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THE CONNECTIONS PROJECT: LINKING ALTERNATIVE
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

presented by

Amy Lynn Damrow

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of the requirements for

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THE *CONNECTIONS* PROJECT: LINKING ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

By

Amy Lynn Damrow

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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1998

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ABSTRACT

THE *CONNECTIONS* PROJECT: LINKING ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

By

Amy Lynn Damrow

The goals of this qualitative study were to explore how alternative high school students perceive the concept of community, to offer these students an experience in community (the *Connections* project), and to assist all participants in the *Connections* project to establish a sense of connectedness with diverse people and ideas. The primary sources of data for this research were interviews with six students before and after the *Connections* project. This intervention involved about 70 people (alternative high school students, international high school students, teachers, international graduate students and members of the community). It took place in three phases: gatherings to discuss various global topics, planning for community projects, and then carrying out these projects.

Connections was created to be an experience in perspective taking, engaging in discussion, and being actively involved in the community. The researcher concluded that the high school interviewees benefited from being involved in the process of the study, and that schools can support healthy youth development within a community context by inviting both institutions and individuals in the community to become more directly involved in the education of young people.

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AMY LYNN DAMROW
1998

I dedicate this thesis to Radwan, Samane,
Frank, Sarah, Ahmad, and Kurt—
I will forever be grateful for their unique perspectives.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It's difficult to know where the acknowledgements for this accomplishment should begin. This study was a culmination of many of my life experiences and adventures; it also reflects the sentiments of one of my favorite quotes: "Act always as if the future of the Universe depended on what you did, while laughing at yourself for thinking that whatever you do makes any difference."

I will always be grateful to the Jefferson students and teachers (particularly Patricia, the lead teacher) for welcoming me into their school. I'm especially appreciative of the time and consideration that Samane, Radwan, Frank, Sarah, Kurt, and Ahmad gave me. I'm thankful that these students were willing to share their thoughts and ideas. The rich perspectives they offered, enabled me to write a thought-provoking story. I genuinely hope they are pleased with the final product.

I truly believe in the power of citizens working together (caring together) for the benefit of both youth and the community. Based on my experience with this study, I have concluded that this belief is idealistic realism. I would like to thank everyone who helped make *Connections* a success—especially the international graduate students, community members, Mrs. Matthews and all of her international students from the high school, the two presenters from the University of State, the secretary at the Azaro Baptist Church (a true Godsend!), the elementary school principal, and Mrs. Patrick and her classroom of 1st

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graders. Their enthusiasm gave me the confidence that *Connections* was indeed, at the very least, a good idea!

I have enjoyed working with the faculty and staff in the Department of Family and Child Ecology in a variety of different contexts. Dr. Marjorie Kostelnik and Mary Faloon have created a very pleasant atmosphere for students.

I was very fortunate to have found Drs. Tom Luster, Esther Onaga, and Doug Campbell to serve on my master's committee. They had faith in my abilities and believed that my indefatigability and passion would carry me through the process, but I always felt that they were there to support, encourage and guide me. They offered kind critical comments which helped me to see my own faulty reasoning and inconsistencies. As a testament to their own willingness to engage in flexible thinking, all of them participated in both an eating adventure and creative cookie analysis. I appreciate them first as exceptional people and secondly as commendable scholars.

Esther, it was a blessing for me to work with you over the last two and a half years. I can't imagine my years at MSU without you! Thanks for giving me so many opportunities to develop both personally and professionally.

Tom, I appreciate all those times you listened to me philosophize, idealize, (perhaps moralize a bit, as well!) and simply think aloud. Sometimes I felt that you were silently laughing at me with a sigh—and rightly so! Thanks for helping me to take myself (and my thesis!) a little less seriously.

Doug, this thesis would not have been possible without your guidance. I feel very fortunate that our paths crossed. Our conversations convinced me that

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I could be true to myself and still write a high quality thesis. Your careful readings also helped me to "come closer to perfection."

I would also like to thank my colleagues in Fee Hall—my second home—and my friends. Special thanks to Helen Irvine for both her technical help at the office and for her friendship. Su Min Oh, Nico Schuler, Guido and Elise Schnabel, Fred Olmsted, and Christie Eppler have all helped to make my years at MSU more enjoyable and more complete. Barb and Zach! I never imagined we would be neighbors, but I have enjoyed it immensely! Thanks.

