. However, they had different interpretations of the term hands on. For Shawn, hands-on learning meant creating and working with his hands. In contrast, other participants associated it with being an active and involved learner and being able to move freely, rather than sitting at desks passively. Eva believed MicroSociety was "more enjoyable when you get around and learn" (November 15, 2018). Another participant stated: "Being able to get up, like that hands-on experience . . . was a way to motivate kids to learn cause it was different and fun" (October 18, 2018). Learning through first-hand experiences, in which "students . . . get up out of their chairs and test out their

ideas in real-life situations" (Wurdinger, 2005, p. 26), were common experiences for participants and appeared to be important factors of their engagement as learners.

An Integrated Experience: "There Was a Crossover"

The various learning activities in the MicroSociety program provided many opportunities for participants to feel engaged. However, this state of being was created by something beyond the learning activities. The overall program structure and how the concept of real-world learning was woven throughout the elementary school curriculum also seemed to contribute to positive participant experiences. Dewey (1916) stated, "Every recitation in every subject gives an opportunity for establishing cross connections between the subject matter of the lesson and the wider and more direct experiences of everyday life" (p. 191). Participants communicated that they appreciated how MicroSociety was snuck in and taught both within the subjects and as a whole-school experience that involved cross-graded learning opportunities with other students and adults. Participants appreciated how "there was a crossover" (October 23, 2018) in how MicroSociety concepts were intertwined with the school subjects, thus helping students better connect to what they were learning. Wurdinger (2005) stated learners are more engaged when they are "applying their knowledge, making connections between different subject matters, solving relevant problems, and breaking down barriers between disciplines" (p. 24). Through MicroSociety, participants were able to experience "life . . . filled with complex problems that require individuals to solve them using a variety of subject areas" (Wurdinger, 2005, p. 25). In their research, Quaglia and Corso (2014) found that students "find interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary learning—much of it project or theme based—more interesting" because it reflects the "true nature of knowledge and the real world" (p. 114).

Developing Competency Through Learning Opportunities: "A Chance to Practice"

Participants valued the authentic opportunities of MicroSociety that allowed them to develop skills throughout the program. Bruner (2006) stated how play functions to “equip the child with the skills he [*sic*] will need as an adult . . . his [*sic*] career in play is a ‘run-up’ to the serious business of life” (p. 58). It was evident from the interview findings that participants used the skills learned in MicroSociety during their time at Academy Elementary School and afterward in their other school and life experiences (e.g., Shawn demonstrating leadership skills in his community band). Bruner (2006) remarked on two ways learning serves people in the future, (a) through the transfer of principles and attitudes, and (b) in the creation of “skills of a kind that transfers to activities encountered later, either in school or after” (p. 40). Opportunities such as working with others, communicating, managing personal finances, problem-solving, and decision-making, were embedded into the MicroSociety program to help students better understand how they could be successful and contributing members of society. Enhancing these competencies honors the program’s purpose in “Preparing children to run the world by giving them a world to run” (https://www.microsociety.org/).

Whether operating a business or being involved in the government or nonprofit sector, there were ample opportunities to problem solve in the MicroSociety program. Bruner (1961) noted that “Experience has shown that it is worth the effort to provide the growing child with problems that tempt him [*sic*] into next stages of development” (p. 38). Bruner believed it was important for students to learn the material delivered by the teacher and “to learn it in such a way that he [*sic*] can use the information in problem solving” (Bruner, 1971, p. 70). The MicroSociety introduced students to authentic problems in dynamic ways, including how to solve problems within their communities. Through service-learning opportunities, such as the community sock drive and raising money for local charities, participants were provided with a

"curriculum for and with young people," beginning "with an examination of the problems, issues and concerns of life as it is being lived in the real world" (Beane, 1997, p. 40). Based on participant accounts, problem-solving skills were demonstrated when adults would step back and allow students to think critically, make a decision, and problem-solve (e.g., taking risks and making mistakes). Bruner (1961) remarked that "Students should know what it feels like to be completely absorbed in a problem" as "they seldom experience this feeling in school" (p. 50). Participants shared the challenges of solving problems and the feelings of being in charge when they were able to carry through with their solutions.

Communication is a multifaceted set of abilities and difficult to analyze; however, each participant in this study was articulate throughout our interviews. They spoke of many opportunities to practice their oral skills through presentations, speeches, and tours for parents and the public. Participants described how public speaking opportunities were confidence-builders because they gave them a chance to practice. All participants commented on how confident they felt when public speaking, which many attributed to the MicroSociety program.

Collaboration was another skill participants reported frequently, perhaps as the practice of working together was purposefully designed in the MicroSociety experience. Grote (2002) stated that in the MicroSociety system, the "teacher functions as a facilitator and resource person who provides the cooperative learning environments that promote student's active participation in real problem-solving situations that have personal significance" (p. 11). By building in time to work together, students learned how to brainstorm, discuss, negotiate, and build consensus. Participants frequently described how they learned about working with and in a group because their work required those skills to accomplish goals. Collaboration happened between students

and with the adults, and it provided opportunities for intergenerational training, such as older students teaching their younger counterparts how to operate a business venture.

As recounted in my interviews with participants, MicroSociety provided students with opportunities to develop financial literacy and personal management, including goal setting. Students needed to be organized to manage their business books and bank accounts and have products ready for the market. Participants spoke of how MicroSociety provided money management skills, such as creating a budget, investing in stocks, and examining profits and losses through the MicroSociety stock exchange. Because of this focus, these participants learned how to direct personal finances, including how to save and invest money, how to recognize profits and losses, and of course, how to spend their money. Eva felt that “Micro has definitely excelled me when I’m doing money. Even just adding in taxes is easier because I understand how money works better” (October 27, 2018). This sense of control over finances seemed to lead to participants feeling empowered, as many commented on how much they appreciated this aspect of being in charge of their money.

By completing several interviews on site at Academy Elementary School, I observed the evidence of creativity and innovation throughout the hallways and classrooms. As part of interviews, I walked the hallways with each participant. Participants described their favorite ventures, such as Cherry Sweet Jewelry, Mad Lab, Worm Wranglers, and Busy Beavers, and the original products created to sell to customers, such as birdhouses, bracelets, smoothies, and toys. Participants spoke about creating unique signs and displays to enhance their ventures and to market their products. Their innovations were also made evident by the artifacts participants shared with me during their interviews, including a class-published book called “Life of a MicroSociety Citizen” (see Appendix I: The MicroSociety Experience—Student Artifacts).

Dewey (1916) valued schools that did not stifle student creativity and motivation. He envisioned schools that created products through "gardening, cooking, sewing, printing, book-binding, weaving, painting, drawing . . . " (p. 230). Dewey (1916) saw these as "active pursuits with social aims . . . not as mere exercises for acquiring skill for future use" (p. 230).

Many participants commented that MicroSociety focused on skill development rather than just concentrating on knowledge acquisition. I believe this purposeful focus on the development of student abilities was one key reason for the confidence participants demonstrated throughout our interviews. As a result of this emphasis, the participants felt competent and successful as learners. Bruner (1971) stated, "The objective [of schools] is to produce skill in our citizens, skill in the achieving of goals of personal significance, and of assuring a society in which personal significance can still be possible" (p. 117). Participants in this study gained an abundance of competencies as a result of their experience in the MicroSociety program, which likely impacted their sense of agency.

Developing Agency and Confidence as a Participant of MicroSociety

When I began my research and started examining the MicroSociety program, I was curious about the program's emphasis on putting "kids in charge." The attribute of student agency featured prominently in participant data and was one key aspect contributing to student feelings of engagement. Engagement was not just about the chosen instructional strategies delivered by the teacher or the learning activities they designed. Rather, it was about the roles and responsibilities these teachers provided for their students in their classrooms and with the entire school community. Engagement included choices and opportunities that students embraced while in the program. Through the process of decision-making, which often involved taking risks and making mistakes, students appeared to gain a strong sense of agency and self-

confidence as participants of MicroSociety with opportunities to make choices, to express themselves, and to carry out different roles and responsibilities.

Freedom and Choice: "Nothing Has Ever Been That Up to Me"

Participants in this study expressed satisfaction with how things operated in the MicroSociety program. When asked how to improve the program, the most common response was wishing for more "Micro time." The most enjoyable program aspect for participants appeared to be the Micro Market, where students had opportunities to exercise choice in how to spend the money they earned. A sense of freedom seemed to be an important factor in helping these students feel valued and responsible as members of their minisociety. Wurdinger (2005) suggested that "Freedom empowers students to take control of their learning, thereby promoting greater intrinsic motivation" (p. 17). In their research on student engagement, Quaglia and Corso (2014) noted that students who struggled or who were disengaged in schools had the "belief, real or imagined, that they have little control or influence over what happens to them" (p. 123).

Participants described that being offered choices and decision-making opportunities made them feel engaged and empowered. Participants typically made decisions about which jobs they wanted, which goods or services to produce, how to spend or invest their money, who to vote for in elections, and which bills to create in government. In comparing this experience with other schools, one participant stated:

> Never in another school have they [the teachers] laid out things and been like "okay, what do you want to do?" It's never been that straight forward . . . nothing has ever been that up to me I guess. I've never had an experience where they just put it all out there (October 23, 2018).

Having freedom to choose and make decisions in the MicroSociety program seemed to provide a sense of agency for student participants. In turn, this led to them feeling they were valuable members of their school community. However, the degree of control students had in their school carried certain roles and responsibilities that often posed challenges for participants.

Roles and Responsibilities: "I Felt . . . Very Empowered"

Participants in this study expressed support for the MicroSociety program. They appreciated how enjoyable, active, and collaborative the program was because it provided them with feelings of responsibility through a multitude of roles. These students revealed many occasions when they were given opportunities to demonstrate leadership through elections, taking on challenging jobs, spending at the market, and even having an influence on school rules. They expressed a sense of being trusted by the adults to carry out the responsibilities given to them. Bruner (1996) stated, "We have known for years that if you treat people, young kids included, as responsible, contributing parties to the group, as having a job to do, they will grow into it—some better than others, obviously, but all benefit" (p. 77).

One important element of the MicroSociety experience was providing students with opportunities to develop a mini-society. Several participants held government positions and made decisions that impacted how their school operated, and others were involved in the judicial process as jury members in the court system. Other participants were owners or managers, which carried many responsibilities that influenced how others experienced MicroSociety. There were opportunities for students to feel enabled and make decisions, including employment in business ventures. As mentioned in Chapter 5, students could purchase existing ventures, create their own, or apply to be an employee once ventures were in place. Participants frequently mentioned how

they valued the roles and responsibilities provided through MicroSociety; as one participant stated, “I felt . . . very empowered” (October 18, 2018).

The MicroSociety program operated on a system of laws enforced through a student-run police force and court system. Participants were involved in making decisions in this area. As described in Chapter 5, the student-run RAMP service was available to provide a sense of control in the school. From what my participants shared, it did not appear that members of the legal system abused their powers. This reality was most likely due to the presence of adult supervisors. Winter stated that: “They [RAMP] don’t want to overpower themselves and they don’t want to be un-powering, they just want to be the right amount . . . They just want to inform people . . . to tell you to stop” (October 30, 2018).

Students making decisions and being given responsibilities over other children were typical in this MicroSociety school and part of the experience of “kids in charge.” Having school-aged children with this much responsibility caused me to wonder what the adults were focused on during this time. Shor (2014) recapped, however, that “Empowerment . . . does not mean students can do whatever they like in the classroom . . . . The learning process is negotiated, requiring leadership by the teacher and mutual teacher-student authority” (p. 16). Based on participants’ perspectives shared in our interviews, adults and students shared power at Academy Elementary School. While the students were working at trying to be successful in their various roles, my participants described how the teachers took on more of a coaching or supervisory role. Participants indicated how the adults wanted the children to be in charge, which was done by letting go of some control and sharing decision-making with students. I believe this helped build agency in the participants and made them feel that their opinions were valued in the school community.

Bruner (1961) indicated that “Effective intuitive thinking is fostered by the development of self-confidence and courage in the student” (p. 65). The MicroSociety program provided a structure that allowed students to build their confidence over time. Bruner (1961) stated the “knowledge one has acquired without sufficient structure to tie it together is knowledge that is likely to be forgotten” (p. 31). As students advanced through the program, their roles and responsibilities became more complex. According to participant descriptions, students were placed in the post office and guided by the teacher in kindergarten. By Grade 5, they were in roles such as government ministers and business owners responsible for problem-solving and making difficult decisions. Bruner (1961) stated learning requires “a continual deepening of one understanding . . . that comes from learning to use them [ideas] in progressively more complex forms” (p. 13). As a result of entering new roles and gradually learning new, more complex skills, by the time participants left their MicroSociety school, they had become confident adolescents comfortable in communicating and working with, teaching, and leading others.

Risk-Taking and Learning From Mistakes: “Mistakes Are Proof You’re Trying”

As with all learning, mistakes are a common occurrence. At Academy Elementary School, experiences of failing and learning from mistakes were purposefully built into the MicroSociety program; and adults often let children experience the consequences of bad decisions. Students not working well could be fired from their employment positions, and students who mismanaged their finances could lose their buying power on market days. As in today’s economy, businesses that were not profitable or whose managers made poor spending decisions could go bankrupt. As Winter described, “if the business didn’t do good [*sic*], we’d lose all our money” (October 30, 2018).

Failing and learning from mistakes were part of the MicroSociety experience authentic learning, and participants in this study recalled making a multitude of mistakes during their time in the program. Several reported challenges in balancing financial books, and others told of suffering penalties of fines for breaking school laws. Even though mistakes occurred, participants noted that adult supervisors were nearby, observing from the sidelines and occasionally stepping in if help was needed. These experiences of difficulty did not appear to discourage participants, and as London indicated, “mistakes are proof you’re trying” (October 15, 2018). Dewey (1933) said, “Failure is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his [*sic*] failures as from his [*sic*] successes” (p. 114). Rather than wait until they were older, participants were able to experience many adult-like experiences in the elementary school setting. From my analysis of what participants reported in interviews, I sense that these challenging experiences helped to build their resilience. As one participant stated: “The whole point of Micro is learning about the job experience, the life experience, the obstacles, the challenges you need to go through” (October 23, 2018).

Being comfortable making and learning from mistakes appeared to be linked to risk-taking, as demonstrated by some participants. It seemed more evident as they gained experience and confidence in the MicroSociety program. For example, after trying out several different ventures and gaining a variety of skills, Shawn took a risk in Grade 5 and created a venture called VicPics, a business focused on the production of computer-designed posters. This decision proved to be successful for him. London gambled that she could handle the workload of being both the manager and owner of Helping Hearts in her Grade 5 year, and this decision proved to be advantageous for her, as she realized how capable she was when she believed in herself. Although taking risks can lead to possible failure, for these two participants, it provided success.

Aspects of self-awareness seemed to contribute to the participating students' ability to take risks in the program. At a young age, Eva took a risk by becoming an owner of Penguin Avenue because she knew she preferred to be in charge and would try again if things did not work out the first time. Bruner (1996) stated, "A system of education must help those growing up in a culture find an identity within that culture. Without it, they stumble in their effort" (p. 42). Feeling in charge through decision-making, risk-taking, and resolving difficult problems were common to what participants reported experiencing in MicroSociety. According to Bruner (1996), feelings of agency are important in creating confident young people: "if agency and esteem are central to the construction of a concept of Self, then the ordinary practices of school need to be examined with a view to what contribution they [the students] make" (p. 38).

Student Voice: "My Opinion Was Valued and Important"

MicroSociety founder Richmond (1973) expressed concern that "political life in classroom and school is almost entirely under the control of adults" (p. 209). He believed adults monopolized most roles in schools, and "children are systematically taught be to behave as followers . . . rather than to operate as leaders in charge of the destinies of themselves and others" (Richmond, 1973, p. 276). Shor (1992), a pioneer in the field of critical education, was unsupportive of the kinds of classrooms where "students learn that education is something done to them by the teacher's voice" (p. 255). He advocated that dialogue and problem-posing be used in schools to help empower students to become agents of their learning. Participants in this study were provided with a variety of opportunities to use their student voice during their MicroSociety experience. Bruner (1996) appreciated schools that made this shift to put the student at the center of decision-making, for then, "children can take on more responsibility for their own learning. They can begin to 'think about their thinking' as well as about 'the world'" (p. 49). Through

several different participatory roles in the political, judicial, or economic structures that were in place in the program, participants experienced responsibilities of being in charge at Academy Elementary School.

A MicroSociety school is based on the premise that “the students—with the help and guidance of their teachers—have to design and run their own democratic, free market society in school” (Clinchy, 1995, p. 403). From the information I gathered from interviews and school artifacts, these democratic principles appeared to be present in the MicroSociety program at Academy Elementary School and were institutionalized through the student-created school constitution. In his book *Education, Experience and Existence,* Quay (2013) described how “Schools contribute to a democratic society not merely by invoking young people in their governance, but by way of the many and various occupations discovered and arranged by teachers” (p. 196). Similarly, participants not only had a voice in school governance but, as school citizens, also carried out their roles in various occupations and in different civic duties, such as voting and paying taxes. Progressive educator James Beane (2005) advocated that teachers should teach the “democratic way as the best way to ‘learn’ democracy is to ‘live it’ (p. 2). Beane (2005) believed this “means involving young people in decision making whenever possible” and teachers “letting go of their complete control of classroom life” (pp. 27-28). As I did not observe the MicroSociety teachers in their classrooms, I can only rely on my interpretations based on participants’ experiences of feeling empowered through their different participatory roles. However, several students commented on how much they appreciated carrying out their roles and responsibilities as MicroSociety citizens; as one participant stated, “it made me feel like my opinion was valued and important” (October 23, 2018).

Participants experienced a variety of learning opportunities in the MicroSociety program that supported a strong sense of self-empowerment through the provision of responsibilities and decision-making. These experiences were designed to include extensive collaboration across the school, including with community members and the adult world. For a school to become a community of learning, the experiences provided needed to be organized, so power and decision-making were shared responsibilities between students and adults, and that students were given opportunities to make a difference as members of this community.

Learning as Part of a MicroSociety Community of Practice

Participants conveyed a high value on community as experienced in the MicroSociety program. Winter spoke of how she treasured how MicroSociety was "like a mini little society, a mini little community of actual working people" (November 6, 2018). Both Dewey and Bruner spoke about the contributions that communities provided to students. Dewey spoke of how schools created a miniature community where students learned and work together, and Bruner's more recent work focused on the idea of creating communities of learners in our schools that would help to advance society. Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of "community of practice" (p. 29) provided an even more accurate description of how participants experienced the MicroSociety program.

A Community of Novices and Experts: "It Creates This Community"

My initial understanding of the MicroSociety program was that it was designed as what Bruner (2006) would describe as an "apprenticeship," which involved "leading the novice into the skilled ways of the expert" (p. 165). Younger participants, who lacked knowledge and skills, were given smaller roles, and were trained as apprentices until they gained more experience. This initial understanding, however, changed once I began a closer examination of my research data.

Lave and Wenger (1991) viewed the concept of apprenticeship differently than Bruner. The authors felt apprenticeship was a "traditional form of control over the . . . least powerful workers" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 64), with "masters" who might view "apprentices as novices who should be instructed" (p. 76). These apprentices would typically occupy a "particular role at the edge of a larger process" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 23).

Participants in this study had many roles in MicroSociety and were constantly learning new knowledge and skills. They were, on occasion, like apprentices who were "subordinate" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 23) and in need of help and supervision from others; At other times, they worked and learned alongside each other to acquire knowledge and skill as a "learning practitioner" (p. 23). Through continued practice and ongoing feedback from others, some participants would advance further and become a "sole responsible agent" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 23) who was capable of performing their work without assistance. As was the situation with a few participants in this study, some became "aspiring experts" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 23) who would share their expertise by helping those with less experience.

As both novices and experts at times, participants were part of a participation structure that Lave and Wenger (1991) referred to as "legitimate peripheral participation" where participants interacted "simultaneously performing in several roles" (p. 23). Participants recounted the benefits of being part of this MicroSociety community of practice. They appreciated the opportunities to learn from a multitude of people and that: "I was never alone . . . there was always someone I could go to for help" (October 23, 2018).

The theory of community of practice highlights the "notion of learning as participation in practice" (Wenger et al., 2015, p. 2), as my participants did within a "single" community, such as in MicroSociety. However, as was the case of this study's participants, they belonged to

"multiple" communities of practice, including those within their school and outside the MicroSociety context. These other identities as school and community leaders further enhanced their capacity as participants in the MicroSociety community of practice. Program expectations required students to take on new positions and responsibilities continually, so they were able to use their skills and talents to "play various roles in various fields of participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 20). Wenger (2015) referred to this as "landscapes of practice which consist of many different communities of practice and the boundaries between them" (p. 2). My participants learned by crossing these boundaries and encountering different communities of practices.

Participant comments provided evidence that they benefited by participating and being engaged in different communities of practice during their 6 years in the MicroSociety program. Wenger (2015) stated that "there is no substitute for direct engagement in practice as a vehicle for learning the competence of a community" (p. 21) and that this is accomplished by "engaging in practice, doing things, working on issues, talking, using and producing artifacts, debating, and reflecting together" (p. 21). This participation stretched beyond "engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). Creating an identity within different communities of practice involved not merely acquiring knowledge and skills but fully participating in them and becoming one "who inhabits the landscape" (Wenger et al., 2015, p. 19). Participants successfully became bankers, police officers, business owners, and government learners by integrating into "new participation frameworks" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 20).

It was clear from participant accounts that some were more successful in some

communities of practice than others. While some engaged in “peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 36) and operated on the boundaries of their community of practice, others were fully immersed in the different “modes of coparticipation” (p. 20), which they experienced as “an empowering position” (p. 36). Participants in this study were given opportunities to develop expertise in a variety of roles and to create different identities within different communities of practice. They were able to use the knowledge and skills acquired in MicroSociety to enhance the communities of practice they were involved in outside of their school, such as with community band, afterschool sports, school leadership, and tutoring. As stated by Wenger (2015), “boundary crossing and boundary encounters are crucial aspects of living in a landscape of practice” (p. 19).

It was apparent from participants' descriptions that everyone, including the adults, was involved in learning and contributing to the MicroSociety’s community of practice. As part of this community, teachers would not be considered experts but fellow learners who contribute to the “activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29) in the same way as students. As one participant stated when describing the MicroSociety program: “there’s such a strong sense of community because . . . you get to know a lot more people. It creates this community,” which is, after all, “the point of micro, to have community” (October 23, 2018). As Lave and Wenger (1991) specified, in a community of practice, “learners must be legitimate peripheral participants in ongoing practice in order for learning identities to be engaged and develop into full participation” (p. 64). Many identities were created through interaction with peers and adults in a collaborative learning environment.

Collaboration as a Way of Life: “Teach Them the Ropes”

Wenger (1998) informs us that learning is a “process of social participation” (p. 24). This

was similar to how Bruner (1996) described learning as an "interactive process in which people learn from each other" (p. 22). In describing a culture of learning, Bruner (1986) said that "It is a place where, among other things, learners help each other learn, each according to her [*sic*] abilities" (p. 21). This "way of being in the social world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 24) was made possible in this MicroSociety school through the different opportunities to work with others in a variety of roles. For my participants, one benefit of the MicroSociety program was collaborating with others. London, for example, stated her favorite part of her work in Helping Hearts was "working with a lot of people" (October 22, 2018). Another participant described how the MicroSociety program was like real life because "you're going to have to work with people . . . and maybe you don't particularly like them but you have to be able to work together in situations and get what you need to get done" (October 23, 2018). Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) affirmed that "When students interact with one another and learn how to solve real-world problems that have significance to them, they become excited about coming to school" (p. 7). I believe this excitement was conveyed by my participants, who learned from those within their community of practice.

In addition to learning from the adults at Academy Elementary School, students tutored, taught, and learned from each other. Bruner (1985), who, as indicated earlier, was influenced by Vygotsky's work on the zone of proximal development, expanded on the idea of scaffolding to include "competent peers" (p. 24). Bruner (1996) stated schools "need not exclude the presence of somebody serving in the role of teacher. It simply implies that the teacher does not play that role as a monopoly, that learners 'scaffold' for each other as well" (p. 21). Bruner's description of the tutoring process fit with participating students' descriptions of how they taught and

learned from other students in their MicroSociety school:

> In general, what the tutor did was what the child could not do. The tutor made things such that the child could do with her [*sic*] what he [*sic*] plainly could not do without her [*sic*]. And as the tutoring proceeded, the child took over from her [*sic*] parts of the task that he [*sic*] was not able to do at first, but, with mastery, became consciously able to do under his [*sic*] own control. And she [*sic*] gladly handed those over. (Bruner, 1986, p. 76)

Richmond (1973), the creator of MicroSociety, saw the benefit of the mentorship relationship between peers. He was impressed with "the relationships that grew between tutors and tutored as a result of their cooperative experience" (Richmond, 1973, p. 175). Comments shared by participants expressed experiencing many benefits of having to teach ideas to fellow students. Winter described the process of teaching others as, "They would keep learning until they know how to do it and you don't have to show them anymore" (October 30, 2018). The idea of learning it twice by teaching others was experienced as being advantageous to participants' learning. Bruner (1961) echoed this sentiment, saying, "teaching is a superb way of learning" (p. 88).

The cross-graded approach used at Academy Elementary School contributed to participants' positive experiences in the MicroSociety program. Through the process of teaching and learning from each other, they made new friends with students in other grades and saw the advantage of pairing older children with younger ones so that they could "teach them the ropes" (October 18, 2018). Working with younger children taught older students patience and gave them a chance to be mentors and to teach new concepts to others. Participants were able to experience the roles of both teacher and tutor since "people move in and out" of a community of practice where there is always "the arrival of a new generation of members" (Wenger, 1998, p.

99). This organizational structure of MicroSociety ensured that “newcomers” were “integrated into the community” to ensure that they “are going to work as old-timers do” (p. 99). As new students progressed through their elementary school and gained more MicroSociety experience, they eventually became the experts within their various communities of practice.

According to participants, the aspect of learning together and teaching others was a significant aspect of their MicroSociety experiences. Beane (2005) affirmed that “when a premium is placed on group activities, collaboration becomes a way of life for teachers and students” (p. 80). This way of life was experienced and communicated by all participants and was different from how they experienced collaboration outside of their MicroSociety school. Participants described how they had to work with others for an entire school year in MicroSociety. However, in their other school experiences, collaboration typically lasted for a few days and was with students of the same grade. One participant believed students collaborated better in MicroSociety than in her other schools due to the higher interest levels of students in the program. For most participants, teaching others the ropes was stated to be their favorite part of the program, and it was the aspect that they missed the most when they left the school.

The MicroSociety program design helped to create what Bruner (1986) described as a “joint culture” where learners collaborated and learned from one another. In addition to working in ventures together, students had roles “dependent on one another” (Wenger, 1998, p. 14); they went shopping together, celebrated together, and learned from each other. Through engagement in various MicroSociety practices, participants negotiated with each other to create meaning (Wenger, 1998, p. 73).

Participant practices in MicroSociety also led to the creation of artifacts. Wenger (1998)

referred to this process as reification or “giving form to our experience by producing objects” (p. 58). Bruner (1996) believed, “The main function of all collective cultural activity is to produce ‘works’. . . that . . . achieved an existence of their own” (p. 22). These works were recounted during participant interviews and provided evidence of collaborative learning. Participants spoke proudly of the work they had done together with others (e.g., business goals placed at the entrance to a venture, team awards received at the year-end MicroAwards, and student-created products). It appeared that these products were part of my participants’ MicroSociety identities; several shared this evidence of learning during our interviews (see Appendix I: The MicroSociety Experience—Student Artifacts).

Wenger (1998) stated that “learning that is most personally transformative . . . involves membership in . . . communities of practice” (p. 6). Further, learning is “engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities” (p. 7). This was clear from the perspectives of my participants, who valued having identities and responsibilities within a community of practice that also extended into the surrounding community.

Relationships With the Surrounding Community: “Everyone Is So Invested”

Another significant finding I discovered through the examination of participant interviews was the role of the surrounding community. The community supports and is involved in the MicroSociety program, providing context to the adage that “it takes a whole village to raise a child.” Wenger (1998) defined community based on “membership in a community of practice” in which there is “mutual engagement “ (p. 73) and where all participants gain a “unique identity” (p. 75). At Academy Elementary School, participants identified themselves through roles such as banker, tour guide, or government minister, while community members identified as knowledge experts, donors, and local practitioners. Everyone had a role.

Community members shared their expertise as business and government leaders, and the students benefited from this community expertise through Micro University, where local business leaders taught specific skills to the students, such as how to operate ventures. Lave and Wenger (1991) might describe these "situated opportunities" as a "learning curriculum," which "evolves out of participation in a specific community of practice" (p. 97). Participants described these "opportunities for engagement in practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 93) with community members as a highlight of their experiences in the MicroSociety program.

Dewey (1916) said that "School should be a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons" (p. 27). MicroSociety leaders brought in community members to contribute to the program and sent students out into the community through frequent field trips to help students develop their expertise in their work roles. One such field trip shared by a participant involved a group of students in charge of the greenhouse. They were able to connect with a man who turned his entire front lawn into a garden. Others were able to meet and speak with police officers, politicians, and local businesspeople. These kinds of contributions gave participants "access to a wide range of activity, old-timers, and other members of the community" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 100) and enhanced their learning by providing authentic first-hard experiences to support their MicroSociety work. As one participant stated when referring to the benefits of involving the outside community: "Everyone is so invested" (November 16, 2018).

As an experiential program, MicroSociety incurred extra costs for materials, field trips, business uniforms, and release time for the MicroSociety coordinators. As described in Chapter 5, some program features were made possible through contributions by community members and businesses who donated supplies and labour for things like the urban chicken pen and

hydroponics gear. Bruner (1996) felt "learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources" (p. 4). Such resources were used extensively as part of the MicroSociety program through community guest speakers, field trips, sponsorship, and donations of time and money for supplies and equipment. As a form of reciprocity to the surrounding community, service-learning opportunities were embedded into the MicroSociety program.

Learning to Help Others: "Focus on the Problems We Have in Our Community"

Wenger (1998) stated the "work of engagement . . . requires the ability to take part in meaningful activities and interactions" (p. 184). According to participants, providing service was a powerful way for students to learn about the local community and to solve problems. Winter described how through various service-learning initiatives, they "would focus on the problems we have in our community" (October 30, 2018). Dewey (1915) believed, "This closer contact with immediate neighborhood conditions not only enriches school work and strengthens motive force in the pupils, but it increases the service rendered to the community" (p. 206). As part of the MicroSociety pedagogy and because community members gave so much to help the program, the school emphasized service learning opportunities as a way to give back to the community. Kaye (2004) described service learning as when "classroom learning is deepened through service to others in a process that provides structured time and reflection on the service experience and demonstration of the skills and knowledge acquired" (p. 7). This way of engaging students in meaningful practices to discuss, take action, and reflect, might as Wenger (1998) suggested, help students to "make a difference to the communities that they value" (p. 10).

The sense of service that participants experienced in MicroSociety provided many benefits for them. They spoke about how rewarding it was to make a difference. Participants

relayed benefits from working on whole school events designed to help students see the value of giving back to their communities. They treasured the ability to provide service to the community and believed this made a difference in their school. Fundraisers generated a sense of reciprocity in the school; for example, Movember was used to raise money for the Canadian Cancer Society. Campaigns such as Soles for Souls, which involved the collection of old shoes to send to people experiencing poverty, helped participants learn about global issues that extended beyond their communities. Bruner (1971) would affirm that “Knowledge and skill may themselves be highly rewarding, but unless the individual has some sense of their learning leading to something beyond themselves, I suspect there will be erosion even of these pleasures” (p. 124).

Conrad and Hedin (1981) have stated, “To make the transition to adulthood, young people urgently need opportunities to be responsible, caring, participating members of our society” (p. 5). Although participants experienced these opportunities as part of MicroSociety through ventures and service learning, most felt these kinds of experiences were missing in their later middle school and high school programs. This lack of opportunity is disconcerting for “At a time when they [the students] need above all to believe in their own value, they are forced to be passive and dependent, deprived of the chance to make a difference in the world” (Conrad & Hedin, 1981, p. 7). Wenger (1998) acknowledged educators must “engage learning communities . . . so that students may learn what it takes to become effective in the world” (p. 274). Participants in this study felt fortunate they were able to continue their influence and be involved in MicroSociety even after leaving Academy Elementary School.

Staying Connected: “I Just Love it There”

Of all findings gleaned from the participant interviews, the most noteworthy one for me was the extent to how connected these students remained with their former elementary school.

All participants described how they were still involved in the MicroSociety program to varying extents. Participants continued to volunteer in the program as needed, attending school events such as Micro Night and the Grade 5 Farewell, and a few still owned business shares in the companies that were still in operation. Several participants helped organize special events at the school as alumni members, and others continued to help on weekends or after school. It was clear from participant comments that they still felt they were part of the MicroSociety community; as one participant stated, "I just love it here. It has a great environment" (November 21, 2018). While these students were still involved in their MicroSociety school, none of these same students were still connected to their former middle or high schools.

Beane (2005) has stated, "nothing is more frequently associated with the idea of democratic classrooms than the notion of creating a sense of community among its members, both students and teachers" (p. 65). All members of the Academy Elementary School were part of a community of practice that included "newcomers and old-timers" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). The old-timers within this community included the school's first MicroSociety coordinator, who, although retired, was still involved in the program. The role of the older students, including those who were no longer attending the school, became that of knowledge keepers who, through the process of mentoring, touring visitors, attending school events, and speaking about the program, helped "newcomers become part of [this] community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29).

The program's strong senses of community and collaboration, including sustained relationships with former members, seem to be an indication of the success of this MicroSociety school. Program leaders have fostered a culture in which its student participants remain connected and engaged with the program. Bruner (1990) felt "schools are 'communities of

learning or thinking' in which there are procedures, models, feedback channels, and the like that determine how, what, how much, and in what form a child 'learns'" (p. 106). He believed students should be provided with "full participation" in this learning culture and cautioned that a "youth culture [which] develops that is isolated from the society at large" risks becoming "burdensome . . . and unrewarding" (Bruner, 1971, p. 125). Through the program, my participants were able to learn authentically about their own worlds while "enroute to becoming a member of the adult society in which one lives out one's life" (Bruner, 1986, p. 127). By purposefully developing a sense of community through cooperation, service, projects, cross-graded tutoring, field trips, and guest speakers, the MicroSociety program allowed participants "to take charge of their own learning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 272), leading them to feel empowered and engaged in their schools and surrounding communities.

Experiencing Engaging Learning Through MicroSociety

The purpose of this study was to determine how participating students experienced learning in the MicroSociety program and whether and how these experiences contributed to students feeling engaged as learners. By examining student perspectives of learning in MicroSociety, I was able to determine and describe those elements students reported as part of engaged learning. Over 100 years ago, John Dewey (1915) stated, "Give the child work that he [*sic*] recognizes as interesting and valuable and the chance to play, and his [*sic*] hatred of school will speedily be forgotten" (p. 190). It was clear from the larger collection of my findings, and as stated by several participants, the simulated world of MicroSociety was an engaging place to learn. There were a variety of factors that contributed to this state of engagement amongst my participants.

Being an Engaged Learner: "Someone Who's Involved"

The construct of engaged learning is a complicated concept, and I did not know if participants would be able to articulate its meaning giving their young age. One participant explained that to be an engaged learner meant "Someone's who involved but also willing to be involved . . . wanting to do it and enjoying it" (November 16, 2018). It was important for me to dig in deeper as to what participants appreciated about MicroSociety, and what aspects were perceived as not as valuable. Participants were able to state what they valued about the program, and they were able to provide alternative words to help describe their feelings as to what experiences engaged them as learners. They were able to articulate which aspects of the program they found challenging and frustrating and contributing to feelings of disengagement.

When asked what it meant to be an engaged learner, participants provided a myriad of responses. Without exception, all participants described their MicroSociety school experiences using positive descriptors. Bruner (1961) stated, "Ideally, interest in the material to be learned is the best stimulus to learning" (p. 14), and this appeared to be the case with participants. Common words they used to describe MicroSociety included "fun," "being involved," "interesting," "exciting," "hands-on," "real world" and "with lots of opportunities," and also words such as "hard work" and "challenging."

Wenger (1998) describes engagement as a way in which we learn and become who we are through social practice. This concept of practice "connotes doing" (p. 47) and is about "meaning as an experience of everyday life" (p. 52). Participants commented on how meaningful the MicroSociety experience was in their lives. They valued working with others, learning with the surrounding community through field trips and guest speakers, and being able to learn actively by being provided choices, responsibilities, and opportunities to learn through first-hand experience. Wenger (1998) stated that "the work of engagement is basically the work of forming

communities of practice," which "requires the ability to take part in meaningful activities and interactions" (p. 184). Through learning and doing within the social practice of a community of practice, participants were able to experience engaged learning.

My research data revealed that although most participants experienced challenging times during MicroSociety, they did not find this caused them to be disengaged as learners or to lose interest in the program. I surmise such experiences helped to develop self-confidence because there were opportunities to try again and learn from mistakes. Also, adults were nearby to encourage and assist students to find their way when things became difficult, including helping them to discover new employment opportunities. Participants commented how they were able to develop additional skills, talent, and confidence because they took a risk and tried new things after experiencing difficulties or failures.

Being in the Flow: "I Kind of Get Caught Up in What We're Doing"

From my interview conversations with the participants, it was apparent they valued learning through the MicroSociety program. In the same regard as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described engaged learning as being in the flow, participants stated time flew by quickly when participating in MicroSociety. One participant described how she lost track of time when working with others in MicroSociety: "I kind of get caught up in what we're doing and enjoying the activities" (November 21, 2018).

Another aspect of being an engaged learner and being in the flow centered on motivation. Bruner (1966) believed, "Almost all children possess what have come to be called 'intrinsic' motives for learning" (p. 114). Participants appeared to be more driven by intrinsic motivators and rarely spoke about grades, rewards, or other external indicators. There were no indications that they chose certain positions because of higher salaries or that they would get better grades.

Some chose jobs that purposefully had lower salaries because they fit better with their talents and abilities.

Participants spoke about learning activities—not in terms of the grades they received—but in terms of how they learned through the process, which sometimes involved hard work. Eva preferred the challenge of hard work and felt that when school is "less enjoyable and boring, I just kind of scratch the surface" (November 15, 2018). MicroSociety creator Richmond (1973) noticed that extrinsic rewards did not sustain student interest in the program. He commented that "Children just did not react strongly to the old system of grades and petty favors" (Richmond (1973, p. 111). Participants valued MicroSociety for reasons such as "working with others," "providing service," and "helping to make a difference in the school and community." Bruner (1961) stated earlier in his research that "Short-run arousal of interest is not the same as the long-term establishment of interest in the broader sense" (p. 72). The fact that all participants are still connected to their elementary school MicroSociety program is one indication of long term establishment of interest. Unlike other students who remain connected or return to their former schools for feelings of nostalgia, participants described different motivations for involvement. There were no extrinsic reasons for participants to remain connected to their former elementary school; they appeared to relish the opportunities to help despite having new commitments in their lives. Participants spoke about returning to help because they viewed their contributions as important work in building a successful MicroSociety program at Academy Elementary School. As a result, participants continued to feel valued as contributing members, as old-timers, in their former school's various communities of practice. Despite these sorts of positive experiences, participants described feelings of disengagement in the MicroSociety program at times.

Adults Taking Over: "Some Facilitators Love it Too Much"

The MicroSociety program included a variety of components, including obtaining employment, training in Micro University, providing and accessing services, production days, and shopping in the Micro Market. I was interested in the perceptions of how students experienced these different aspects and what components they found to be challenging, frustrating, or disengaging. Based on my participant recollections, few features of the program provided negative experiences for participants. Perhaps this was because several participants had previous roles in discussing and promoting the benefits of the program with adults. My participants may still have viewed themselves as representatives of the school and attuned their responses to what they believed was wanted. Perhaps, it was because, as research participants, they simply recalled fond memories of their former elementary school as many students do.

Most negative experiences shared by participants centered around the employment aspects of obtaining a job (e.g., applying, being interviewed at the job fair, and being chosen for a specific position). These experiences seemed to make some participants feel less confident, unpopular, or frustrated. A few participants did not like it when jobs were chosen for them, as this diminished their sense of agency.

The most frequent frustration with the program, as expressed by participants, was a perceived difference in opinion about how much students could handle without adult intervention. Some participants did not appreciate it when adults would take over and make decisions on behalf of students. They conveyed a desire for the adults to “step back and let the kids do more of the work” (December 5, 2018). One participant stated, “Some facilitators love it [MicroSociety] too much and want to get involved, but that’s not what’s it’s supposed to be about” (October 31, 2018). Wurdinger (2005) affirmed that “Meaning and interest may be lost if the educator takes charge and tells students what to do” (p. 11). Moments of disengagement

occurred when students were deprived of choices or freedom or felt their talents were not being recognized. My participants recalled feeling less disengaged while involved in the MicroSociety program because the adults at Academy Elementary School were able to shift “attention to the issue of how we enable young human beings to grow into effective adults by helping them use and develop their own powers” (Bruner, 1996, p. 72). These feelings contrasted with their comments about how they experienced learning in their other schools.

Concluding Comments

In this chapter, I described three dominant themes surfacing from the findings. I aimed to provide a complete picture of how participants experienced learning in a MicroSociety school and to examine some factors that contributed to engaged and disengaged learning for these students. Ellis (1998) stated that when evaluating interpretive accounts, “one should ask whether the concern which motivated the inquiry has been advanced” (p. 30). I have learned a tremendous amount about how participants experienced the MicroSociety program and conclude that as an experiential program, MicroSociety provided an engaging learning experience for these participants. Participants conveyed their involvement in learning in a culture that focused on providing enjoyable, authentic, and collaborative learning experiences. The program's principles were centered on empowering students to make decisions and allowing them to fully participate in a community of practice that taught them how to become functioning members of society through the integration of life skills. Ellis (1998) stated the “real test of an inquiry of interpretation is whether or not it reveals a solution to the difficulty that motivated the inquiry” (p. 29). Thus, in my final chapter, I conclude by sharing possible solutions supported by research, discuss the limitations of my study, and offer recommendations and concluding

thoughts gleaned from this study. In the spirit of providing voices to the participants, I include their suggestions of how educators can better engage learners in today's classrooms.

Chapter 8: Reflections and Conclusions

The main purpose of this case study research was to examine the experiences of student participants in the MicroSociety program and to determine to what extent these experiences contributed to their feelings of being engaged as learners. Current research about MicroSociety has been limited and rarely accounts for students' experiences; thus, I hope this study provided further contributions by offering students' perspectives on learning in this program. Quaglia and Corso (2014) stated, "When students believe they are heard and influencing decisions, schools become more relevant to students' lives and are more likely to be seen as serving their needs" (p. 3), which can make students feel more connected to their schools and lead them to "do better academically" (p. 59). Findings from my research could help address the continuing problem of student disengagement in schools and provide students with more opportunities to feel empowered in their school communities. In this final chapter, I reflect on what I have learned from participating in interpretive inquiry research using a case study approach that involved young adolescents. I also revisit the study limitations and offer remaining questions regarding my study that may warrant further investigation. In honoring the contributions of participants, I include their thoughts and recommendations, which provide potential on how to better educate today's young people.

Reflections on Interpretive Inquiry Research and Case Study Approach

When I first began my learning journey exploring student engagement, numerous studies indicated students need to feel more empowered in their schools and learning. With this notion, I felt it essential for my research to involve student participants and provide them with the opportunity to share their experiences. I believe interpretive inquiry was the best approach for this. As a former teacher and instructor in preservice teacher education, I have had many

opportunities to visit schools and ask students about their school experiences. However, in these instances, I was more of an observer and what Boostrom (1994) might call a "subjective inquirer" (p. 57), or someone who liked to pose a lot of questions. I was not a researcher. This study allowed me to become a true researcher, a "reflective interpreter," where "I had to learn to pay attention" (Boostrom, 1994, p. 61) and listen carefully as participants spoke about their experiences in the MicroSociety program. With each question presented and with each response, I needed to "see meaning" (Boostrom, 1994, p. 62) in what the participants were saying. I also needed to react quickly and think of follow-up questions that kept the conversation flowing.

Using preinterview activities that were conversation starters helped my participants feel at ease at the commencement of our interviews. We would often revisit these activities in subsequent interviews. Participants seemed to enjoy bringing artifacts to share with me that were part of their MicroSociety experience, as it gave them a bit of control over the interview process and allowed them to talk about something that was familiar to them. Lastly, the opportunity to share photos of MicroSociety or to walk the halls of their former school helped my participants reminisce about former experiences, which then fostered additional conversations. It was a rare occasion when our interviews would end earlier than planned as my participants had a lot to say and share with me.

I found the interview process to be an intense but highly valuable experience. I was grateful for participants who were communicative and willing to share with me, an outsider unfamiliar with their worlds. It was challenging at times to keep up with participants as I did my best to write down their words. The use of an Echo Smartpen proved particularly beneficial as I was able to write down field notes at the same time as recording our conversations. A second digital recording device allowed me to compare the conversations to ensure consistency. These

recording devices were helpful in reviewing and analyzing my transcripts on an ongoing basis and provided an opportunity for me to think of follow-up questions for subsequent interviews. Reviewing transcripts allowed me to examine what we had previously talked about, confirm participant meanings, and smoothly transition to new topics. Even today, I have the desire to go back and continue our interviews so I could ask additional questions of clarification and to further learn from my participants. There is a point, however, when the interview stage must end, and the analysis of data begins.

The data analysis process was time consuming but essential in furthering my understandings of how my participants experienced MicroSociety. The interviews with my six participants provided me with a binder full of rich data. I found it helpful to use different colored paper to keep track of each participant. As I deciphered their words, I began to color-code the various themes starting to emerge; this was done for each individual participant. I initially focused on six themes, but after further examination, narrowed it down to the four most prominent themes. Eventually, I removed a theme that commented on how students experienced engaging learning in MicroSociety because it felt generalized and repetitive to the other themes.

My data analysis continued when I created large word tables for each participant containing the highlighted segments from our interviews that demonstrated the dominant themes. This process was helpful in allowing me to step back and view the overriding themes from my participants' perspectives. At first, this was also how I presented my findings. My supervisors provided an alternative approach, suggesting a series of vignettes that emerged when I examined each participants' experiences in MicroSociety separately and chronologically. Stake (1995) defined vignettes as "briefly described episodes to illustrate an aspect of the case" (p. 128). This process allowed me to explore each participants' experiences in the program more critically and

provided me with the opportunity to get to know them more deeply. But a case study researcher also "recognizes and substantiates new meanings" and "finds ways to make them comprehensible to others" (Stake, 1995, p. 97). Thus, following the data analysis and presentation of findings, a discussion on the new meanings I was uncovering was needed.

The themes shared in my discussion chapter support the MicroSociety program's focus on student empowerment and real-world learning. However, through the analytical process and additional reading, the concept of communities of practice emerged as an essential component of my participants' MicroSociety experiences and provided a significant contribution to my study. As Wenger (1998) stated, practicing in a real-world community of practice was for my participants "a process by which we [they] can experience the world and our [their] engagement with it as meaningful" (p. 51).

When I first decided to explore the MicroSociety program as a research interest, I was eager to learn as much as possible. In my initial brainstorming of possible research directions, I thought of interviewing former students, teachers, parents, and administrators and briefly considered the idea of using quantitative surveys using a mixed-methods approach to data collection. However, following conversations with the principal, MicroSociety coordinators and the school district associate superintendent, it was apparent that a lot of data already existed about the school and program. Most of this was in the form of reading and math scores, and surveys from parents and teachers, which were generally positive towards the program. Following further conversations with my supervisors, I determined that what I felt was missing were the words and stories from the young participants themselves about how they experienced the program. With this in mind, I structured my candidacy proposal to focus on a case study

approach using interpretive inquiry interviews to capture the participants' experiences in the MicroSociety program.

In my naivete as a researcher, I was optimistic in thinking I would have a large pool of potential participants to aid me in my study. Initially, I hoped to have six participants: three males and three females, and all preferably in middle school. I had to shift my expectations as I only had one male volunteer, and three participants were in high school. I found the high school students' perspective valuable, and I believe it was because they were far enough removed from the MicroSociety program that they could talk about it honestly and descriptively. Several years of additional learning experiences in different schools may have also provided a broader perspective, which was helpful to me in better understanding what they described as engaging learning. Although I interviewed six participants and analyzed all data collected from them, with the encouragement of my supervisors, I decided to focus my findings on the four participants who had attended the program for all 6 years. In this difficult decision, I felt I would let down the other two participants by not providing a voice for them to tell their stories. However, I was encouraged to know that I could still share their experiences in different ways in the future (e.g., scholarly articles, presentations).

Limitations

Study limitations were related to completing research with a small number of participants and at one research site. As of late 2020, there were four MicroSociety schools in Canada, with all of them in Alberta. Most of these schools have just started with the program. As a result, I had to choose a research site with an established MicroSociety program. This site was a school with which I was already familiar, knowing several teachers on site. I had to be mindful not to show any bias in this study. Although I was familiar with the MicroSociety program before

commencing my study, what I knew was based on my observations and conversations with staff members who were supportive of the program. I discovered others, including former teachers, who struggled with program aspects and purposefully left the school because of MicroSociety. What I did not know and what guided my research was the student perspective of whether they were truly in charge in a simulated real-world setting as advertised by the banners on-site and the testimonials posted on the school website.

I realized early in the interview process the participants were all strong program supporters. This support was shown by their continued commitment to the program and their willingness to volunteer for our interpretive inquiry interviews. Initially in the interviews, I desired to learn about those experiences the participants found engaging or disengaging about MicroSociety. Participants described a few aspects of the program as less enjoyable, but for the most part, they were positive in their descriptions. When choosing participants to interview, I hoped to find those who had challenges and difficulties within the program. I believe this would have helped me to better understand the concept of student disengagement through a student perspective. I realize, however, that students who did not value the program were most likely not willing to give up their time to talk about it with an outsider. Although this could be perceived as a limitation of this study, Yin (2014) reminded me that in using the case study approach, I would not consider my participants to be a “sample group” (p. 21). They were unique individuals who could contribute to the theories used in my study, rather than simply helping me to extrapolate “statistical generalizations” (Yin, 2014, p. 21).

Participants described feeling engaged as learners during the MicroSociety program. Although feelings of disengagement were not common in the program, this does not mean they did not experience feeling this way in their other school experiences. My participants were open

to sharing these negative experiences with me, and it provided me with a complete picture of how they preferred to experience learning. I examined a specific program and the students who participated in it; therefore, it is beyond the scope of my research to share detailed findings and to discuss themes relevant to my participants' post-MicroSociety experiences. Despite this limitation, there is value in trying to interpret what these kinds of experiences meant for children. I believe it is more typical for young adolescents to speak positively about their elementary school experiences than when describing how learning occurs in middle school and high school. Although case study is not generalizable to larger conclusions, these young people deserve to be heard, and their suggestions might enhance the literature regarding student perspectives towards learning. Thus, in the next section, I share some recommendations participants offered on improving learning in today's schools.

Learning from Participants: Improving Learning in Today's Schools

As is the situation in case study research, this study does not suggest that the findings shared are applicable to all students who have experienced the MicroSociety program. This case study involved former MicroSociety participants who all appeared to appreciate and value learning. Because of their perspective in attending other schools, they offered a snapshot of how they have experienced learning and what contributed to their feelings of engagement and disengagement.

All participants stated they had not felt as engaged in learning in their other schools as at their MicroSociety school. They provided a variety of reasons for this disengagement: learning activities were not as enjoyable, less choice and responsibilities, and curriculum that was not as relevant to their lives and put considerable emphasis on traditional tests. Perhaps, as Bruner (1959) stated, "Facts simply learned without a generic organization are naked and useless truth"

(p. 185). Although my participants did not find learning as engaging in their other schools, they offered several thoughts on how to improve learning in today's schools. These suggestions primarily focused on two areas: the curriculum and the instructional design decisions teachers make around instruction and assessment.

The context of the curriculum was an area of concern for some participants. They valued the authentic, real-world learning opportunities of MicroSociety and how it was connected across their school subjects. They suggested middle and high schools incorporate more of this into the curriculum by teaching things "that kids can use" (November 15, 2018). As suggested by my participants, this real-world learning would include more financial literacy, service learning, current events, government, and more skill development in areas such as public speaking. One participant suggested a class on life skills, including "proper phone etiquette, how to do an interview . . . how to write a resume, how to apply for a job . . . cheques, bills, CPR, self-defense and safety" (October 27, 2018). The same participant questioned why some classes were options: "Cooking shouldn't be an option, it should be like you have to take it" (November 15, 2018). Another participant expressed concern with the content of the high school curriculum:

> I feel like we're learning curriculum, but it's not a lot of stuff we can take with us and use in our daily lives . . . once we get out into the real world, a lot of that just doesn't become relevant for you and there are things that maybe we could take some time to learn that would be more important, and more relevant and valuable to us once we leave. (November 16, 2018)

In their post MicroSociety school experiences, my participants described how subjects were taught separately and disconnected from the world in which they were living. Dewey (1902) was critical of how the child "goes to school, and various studies divide and fractionize

the world for him" (p. 105). My participants also experienced these feelings. One participant was disappointed in the traditional approach to the curriculum and the lack of relevancy in her middle school. She stated her school was not "like the real world . . . it was just the social, science, math and LA kind of thing" (October 29, 2018). Another participant felt that in her K-8 school, everything was taught "kind of in isolation" (October 30, 2018), which she found less interesting. A high school participant commented on how she missed the integration of real-world learning in the curriculum and described her high school classes as being "taught in isolation" (December 17, 2018). Dewey (2009) was critical of this isolating nature of traditional education, stating, "it is the business of education . . . to struggle against this isolation in order that the various interests may reinforce and play into one another" (p. 135).

My participants frequently commented about how expansive the curriculum was in middle and high school, and how this impacted their schooling experiences. One middle school participant found school harder with more to learn: "I had to come home every night, working on my homework . . . it was kind of a struggle to keep track of my school life versus my social life" (November 6, 2018). A high school participant stated she thinks there are more disengaged learners in middle and high school because "there's a lot of curriculum . . . and there's a lot they [the teachers] have to get through" (October 31, 2018). Likewise, another high school participant felt students in his high school were not as engaged because of the "strict curriculum" that teachers "have to get through in a period of time" (December 10, 2018).

During my interviews, I specifically asked participants what teachers could do to make learning more engaging for them. First, participants spoke about how they did not value the traditional approaches to instruction, often experienced in their middle and high school classrooms. One participant described how learning in middle school was "sitting at a desk"

(November 15, 2018), where teachers are "giving lectures" and the students are "taking notes," which she found to be "really boring" (October 27, 2018). Another participant commented on how most learning in her high school experience involved teachers lecturing and "telling us everything and us just writing notes" (November 16, 2018). One participant described how her teachers "just went to the script" (November 6, 2018). When asked to elaborate on what she meant by this, this participant offered the following explanation:

> They [the teachers] didn't really want to twist it up a little bit. They just read what they had to do. You know, like how you read a script . . . It's kind of where you don't want to pizazz it up? You have to go to the original, it's kind of like copyright like you're just pasting word by word, you're not putting it in your own form. (November 6, 2018)

Wenger (1998) was critical of this traditional classroom format which was "too disconnected from the world and too uniform to support meaningful forms of identification" (p. 269). Once students left their MicroSociety community with the multitude of roles they held as Micro-citizens, they appeared to return to that traditional place of learning where their primary identity was that of a student.

As shared in interviews, participants preferred active approaches to teaching and offered several suggestions for teachers to consider. One participant proposed that teachers, "instead of talking . . . show more, a little bit less talk to make kids interested and wanting to do it, instead of just sitting there" (November 6, 2018). She also suggested strategies like role playing "to keep kids awake" by having them "dress up . . . create a script . . . which would make it fun for kids" (November 6, 2018). Another participant supported more active approaches to teaching such as "field trips . . . games . . . and projects" (November 5, 2018). The use of hands-on learning activities was a common thread in my participants' suggestions.

In addition to the traditional approaches to teaching, my participants commented on how conventional methods of assessment, such as tests, were used more frequently in their middle and high school classrooms than in their MicroSociety school. One middle school participant was critical of this emphasis on tests: “Every single day, you have to learn something and then you have a test; you’re completely bombarded of all the things that have been thrown at you” (November 6, 2018). Another high school participant wished there were less reliance on tests in her school. She indicated that “Teachers love to quiz whenever they can,” so “there’s always the pressure of a test coming” (November 16, 2018). When asked why she thought her teachers were not as comfortable doing things such as projects, she asserted that “it’s sometimes hard giving up that control and letting someone else do it” (October 31, 2018).

An over-reliance on tests to assess learning was a change suggested by several participants. One participant recommended teachers “not have exams back to back to back” (December 10, 2018), while another recommended that teachers have “less big tests” and to replace these with “more projects” (December 17, 2018). My participants stated they appreciated it when provided with a choice on how to complete schoolwork, but this only occurred on a few occasions. As one participant said, “Teachers should try and do more of what we [the students] want, rather than what they would have planned” (December 17, 2018).

Wenger (1998) was critical of institutions that viewed learning as “an individual process” that is “best separated from the rest of our activities” (p. 3). Several participants also did not see the value in learning this way and suggested that teachers use more collaborative learning to engage learners. One high school participant described how he was less engaged in learning in his high school, and other students were “on their phones . . . sleeping . . . skipping” (December 10, 2018). Compared to his collaborative experiences in his MicroSociety school, he felt high

school was more of a "dictatorship," where teachers made most decisions. But he understood the challenge his teachers faced, as they "don't have enough time to plan all the activities because they have to do all the marking" (December 10, 2018). He felt his high school teachers were "Probably trying to make sure that you are ready for the next grade up, rather than getting you ready for the outside world" (December 10, 2018). His recommendation to improve today's schools was for teachers to create "more activities to get more people involved" (December 10, 2018) and to collaborate with the surrounding community with more guest speakers and field trips. Participants also valued working with students and adults in other grades, with one participant suggesting that teachers do "more partnering up with different grades" (December 17, 2018).

My participants were consistent in sharing their thoughts about what teachers could do to make learning more engaging in today's classrooms. Suggestions for teachers to move away from traditional approaches such as lectures, note-taking, and tests, and to replace this with more active learning approaches in their classes, such as projects, collaborative learning, and hands-on learning, were similar to what Dewey (2009) suggested several decades earlier. Dewey recommended that teachers use more active instructional strategies in their classrooms, including field trips, games, role play, and opportunities for students to work with others in their communities.

Current research on best teaching and learning practices aligned with participant suggestions. Zemelman et al. (1998) summarized the principles, assumptions, or theories about good teaching and learning. As described by my participants, many were key MicroSociety program components, including learning that is experiential, active and hands-on, and which provided students with choices and challenges so that they could take responsibility for their own

learning (p. 8). The authors go on to say that "learning activities need to be authentic" with "real, rich, complex ideas and materials," which are "socially constructed and often interactional" (p. 8). They believed the best classrooms were taught holistically and were democratic in nature: "a model community" where "students learn what they live as citizens of the school" (p. 8).

Participants' suggestions of working more with each other were supported by research on the effects of cooperative learning on increasing student engagement and achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2008; Hattie, 2009; Hume, 2011; Marzano et al., 2001). The ongoing research of Darling-Hammond and associates (2008) has concluded that students "learn more deeply when they can apply classroom-gathered knowledge to real-world problems, and when they take part in projects that require sustained engagement and collaboration" (para. 3–4). Daniels and Bizar (1998) also recommended that teachers:

> develop their curricula around the real issues that people face in the world, helping to immediately connect students to the importance of what they are learning. These connections deepen the learning process and help students to construct a personal meaning about their world. (p. 173)

Participants commented they did not participate in project-based or service-learning opportunities to solve authentic problems when they went on to higher grade levels after leaving their MicroSociety school. Research has suggested this kind of learning benefits students "academically, socially, and emotionally" and helps them "develop skills; explore numerous career options; and . . . appreciate the value of civic responsibility by actively participating in their community" (Kaye, 2004, p. 2).

Participants valued the connectedness of their MicroSociety experience and found this aspect missing once they left the program. Although my participants did not understand the

concept of curriculum integration, they shared how much they preferred to learn this way compared to learning in isolation which was more common in their other school experiences. Wurdinger (2005) stated, “when subject matters are compartmentalized, learning may become disjointed and quickly lose meaning” (p. 24). The Association for Middle Level Education (formerly the National Middle School Association) recommends an integrative curriculum “that helps students make sense of their lives and the world around them, giving them an opportunity to make significant and meaningful decisions about their learning while focusing on transdisciplinary tasks and ideas” (NMSA, 2003, p. 22). This element of curriculum integration is more typical of experiential learning, which “utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to education when students directly experience something, they are exposed to a variety of subjects that are linked together . . . ultimately seeing a bigger picture of how things are interconnected in the world” (Wurdinger, 2005, p. 25).

As stated by my participants, MicroSociety provided an experience of learning within a community of practice. The program philosophy made them feel more engaged and empowered because teachers released some responsibility for learning onto the students. Participants suggested teachers move beyond the script of a subject-centered curriculum taught with traditional approaches and instead integrate more life skills through collaboration, community, and active learning approaches. Dewey (1915) also valued having students learn within their communities so they could leave school “with something to be immediately used in their everyday life” (p. 50). Dewey (1915) reminded educators, “when a school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community . . . we shall have the deepest and best guaranty of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious” (p. 20).

Questions of Inquiry and Potential Investigations

Gadamer (1995) maintained that "the question is the path to knowledge" (p. 363). I have had many questions throughout this study. Some questions were answered, others became less important as I became immersed in the interpretive inquiry process, and still, others began to surface as new curiosities to explore well after my interviews were completed. Ellis (1998) explained, the "aim of interpretive inquiry is not to write the end of an existing story, but to write a more hopeful beginning for new stories" (p. 10). Thus, the end of my research journey with the MicroSociety participants is the potential beginning for future investigations.

Others who investigated questions about the MicroSociety program have offered suggestions and ideas for continued research. Several decades earlier, Richmond (1973), the MicroSociety program creator, recommended research in several categories, including studying "the impact of the model on psycho-social developments of individuals . . . on the climate of the school" and on "traditional academic performance" (p. 256). He suggested creating training opportunities for teachers interested in the program, and more opportunities to link "the experiences schools offer with general career categories" (p. 182).

Much of Richmond's earlier suggestions have been accomplished through the current work of the MicroSociety International Organization, which he cofounded, and from additional research carried out by others. Following a study of a MicroSociety school, Ibarra (2001) recommended that schools incorporate more experiential, active learning approaches like those used in the program. After completing a case study dissertation of a specific school, Grote (2002) recommended, "additional studies be carried out in regard to schools that have successfully implemented a MicroSociety program" (p. 158). Lastly, from his mixed studies research examining school change and program implementation in six MicroSociety schools, Cherniss (2006) indicated that program sustainability would be improved if teachers had a better

understanding of the concept of the “student empowerment principle.” He recommended additional in-service training for teachers to help shift away from their “habitual ways of thinking” (Cherniss, 2006, p. 181) of schools as places where teachers were in charge and made all decisions.

My research took a different direction. Rather than explore program implementation from the perspectives of teachers and administrators, or by examining quantitative data of surveys and test scores, I chose the act of listening to former participants talk about their MicroSociety experiences. Although this study is complete, I still desire to know more about how students experience the MicroSociety program. I believe additional information might be provided with supplementary student interviews, especially with those who had mixed feelings or unfavourable views about the program. An open-ended question asking students to propose suggestions for improvement in the MicroSociety program might offer some interesting considerations for thematic analysis.

I would be interested in learning how participants’ perspectives about the program changed over time and as they got older. I may not receive similar results if I had chosen younger, current program participants or ones who did not experience the same breadth of responsibilities. If I could interview more high school graduates who had experienced the MicroSociety program for the full 6 years, I would be interested in finding to what extent they felt the program prepared them for the world in which they were now living as adults. Likewise, a longitudinal study that shadows the same participants over time could examine whether the program had a lasting impact. Additional research may provide details of how perceptions changed as participants became citizens that experienced the political and economic structures of society. Research might also provide information as to what they felt was missing from the real-

world simulation of MicroSociety. It would be interesting to hear about their recommendations for the program after experiencing the real world as adults.

The themes of this study are another area of future consideration. From the information shared by my participants, I concluded the MicroSociety provided them with real-world learning opportunities that empowered and engaged them. This conclusion was due to the program principles and how a community of practice was created at Academy Elementary School. It would be interesting to research other MicroSociety schools to see if a community of practice were equally integral to how participants experienced the program. Likewise, additional investigations of other programs that claim to provide real-world learning opportunities that engage and empower students may offer additional evidence on how to create communities of practice in our schools.

I also think it would be interesting to examine additional aspects of the MicroSociety program through the broader theoretical and conceptual framework of communities of practice of "thinking about learning as a process of social participation" (Wenger, p. ix). For example, interviewing teachers might provide valuable details about pedagogy, deep learning, democratic classrooms, and the decisions they made to create a community of practice in their school. Likewise, interviewing parents of MicroSociety students could provide a fascinating viewpoint on how these adults felt the program prepared their children for the real-world, and to what extent their children remained on the periphery of the MicroSociety community after leaving Academy Elementary School. Parents would also be able to share perspectives on how their children experienced learning in MicroSociety compared with their other schools. Since community members are a valuable and significant component of the MicroSociety program, their views as old-timers and knowledge keepers could also provide an interesting component to

the research on communities of practice. Lastly, a closer examination of the role of the MicroSociety coordinators, as "system convenors" who "cultivate communities of practice by bringing together people from diverse locations in order to transform practice" (Wenger et al., 2015, p. 97) would be intriguing to explore in a future study.

In the end, this study has been about the students. My participants offered ideas on topics such as service learning, a focus on skill development, curriculum integration, and learning collaboratively across grades, as potential practices that could build stronger communities of practice in our schools. Changes to policy, curriculum, or instructional practices may aid in helping schools create the types of connected communities that were so valuable to my participants. Wenger (1998), however, reminds us that "leaning cannot be designed; it can only be designed for" (p. 229). After all, teaching can occur without any significant learning, and learning can take place without effective teaching. What is important is the "practice" as "driven by doing and learning" (p. 251), and the creations of "social infrastructures that foster learning" (p. 225). When this occurs in our schools, there will be greater engagement. These "communities" are the key to "real transformation – the kind that has real effects on people's lives" (p. 85).

Concluding Thoughts: A Journey Without Maps to a New Landscape of Practice

> As our readers read, as they begin to construct a virtual text of their own, it is as if they were embarking on a journey without maps—and yet, they possess a stock of maps that might give hints.
>
> —Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*

At times throughout this research process, I have felt like I was on a "journey without maps." Although I possessed a "stock of maps" (Bruner, 1986, p. 36) and was familiar with the literature on instructional design to improve student achievement from my work as a teacher, school district Coordinator of Instruction, and instructor in preservice teacher education, I was a

novice as a researcher. I knew little about how students experienced learning as engaging, other than hunches gleaned from my own students and children. My desire was to construct a clearer picture about student engagement and the impact that this had on students' experiences in school.

Although this research journey has taken considerable time and has been challenging at times, it was not an experience that I wanted to rush through. Every aspect of this study: obtaining ethics approval, interviewing participants, and writing the various chapters, has taken longer than I had expected. Throughout this deliberate process, I have learned and have been able to construct a clearer picture of how my participants experienced learning in a MicroSociety school. I have learned that student engagement extends far beyond the instructional design decisions that a teacher makes. It is about the experience of learning socially within a broad community that allows children to develop competence and to form identities through ongoing practice. Through this process, engagement is created. As Wenger (1998) reminds us, "the possibility of engagement is critical to learning" (p. 238).

According to Ellis (1998), "From interpretive inquiry we learn to think more fruitfully than we could before in our efforts to gain wisdom or find helpful approaches to difficult problems" (p. 10). I feel I have furthered my knowledge in understanding that every child experiences learning differently. These experiences cause some students to feel engaged, and at times challenged and frustrated. But I have also learned that with persistence, confidence and a strong sense of self, patterns of disengagement can be avoided. This study helped shift my thinking beyond the teacher's role in planning engaging learning experiences, to thinking more about how students can feel empowered through the development of a community of practice within the school and extending to the surrounding community. Although participants valued the real-world elements and learning activities of MicroSociety, it was the dynamic nature of being

part of this community of practice that provided them with their most positive and enduring learning experiences.

Dewey (1938) envisioned schools in which “all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility” (p. 56). He valued schools where students could experience democratic principles with opportunities to collaborate in identifying and solving problems in the community. Bruner also placed considerable importance on the value of creating community in schools, a place to develop a culture of learning between teachers and students. Wenger (1998) stated that experiencing a community of practice is “a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful” (p. 51). Participant experiences shared in this study indicate how deeply meaningful and long lasting it was to be part of a community of practice in a MicroSociety school.

As a researcher on my own journey of discovery, I too, have found this experience to be deeply personal and meaningful. Wenger (2015) has stated that “If the body of knowledge of a profession is a living landscape of practice, then our personal experience of learning can be thought of as a journey through this landscape” (p. i.). By carrying out this research and reflecting on my own practices and involvement in various communities of practice, including deep learning about the MicroSociety community of practice, I have experienced becoming part of the scholarly community as a researcher. Wenger (2015) reminded me that “this journey within and across practices shapes who we are” (p. 19), and because of this experience, I have a deeper understanding of who I am, how I have changed, and the kinds of work I wish to pursue in the future. I have always aspired to contribute to a culture of learning through my work, but I felt I needed to be in charge of the decisions surrounding my work and that I needed to be the “knowledge keeper.” I now realize that my learning is further enhanced when I am a contributing

member of a community of practice in which sometimes I am the “old-timer,” sometimes I am the “practioner,” and sometimes I am the “newcomer” who aspires to learn more. Knowing that I have the capacity to participate in a variety of roles and within different communities of practice is engaging and empowering and will further enhance my knowledge and skills as an educator. I look forward to creating and participating in communities of practice in my future work. By working collaboratively with others, including faculty, students, or community members, and by taking risks and making mistakes as the participants in this study did, we will uncover the truth, and we will learn. Wenger (1998) stated that “engagement in practice . . . is both the road and the destination” (p. 95), and I have enjoyed both of these aspects in doing this work. I look forward to more journeys as an educator and as a researcher.

References

Abeles, V. (2015). *Beyond measure: Rescuing an overscheduled, overtested, underestimated generation.* Simon and Schuster.

Alberta Education. (2001). *Removing barriers to high school completion: Final report.* https://open.alberta.ca/publications/077851319x

Alberta Education. (2010). *Inspiring Education: A dialogue with Albertans.* https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/45370ce9-3a90-4ff2-8735-cdb760c720f0/resource/2ee2452c-81d3-414f-892f-060caf40e78e/download/4492270-2010-Inspiring-Education-Dialogue-Albertans-2010-04.pdf

Alberta Education. (2012). *Speak out year end review: 2011–2012.* https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/bba43b3a-1870-47ad-b694-7b69017c702a/resource/3fac6f8d-5cf7-4adf-9a2c-38070b7fad9e/download/6019943-2012-09-year-in-review.pdf

Alberta Education. (2013). *Accountability pillar results for annual education results reports.* https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/14c4c9d0-81d2-486c-9e51-d78ff8688a45/resource/09a1764d-efec-47c0-9d58-f4d4b002cac4/download/6866662-2013-10-accountability-pillar-results-annual-education-results-report-aerr.pdf

Alberta Education. (2014). *Speak out year in review: 2013/2014.* https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/bba43b3a-1870-47ad-b694-7b69017c702a/resource/38d5a74e-a295-4bbf-b6cf-0c947e2c12e0/download/zz-6019943-2013-2014-speak-out-the-alberta-student-engagement-initiative-year-in-review.pdf

Alberta Education. (2015). *High school completion strategic framework.* https://www.alberta.ca/high-school-completion.aspx

Alberta Education. (2016). *The guiding framework for the design and development of kindergarten to grade 12 provincial curriculum (Programs of study).* https://education.alberta.ca/media/3575996/curriculum-development-guiding-framework.pdf

Alberta Education. (2017). *Stakeholder satisfaction with education in Alberta surveys: Summary report.* https://education.alberta.ca/media/3693627/alberta-education-survey-summary-report-2017.pdf

Alberta Education. (2019a). *Accountability pillar results for Annual Education Results Report* (AERR). https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/3aa355c1-3a4e-49b1-9992-f3f567bb8605/resource/35e5aa8b-5669-4846-8585-5ef16bf1f843/download/edc-accountability-pillar-results-for-annual-education-results-report-aerr-2019-10.pdf

Alberta Education. (2019b). *Education annual report 2018–2019* https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/8b226e68-1227-4aec-87a5-b573f3bfb062/resource/fec2c6c0-2fa7-4030-adcc-8f3dbaa1bcf4/download/education-annual-report-2018-2019-web.pdf

Arete Consulting. (2002). *MicroSociety: The impacts.* Arete Corporation.

Armstrong, T. (1994). *Multiple intelligences in the classroom.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Association for Experiential Education. (2017). *What is experiential education?* https://www.aee.org/what-is-ee

Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. In D. Flinders & S. Thornton (Eds). (2013). *The curriculum studies reader* (pp. 235–251). Routledge.

Audas, R., & Willms, J. D. (2001). *Engagement and dropping out of school: A life-course perspective.* HRDC Publication Centre. https://eweb.uqac.ca/bibliotheque/archives/15292281.pdf

Barrington, B. L., & Hendricks, B. (1989). Differentiating characteristics of high school graduates, dropouts and non-graduates. *Journal of Educational Research, 82*, 309–319.

Beane, J. (1997). *Curriculum integration: Designing the core of democratic education.* Teachers College Press.

Beane, J. (2005). *A reason to teach: Creating classrooms of dignity and hope*. Heinemann.

Behrendt, B. (2002, April 20). Ipsville MicroSociety: Is unique program serving purpose? *St. Petersburg Times.*

Bennett, S. (1976). Building miniature societies in schools. *Education. 97*(2), 162.

Boostrom, R. (1994). Learning to pay attention. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *7*(1), 51–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839940070104

Boyce, W. (Ed.). (2004). *Young people in Canada: Their health and well-being.* https://www.jcsh-cces.ca/upload/hbsc_report_2004_e.pdf

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brenner, M. (2006). Interviewing in educational research. In J. Green, G. Camilli, & P. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 357–370). Routledge.

Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J., Jr., & Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives on high school dropouts.* Civic Enterprises.

Bruner, J. (1956). *A study of thinking.* John Wiley & Sons.

Bruner, J. (1960). *The process of education.* Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1961). The act of discovery. *Harvard Educational Review, 31,* 21–32.

Bruner, J. (1962). *On knowing: Essays for the left hand.* Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction.* Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1971). *The relevance of education.* W.W. Norton.

Bruner, J. S. (1985). Vygotsky: A historical and conceptual perspective. In J. Wertsch (Ed.), *Culture, communication and cognition: Vygotskian perspectives* (pp. 21–34). Cambridge University Press.

Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds.* Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning.* Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education.* Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (2006). *In search of pedagogy* (vol. 1). Routledge.

Chandross, K. (1986). Overview of the youth/adult partnership issue. In T. Smith & C. Knapp (Eds.), *Sourcebook of experiential education* (pp. 147–151). Routledge.

Cherniss, C. (2006). *School change and the MicroSociety program.* Corwin Press.

Cherniss, C., & Fishman, D. (2003). The Mesquite 'MicroSociety' school: Identifying organizational factors that facilitate successful adoption of an innovative program. *Evaluation and Program Planning, 27*(1), 79–88. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2003.01.001

Childress, H. (2000). *Landscapes of betrayal, landscapes of joy: Curtisville in the lives of its teenagers.* SUNY.

Clinchy, E. (1995). Learning in and about the real world: Recontextualizing public schooling. *The Phi Delta Kappan, 76*(5), 400–404. www.jstor.org/stable/20405350

Conrad, D., & Hedin, D. (1981). National assessment of experiential education: Summary and implications. In T. Smith & C. Knapp (Eds.), *Sourcebook of experiential education* (pp. 382–403). Routledge

Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five designs.* Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among the five traditions.* Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2011). *Education research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Pearson Education.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience.* Harper & Row.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life.* Basic Books.

Dabrowski, J., & Marshall, T. R. (2018). *Motivation and engagement in student assignments: The Role of Choice and Relevancy.* The Education Trust. https://edtrust.org/resource/motivation-and-engagement-in-student-assignments/

Daniels, H., & Bizar, M. (1998). Methods that matter: Six structures for best practice classrooms. Stenhouse.

Darling-Hammond, L., Barron, B., Pearson, P. D., Schoenfeld, A. H., Stage, E. K., Zimmerman, T. D., Cervetti, G. N., & Tilson, J. L. (2008). *Powerful learning: What we know about teaching for understanding.* Jossey-Bass.

Davis, B. (2004). *Inventions of teaching*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2009). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1–27). Sage.

Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and the curriculum*. University of Chicago Press.

Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. Heath.

Dewey, J., & Dewey, E. (1915). *Schools of tomorrow.* E. P. Dutton & Company.

Dewey, J. (1915). *The school and society*. University of Chicago Press.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education.* Macmillan.

Dewey, J. (1929). My pedagogic creed. *Journal of the National Education Association, 18*, 291–295.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Simon & Schuster.

Dunleavy, J., & Milton, P. (2009). *What did you do in school today? Exploring the concept of Student Engagement and its implications for Teaching and Learning in Canada*. Canadian Education Association.

Dunleavy, J., Milton, P., & Crawford, C. (2010). The Search for competence in the 21st century. *Quest Journal*. http://www.yrdsb.ca/Programs/PLT/Quest/Journal/2010-Search-for-Competence-in-the-21st-Century.pdf

Dunleavy, J., Milton, P., & Willms, J. D. (2012). *Trends in intellectual engagement: What did you do in school today?* (Research series report no. 3). Canadian Education Association.

Ellis, J. (1998). Interpretive inquiry as a formal process. In J. Ellis (Ed.), *Teaching from understanding* (pp. 15–32). Garland.

Ellis, J., Hetherington, R., Lovell, M., McConaghy, J., & Viczko, M. (2013). Draw me a

picture, tell me a story: Evoking memory and supporting analysis through pre-interview drawing activities. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 58*(4), 1–21. https://jmss.org/index.php/ajer/article/view/55541

Evans, R. (2011). *The tragedy of American school reform.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Ewert, A. (1995). Research in experiential education: An overview. In K. Warren, K. M. Sakofs, & J. Hunt (Eds), *The theory of experiential education* (pp. 351–357). Association for Experiential Education.

Fried, R. (2001). *The passionate teacher: A practical guide.* Beacon Press.

Gadamer, H. G. (1995). *Truth and method,* (2nd ed., rev. ed.). Continuum.

Gallup. (2013). *U.S. overall Gallup student poll results.* http://www.gallupstudentpoll.com/174020/2013-gallup-student-poll-overall-report.aspx

Gallup. (2017). *2016 Gallup student poll: A snapshot of results and findings.* https://www.sac.edu/research/PublishingImages/Pages/research-studies/2016%20Gallup%20Student%20Poll%20Snapshot%20Report%20Final.pdf

Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. D. (1984). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research.* Academic Press.

Grote, J. (2002). *A case study of a MicroSociety school* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Illinois State University.

Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies, 17*(1), 13–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860220137345

Harris, M., & Cullen, R. (2010). *Leading the learner-centered campus.* Jossey-Bass.

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to*

achievement. Routledge.

Headden, S., & McKay, S. (2015). *Motivation matters: How new research can help teachers boost student engagement*. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/resources/publications/motivation-matters-how-new-research-can-help-teachers-boost-student-engagement/

Hittleman, D. R., & Simon, A. J. (2006). *Interpreting educational research: An introduction for consumers of research* (4th ed., pp. 8–9). Pearson.

Hume, K. (2011). *Tuned out: Engaging the 21st century learner.* Pearson Canada.

Huncar, A. (2016, September 7). *Alberta high school completion rates continue to rise*. http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-high-school-completion-rates-continue-to-rise-1.3751846

Hurt, J. (2019). The MicroSociety model: An assessment of civic engagement outcomes amongst fourth and fifth grade students. *Senior Honors Projects, 2010–current*, 635. James Madison University. https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019/635

Ibarra, L. (2001). *MicroSociety: Civic education, academic achievement, and higher education aspirations through experiential learning* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas, El Paso]. ETD Collection. http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/dissertations/AAIEP05533

Jardine, D. (1992). Reflections on education, Hermeneutics, and ambiguity. In W. F. Pinar & W. M. Reynolds (Eds.), *Understanding curriculum as phenomenological and deconstructed text* (pp. 116–127). Teachers College Press.

Jukes, I., McCain, T., & Crockett, L. (2010). *Understanding the digital learner: Teaching and learning in the new digital landscape.* 21st Century Learning Project.

Kaye, C. B. (2004). *The complete guide to service learning: Proven, practical ways to engage students in civic responsibility, academic curriculum, and social action.* Free Spirit Publishing.

Kelm, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2004). Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. *Journal of School Health, 74*, 262–273. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2004.tb08283.x

Kinney, P. (2007). A voice from the middle. *Principal Leadership, 8*(2), 34–36.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* Prentice-Hall.

Kolb, D. (1991). Meaningful methods: Evaluation without the crunch. *Journal of Experiential Education, 14*(1), 40–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/105382599101400108

Kutzik, D. (2004). *Capitalizing on MicroSociety: How students profit from real-world learning.* Research for Action.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge University Press.

Manitoba Education. (2010). *Engaging middle years students in learning: Transforming middle years education in Manitoba.* https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/support/my_foundation/full_doc.pdf

Marzano, R., & Pickering, D. (2011). *The highly engaged classroom.* Marzano Research Laboratory.

Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollock, J. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research based strategies for increasing student achievement.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education: Revised and expanded from case study research in education*. Jossey-Bass.

MicroSociety. (n.d.). [Homepage]. https://www.microsociety.org/

National Association of Independent Schools. (2014). *Report on the High School Survey of Student Engagement.* http://headsuped.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/HSSSE-NAIS-2014-Report-on-Student-Engagement.pdf.

National Association of Independent Schools. (2017). *NAIS Report on the 2017 Middle Grades Survey of Student Engagement.* https://www.nais.org/media/MemberDocuments/Research/2017-MiddleGradesSurvey_Final.pdf

National Middle School Association. (2003). *This we believe: Successful schools for young adolescents.* National Middle School Association.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2013). *PISA 2012 results: Ready to learn: Students' engagement, drive and self-beliefs* (Vol. 3). http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-iii.htm

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2018). *PISA 2015: Results in Focus* http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2019). *PISA 2018 results: What school life means for students' lives* (Vol. 3). http://www.oecd.org/publications/pisa-2018-results-volume-iii-acd78851-en.htm

Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. (2005). *Early school leavers: Understanding the lived reality of student disengagement from secondary school.* Ontario Ministry of Education and Training.

Parsons, J., & Taylor, L. (2011). Improving student engagement. *Current Issues in Education*, *14*(1). https://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/745

Pearson, S. (2002). Finding common ground: Service-learning and education reform. A *survey of 28 leading school reform models*. American Youth Policy Forum.

Piaget, J. (1950). *The psychology of intelligence*. Routledge.

Pintrich, P. R. (2003). A motivational science perspective on the role of student motivation in learning and teaching contexts. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(4), 667–686. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.95.4.667

Pitts, P. T. (2016). *Truancy and engagement: The effect of MicroSociety participation on attendance in a south Texas school district.* (Publication No. 10248560) [Doctoral dissertation, Lamar University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. In *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education,* 8(1), 5–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080103

Prochazka, L. (1995). Internalizing learning: Beyond experiential education. In K. Warren, K. M. Sakofs, & J. Hunt (Eds), *The theory of experiential education* (pp. 143–147). Association for Experiential Education.

Quay, J. (2013). *Education, experience, and existence: Engaging Dewey, Pierce and Heidegger.* Routledge.

Ramsden, P., & Marton, F. (1988). 'What does it take to improve learning?' In P. Ramsden (Ed.) *Improving learning: New perspectives* (pp. 268–278). Kogan Page.

Reimer, M., & Smink, J. (2005). *15 effective strategies for improving student attendance and truancy prevention* [Paper presentation]. National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson, SC.

Richmond, G. (1973). *The MicroSociety school: A real world in miniature*. Harper & Row.

Richmond, G. (1989). The future school: Is Lowell pointing us toward a revolution in education? *The Phi Delta Kappan*, *71*(3), 232–236. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20404116

Richmond, G. (1991). A real-world model for America's Schools. *The Wall Street Journal.*

Richmond, G., & Richmond, C. (1996). *The MicroSociety handbook.* MicroSociety, Inc.

Rumberger, R. W. (1995). Dropping out of middle school: A multilevel analysis of students and schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 583–625. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003583

Quaglia, R., & Corso, M. (2014). *Student voice: The instrument of change.* Corwin Press.

Santelises, S. B., & Dabrowski, J. (2015). *Checking in: Do classroom assignments reflect today's higher standards?* The Education Trust. https://edtrust.org/resource/classroomassignments/

Schlechty, P. C. (2002). *Working on the work.* Jossey-Bass.

Seidman, I. E. (1991). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences.* Teachers College Press.

Shaw, L. (2000). MicroSociety plan doesn't make sense. *San Francisco Gate*. https://www.sfgate.com/opinion/letterstoeditor/article/MicroSociety-Plan-Doesn-t-Make-Sense-2755777.php

Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering Education: Critical teaching for social change.* The University of Chicago Press.

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Sage.

VanDeWeghe, R. (2009). *Engaged learning.* Corwin Press.

van Manen, M. (1984). Practicing phenomenological writing. *Phenomenology and Pedagogy, 4*(2), 36–69.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Harvard University Press.

Warren, K., Sakofs, M., & Hunt, J. (Eds.). (1995). *The theory of experiential education.* Association for Experiential Education.

Weimer, M. (2013). *Learner-centered teaching.* John Wiley & Sons.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity.* Cambridge University Press.

Wenger-Trayner, E., Fenton-O'Creevy, M., Hutchinson, S., Kubiak, C., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (Eds.) (2015). *Learning in landscapes of practice: Boundaries, identity, and knowledgeability in practice-based learning*. Routledge.

Westheimer, J., Kahne, J., & Gerstein, A. (1995). School reform for the nineties: Opportunities and obstacles for experiential education. In R. Kraft & J. Kielsmeier (Eds.), *Experiential learning in schools and higher education* (pp. 40–47). Association for Experiential Education.

Willms, J. D., Friesen, S., & Milton, P. (2009). *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement.* EdCan Network/Canadian Education Association.

Wolk, R. (2010). Education: The case for making it personal. *Educational Leadership*, *67*(7), 16–21. http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr10/vol67/num07/Education@-The-Case-for-Making-It-Personal.aspx

Wolk, R. (2011). *Wasting minds: Why our education system is failing and what we can do about it.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

World Health Organization. (2016). *Growing up unequal: Gender and socioeconomic differences in young people's health and well-being.* http://alkoholdialog.dk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/HBSC-2016.pdf

Wurdinger, S. (2005). *Using experiential learning in the classroom.* Scarecrow Education.

Yazzie-Mintz, E. (2007). Voices of students on engagement: A report on the 2006 high school survey of student engagement. Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana University. http://ceep.indiana.edu.hssse

Yazzie-Mintz, E. (2009). *Engaging the voices of students: A report on the 2007 and 2008 High school survey of student engagement*. National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Yin, R. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods.* Sage.

Zemelman, S., Daniels, H., & Hyde, A. (2012). *Best practice: Bringing standards to life in America's classrooms* (4th ed.). Heinemann.

Appendices

Appendix A

Information Letter to Parents/Guardians

Date

Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Brent Galloway, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. I am very interested to hear about your child's learning experiences with the MicroSociety Program that took place during their elementary school years, and I invite your child to participate in my research study called "MicroSociety: A Case Study Approach for Understanding the Engagement of Young Adolescents in Today's Classrooms."

The purpose of my research study is to explore how students experience learning within a school that uses the MicroSociety program. With its premise of promoting "real-world learning," I am curious how this program helps engage students in today's classrooms and to what degree students are involved and participate in the running of this program with others at the school site (other students, community members, administration, MicroSociety program coordinators, teachers, and support staff).

In my research study, data will be collected over 2 months in either the school site that your child currently attends or at the MicroSociety school site, and will include the following:

1. A MicroSociety questionnaire that will be helpful in providing information used to help conduct the in-depth interviews (see attached).
2. Three to four structured and open-ended interviews with each individual participant that will take place during or after-school hours. These interviews will be about the participants' experiences within the MicroSociety program. Each interview will be approximately 30 to 45 minutes in length, and each interview will be recorded.
3. Participant artifacts created when they attended the MicroSociety school (e.g. student work) and other evidence (e.g. photographs)
4. Participant artifacts created during interviews (e.g. drawings)

Participation in the research study is completely voluntary, and you or your child can withdraw from the study at any time until data collection is over without penalty or prejudice. In addition to your permission and signed consent, your child will also be asked if they would like to take part in this study through an assent form. Only those children who have parental permission and who indicate they want to participate will do so. If you and your child would like to further help me in my study, I ask that you read and sign the attached consent and assent forms.

To ensure anonymity and protection of privacy, pseudonyms (alternative names) will be used,

and all data will be coded, analysed, and stored using password protection and encryption. Additional hard copies, such as field notes, will be locked in a secure location and will be destroyed after 5 years.

Thank you for considering my request and for your contributions to research.

Sincerely,

Brent Galloway

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researcher.

Appendix B

Information Letter to Student Participants

Date

Dear Student,

Hi. My name is Brent Galloway, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. I am very interested to hear about your time as a student in the MicroSociety program. As a former student of this program, I invite you to participate in my research study called "MicroSociety: A Case Study Approach for Understanding the Engagement of Young Adolescents in Today's Classrooms." I think it will be an exciting opportunity for you to talk about this particular school experience.

The purpose of my research study is to explore how students like yourself have experienced the kinds of learning that is used in MicroSociety schools. With its focus on "real-world learning," I am curious how this program helps to engage students in today's classrooms and to what extent you participated and were involved in the running of this program.

In my research study, I will collect information over a 2 month period (April to June), and this will be done either at your current school or at your former MicroSociety school. My study will include the following four things:

1. A MicroSociety questionnaire that will be helpful in providing information to me so that I can best conduct my interviews (see attached).
2. Three to four structured and open-ended interviews with each individual student that will take place during or after-school hours. These interviews will be about your experiences within the MicroSociety program. Each interview will be approximately 30 to 45 minutes in length, and each interview will be recorded.
3. Artifacts that you created when attending the MicroSociety school (e.g. student work) and other evidence (e.g. photographs)
4. Artifacts you create during interviews (e.g. drawings)

Participation in my research study is completely voluntary, and you or your parents can withdraw from the study at any time until data collection is over without penalty or prejudice. Your parent/guardian is asked to provide permission and signed consent, and you are also asked if you would like to take part in this study through an assent form. Only those students who have parental permission and who indicate they want to participate will do so.

To protect your privacy and to ensure that you will remain anonymous to others, you will be asked to create an "alternative name" (a pseudonym) to be used throughout the study. All information that I collect data will be coded, analysed, and stored using password protection and

encryption. Additional hard copies, such as field notes, will be locked in a secure location and will be destroyed after 5 years.

Thank you for supporting my research study and for your valuable contribution to educational research. I look forward to the opportunity to work and learn from you.

Sincerely,

Brent Galloway

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researcher.

Appendix C

Letter of Consent for Parents/Guardians for Data Collection at School Site

CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS

Study Title: MicroSociety: A Case Study Approach for Understanding the Engagement of Young Adolescents in Today's Classrooms

Investigator: Brent Galloway, University of Alberta, 403-896-0960

Supervisor: Dr. Linda Laidlaw, University of Alberta, 780-492-0884

As a parent/guardian, you understand that this study pertains to the following information:

Background: Your child is being asked to participate in this research study to share their experiences as a learner within the MicroSociety Program. As a former participant of this program, I believe your child's experiences with this program will help inform my research.

Purpose: Your child will be asked to share their experiences as a student of the MicroSociety program so I can better understand how this program might engage the learners in today's classrooms and to better understand the role that students have with programs like this.

Procedures: Data will be collected through a series of in-depth interviews that will take place at the MicroSociety school site. Interviews will be approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length and will take place during afterschool hours (e.g., 3:00 to 5:30 p.m.). The time commitment for your child in this research study will be approximately four to six weeks.

Benefits: Being involved in a research study as a participant can provide many benefits. Knowing that the opportunity to talk about past learning experiences, which may lead to improved learning for other students, can be a very intrinsically motivating experience for your child. Likewise, helping your child talk about what they view as engaged learning, might lead them to more successful learning experiences in the future.

Risks: I am not anticipating any foreseeable risks, discomforts, or inconveniences for your child by participating in these interviews.

Confidentiality: To ensure anonymity and protection of privacy, no names will be used in the study documentation or in the publication of results. Instead pseudonyms (alternative names) will be used. All data in this study will be coded, analysed, and stored using password protection and encryption. Additional hard copies, such as field notes, will be locked in a secure location and will be destroyed after 5 years.

Voluntary Participation/Freedom to Withdraw: Participation in the research study is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw your child from the study at any time until data collection is over without penalty or prejudice.

CONSENT FORM FOR PARENT/GUARDIAN**

As a parent or legal guardian, if you wish your child to be considered as a participant in this research study, please fill out the remainder of this consent form to give your child permission to participate in this study. You are also aware that your child needs to agree to participate in this study by signing the attached assent form. Your signature on this form shows that you have received and read the information letter, had the opportunity to consider the information, and that both you and your child voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

____**YES**, I agree to have my child ___________________ participate in this research study.
(child's name)

____**NO**, I do not wish to have my child _________________participate in this research study.
(child's name)

NAME OF PARENT/GUARDIAN: ___________________________

SIGNATURE: _____________________________ DATE: _________________________

PHONE NUMBER: _________________________ EMAIL:________________________

**Consent forms can be completed at the Information Session, or can be dropped off at the school office during the next business week (date to be confirmed at a later time).

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researcher.

Appendix D

Letter of Assent for Student Participants for Data Collection at School Site

ASSENT FORM FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Study Title: MicroSociety: A Case Study Approach for Understanding the Engagement of Young Adolescents in Today's Classrooms

Investigator: Brent Galloway, University of Alberta, 403-896-0960

Supervisor: Dr. Linda Laidlaw, University of Alberta, 780-492-0884

As a student, you understand that this study pertains to the following information:

Background: You are being asked to participate in this research study to share your experiences as a learner within the MicroSociety program. As a former participant of this program, I believe your experiences with this program will help inform my research.

Purpose: You will be asked to share your experiences as a student of the MicroSociety program so I can better understand how this program might engage the learners in today's classrooms and to better understand the role that students have with programs like this.

Procedures: Data will be collected through a series of in-depth interviews that will take place at the MicroSociety school site. Interviews will be approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length and will take place during afterschool hours (e.g., 3:00 to 5:30 p.m.). Your time commitment in this research study will be approximately four to six weeks.

Benefits: Being involved in a research study as a participant can provide many benefits. Knowing that the opportunity to talk about your past learning experiences, which may lead to improved learning for other students, can be a very rewarding experience. Likewise, helping to talk about what you view as engaged learning, might lead you to more successful learning experiences in the future.

Risks: I am not anticipating any foreseeable risks, discomforts, or inconveniences by participating in these interviews.

Confidentiality: To ensure anonymity and protection of privacy, no names will be used in the study documentation or in the publication of results. Instead pseudonyms (alternative names) will be used. All data in this study will be coded, analysed, and stored using password protection and encryption. Additional hard copies, such as field notes, will be locked in a secure location and will be destroyed after 5 years.

Voluntary Participation/Freedom to Withdraw: Participation in the research study is completely voluntary, and you or your parent/guardian can withdraw you from the study at any time until data collection is over without penalty or prejudice

ASSENT FORM FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS**

As a student if you wish to be considered as a participant in this research study, please fill out the remainder of this assent form that will give you permission to participate in this study. You are also aware that your parent/guardian needs to agree to participate in this study by signing the attached consent form. Your signature on this form shows that you have received and read the information letter, had the opportunity to consider the information, and that both you and your parents/guardians voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

_____**YES**, I agree as a student to participate in this research study.

_____**NO,** I do not wish to participate in this research study.

NAME OF STUDENT PARTICIPANT: ___________________________

SIGNATURE: ____________________________ DATE: ________________________

PHONE NUMBER: ________________________ EMAIL:_______________________

**Assent forms can be completed at the Information Session, or can be dropped off at the school office during the next business week (date to be confirmed at a later time).

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researcher.

Appendix E

Proposed Preliminary MicroSociety Questionnaire

I am a researcher from the University of Alberta, and I am very interested to hear about your learning experiences with the MicroSociety Program that took place in your elementary school. Participation in the MicroSociety Questionnaire is completely voluntary; however, if you would like to further continue helping me in my study, I ask that you fill out this questionnaire, sign the assent form, and have your parents sign the included consent form. This information will help me select several participants to take part in the in-depth interviews that will allow me to learn even more about MicroSociety. Thank you for considering my request.

Brent Galloway
PhD candidate
University of Alberta

MicroSociety Information:

1. Student Name: ______________________
2. What school do you currently attend? __________________________
3. Circle all of the years that you participated in the MicroSociety Program:
   a. Kindergarten
   b. Grade 1
   c. Grade 2
   d. Grade 3
   e. Grade 4
   f. Grade 5
4. What kind of jobs/work did you do through the years that you participated in the MicroSociety program?

5. Please check all of the following that are applicable to you:
   - ❐ Are you available after school for interviews?
   - ❐ Are you available during lunch hour for interviews?
   - ❐ Do you prefer to have interviews conducted at your current school?
   - ❐ Do you prefer to have interviews conducted at the MicroSociety school?

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researcher.

Appendix F

Proposed Preinterview Activities

Inquiry Questions:
How did the student experience learning in a MicroSociety school? What is it like to experience "real world learning" in a school that utilizes the MicroSociety program? What did students find engaging and/or dis-engaging about their MicroSociety experience?

Preinterview Activities:

1. Make a two column chart with words/drawings/diagrams showing learning activities (in-class activities or events or routines; assignments) that you have liked and another column of those that you have not liked as a learner while participating in MicroSociety
2. Can you recall the 3 most memorable class activities or assignments from your MicroSociety experience? Use words and pictures to demonstrate these experiences as a collage.
3. Create a timeline outlining three to five times in your life that you found most memorable/powerful as a learner (try to remember as far back as possible as well as current learning experiences, and these experiences may or may not have taken place in your MicroSociety school). Your timeline could include words and/or pictures.
4. Make 2 drawings: one of yourself in a learning activity you feel positive about; and one in a learning activity you do not feel positive about. Use drawings/images to show the context or what is going on and/or use thought bubbles as in cartoons.

Appendix G

Proposed Interview Questions for Student Participants

Interview 1: Orientation (initial meeting with individual student participants)

1. I will introduce myself to my student participant and review my proposed research study.
2. I will ask the student participant to tell me a little bit about themselves (e.g., grade, school, interests, and hobbies) and what attracted them to participate in this study. I will ask if they have any questions to ask me.
3. I will review participant preliminary questionnaire (see Appendix E) to determine best meeting times/locations
4. I will review the recording process with the participant and show the recording tools that I will be using for my study.
5. I will discuss the idea of a preinterview activity and provide this for the participant to bring to our next interview. I will also ask the participant to create a pseudonym for our next interview.

Interview 2: Getting to Know the Participant (in reference to preinterview activity)

6. Please tell me about the artifact you created for the preinterview activity.
7. Tell me about a time that you learned something really well in school. What is something you learned really well but did not learn in school? What is something you wish you could learn in school that you haven't yet studied? What are you an expert in doing? Describe a time when you were "fully invested" in what you were doing and lost total track of the time. Did this ever happen at school of during MicroSociety?
8. For our next interview, could you please bring me an artifact that demonstrates your involvement or learning in the MicroSociety program? (work sample, photo)

Interview 3: The MicroSociety Experience (Note: This may be divided into two separate interviews dependent on time)

9. Tell me about your artifact that you brought with following our last interview
10. Describe to me your experiences in MicroSociety. What do you remember about your time in the MicroSociety program? What did you like the most about learning in a MicroSociety school? Why? What was the most challenging part of the program? Why? What did you dislike the most about the program? Why? What did you learn from being involved in MicroSociety? What did you find most rewarding about your involvement in this program? Why was it rewarding for you?
11. Describe to me how the MicroSociety program worked. What was your role? What was the role of the teachers, other adults and other students? Who was your favorite teacher during this time and why? How were you involved in decision-making in the MicroSociety program? What kinds of choices were you provided in the program and how did you use this to help you learn? What kinds of opportunities were you given to provide your ideas/state your opinions? In what ways were you able to use your talents and interests in the MicroSociety program?
12. In what ways do you think MicroSociety was like the real world? What did this look like? What challenging situations or community problems did you explore in MicroSociety?

What skills were you able to use and acquire as a result? What did you learn about yourself that might be helpful in your future?

13. For next time, I want you to think of one recommendation that you might offer to make to make today's schools better for learners, or an idea to improve the MicroSociety Program.

Interview 4: The Close

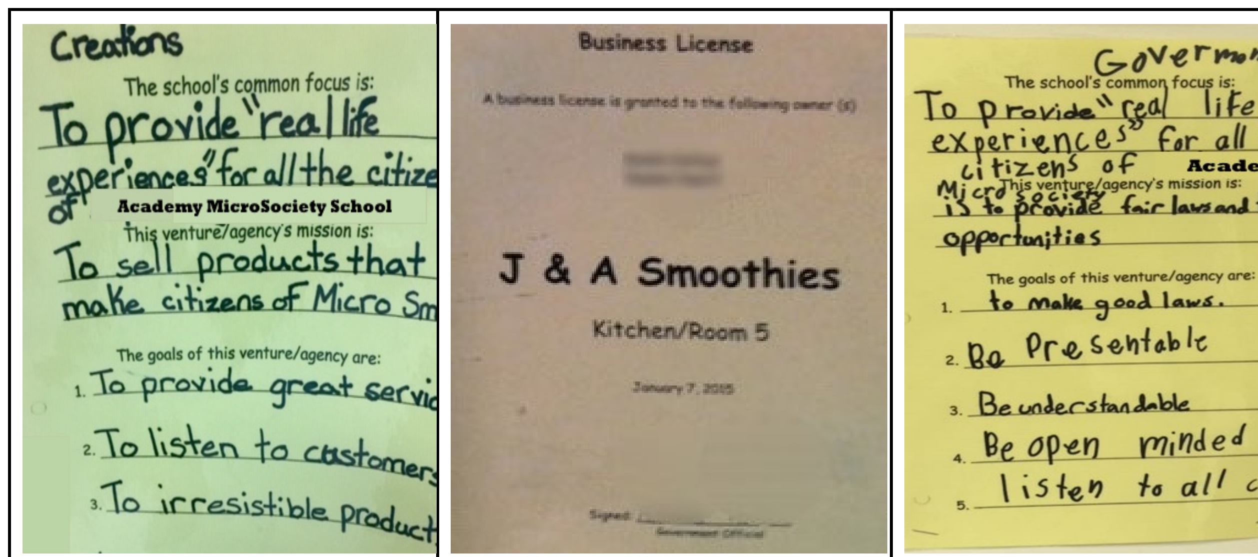
14. Describe to me learning that you feel is engaging? How was learning in MicroSociety like this? In what ways was it not like this? Describe to me learning that is "real" or "relevant" to you as the learner? How was learning in MicroSociety like this? In what ways was it not like this? What ideas do you have that would improve the MicroSociety program? What suggestions do you have to make learning more engaging, relevant and real for today's students? What could your teachers do more or less of that would be helpful to you as a learner? What could your teachers do that would make learning more engaging for you?

Appendix H

The MicroSociety Experience: Background Information

Business Venture	Staffing Needs
Moose on the Loose General Store Moose on the Loose sells toys, books and houseware items. If you want to be a salesperson, stock shelves and help others find great items you would make a great addition to the Moose on the Loose sales-team!	Assistant Manager (1) Production Workers (6) Sales Clerks (3) Marketing advisor (2)
Academy Cafe (formerly Penguin Avenue and J and A Smoothies) If you like to cook, prepare and serve food to the throngs of people attending Market Days then this is the place to apply. You will be preparing and selling baked goods and meals to go, as well as nutritious snacks and smoothies to the citizens and visiting guests.	Manager (1) Assistant Manager (1) Chefs/Bakers (6) Servers (2) Cashiers (2)
Royal Academy Micro Police (RAMP) RAMP enforces the laws and keeps our school a safe place for learning. They are important and must work hard to maintain a high level of respect. Peace Officers must obey the laws and set a good example. They will also be involved in public relations.	Superintendent (1) Staff Sergeants (2) Patrol Officers (4) Detectives (2) Clerk (1)

Figure 2: A Sample of 2018-19 MicroSociety Want Ads



All ventures are required to create a business plan and obtain a business license in order to operate on Micro Market Days. These must be displayed upon entrance to each venture. This includes the student-elected government which represents students' voices by making laws and serving constituents

Figure 3: MicroSociety Business Proposals/Licenses at Academy Elementary School.

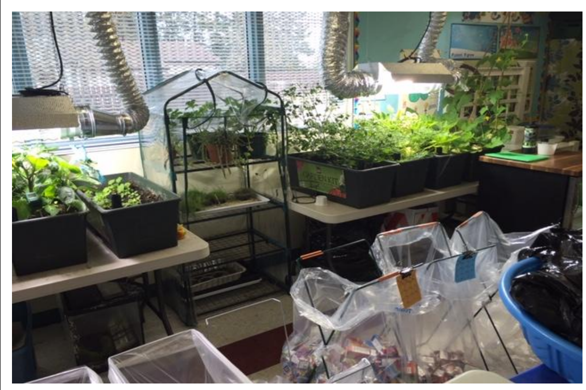
The new Entomology Lab, housing insects and different plants, is used to teach Science	Flowers and vegetables are grown in the new Botany Lab, and then sold at Micro Market days
Students raise and take care of chickens who lay eggs used in the school's breakfast program	 Greenhouse equipment, fish tanks and hydroponics turns this classroom into a living laboratory
Academic vocabulary used to teach MicroSociety concepts.	A stock exchange board informs students of how their investments are performing

Figure 4: MicroSociety Resources at Academy Elementary School

Appendix I The MicroSociety Experience – Student Artifacts

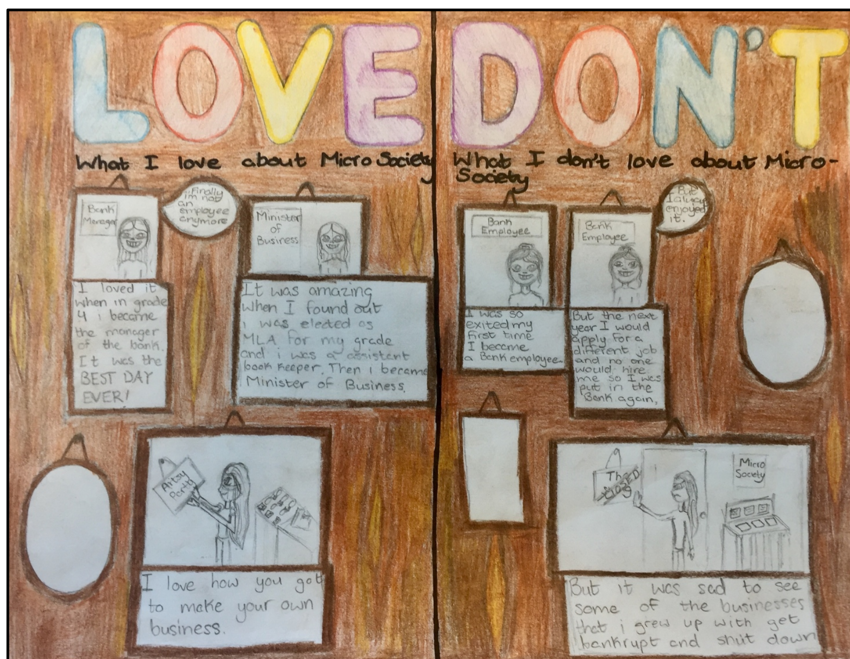


Figure 5: Preinterview activity – "What I Love/What I Don't Love About Micro" by Winter

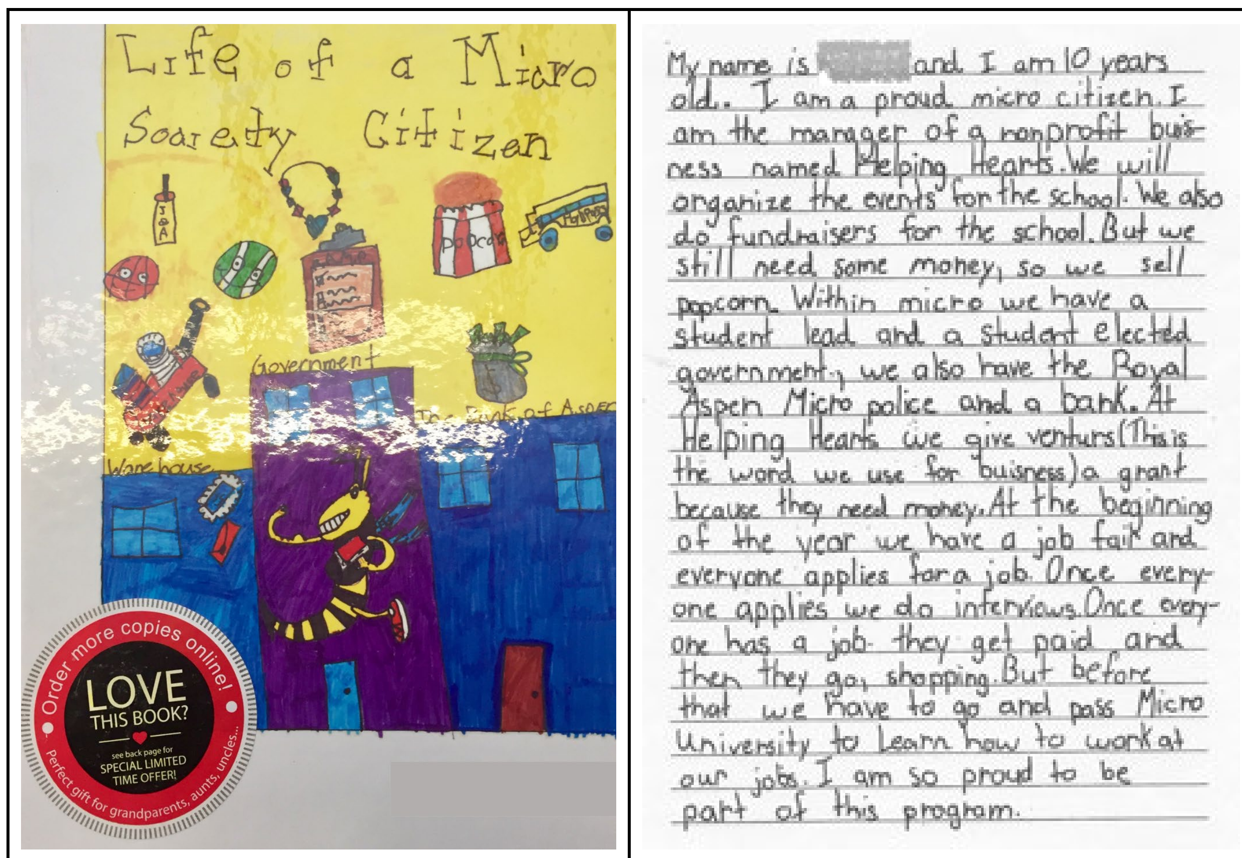


Figure 6: Life of a MicroSociety Citizen class-published book and sample entry