From the beginning of this research my roommate, Shizuko Saito, has been very supportive. When I was frustrated and depressed, she would take the time to help me figure out what I was thinking and what I was really trying to say. She also convinced me that struggling is an essential part of the process.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their love and encouragement throughout my life, but particularly during this final year of graduate school. My Mom and Dad both read drafts and offered insightful feedback. My father, a public school superintendent, encouraged me to consider some of the practical realities of secondary education. I'm also appreciative of the detailed editorial feedback my sister Christine gave me. Her excellent writing skills were a blessing, especially toward the end of this endeavor, when I grew too tired to be rationale and objective.

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CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

Citizenship begins with commitment rather than expertise. Citizens do not need special preparation, advanced education, or bureaucratic permits to get involved. And once we do, empowerment, optimism, and trust are enhanced, the capacity to understand our fellow citizens increases, and the public's work gets done in new and unexpected ways.

—*The Final Report of the National Commission on Civic Renewal*

Although one of the goals of this study was to contribute to existing research on alternative high school students and how they view their worlds, I also wished to contribute to the healthy development of these students and the communities to which they belong. I designed the *Connections* project with the intention of linking alternative high school students and the community. Through *Connections*, I also hoped to help participants build a stronger sense of connectedness to diverse members of the community through positive interactions with them. This study was an opportunity for me to conduct research **and** to make a difference in my community.

During the first two weeks of March 1998, eight adolescents from an alternative high school were interviewed. At this time, the students were encouraged to reflect on the concept of community and their relationship to others. These interviews also served as both an introduction to *Connections* and an invitation to become more involved in the study. The first phase of *Connections* involved approximately 70 people—alternative high school students, international high school students, teachers, international graduate students, and members of the community. These individuals met in the

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fellowship hall of a local church on three consecutive Friday mornings, where they discussed hunger awareness, perspective taking, and perceptions of Africa. During the second phase of *Connections,* participants planned community projects; the third phase included actually carrying out those projects. Following *Connections*, six of the original eight students were available to be interviewed again. At this time, the students offered evaluative comments of their experience with *Connections*; we also engaged in a dialogue about community and other related concepts. Other project participants were also interviewed in order to provide a richer description of the intervention.

Genesis of the Study

The concept of community has various interpretations. Even though I have reflected upon this abstraction at great length, a precise definition still eludes me. On one level, community consists of individuals and institutions in the same locality. But in a more abstract, idealistic sense, community is "friendship at a societal level" (Maguire & Fargnoli, 1991, p. 28); it is something "qualitatively better than coexistence" (p. 58). For this study, I was interested in discussing the concept of community with alternative high school students. I also believed that an *experience* in community should accompany and give substance to such a discussion.

The *Connections* project was designed to provide alternative high school students and other members of the community with such an experience. The project incorporates various ideas from different disciplines as well as elements

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from my own personal experiences. Although theories of human development have driven the study, themes from political science, education, sociology, communication and psychology have also guided the process. The project gave all participants an opportunity to meet and engage in dialogue with diverse others; it also enabled them to go beyond conversation and actively contribute to the common good through community projects. For example, we discussed world hunger, and then we went to a shelter to serve lunch to the homeless.

Belief in the fundamental importance of social relationships in the process of self-development was a central component of *Connections*. Psychologist Mark Bickhard (1992) suggests that what we are and who we are as individuals is based in "our abilities for, and manners of, interaction with our worlds" (p. 42). Thus, our ability to successfully interact with others, not only with friends and family but with relative strangers as well contributes to an overall sense of connectedness. According to Werner (1989) affectional ties within the family and support systems within the community (in church, at work, or in school) can serve as essential protective factors following stressful life events. But on a day to day basis we also rely on our ability to relate to and work together with unknown, diverse others. When strangers cooperate, either through participation in everyday conventions or because of an intuitive belief in the value of cooperation, our passage through daily activities is simplified. Positive connections within the larger community empower us, increase our optimism, and establish a greater degree of trust. This sense of efficacy encourages us to join with our neighbors to work for the common good; it also compels us to take

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responsibility for improving the conditions of our lives. As citizens of a democratic nation it's important that we get involved, because together we can make a difference.

In the summer of 1997, I accepted an internship position with a project at Jefferson (the name of the Lynnwood High School Alternative Program) called *Whole Kids; Whole Community*. [The names of all people, places, and reports have been changed in order to protect the identity of the participants.] The project seemed congruent with my personal belief system in terms of youth and community development. The strategy of *Whole Kids; Whole Community* was to create "new opportunities for the multiple risk, high needs teens in the Lynnwood High School Alternative Program." The students would work together with adult mentors on community service projects. Thus, youth would be encouraged to actively participate in a responsible community role, while community members were reminded of their responsibility to strengthen youth development efforts. Youth agencies, public service community organizations, the local business and trade associations, civic clubs, churches and the local university all contributed members to the community planning board which met in the summer of 1997.

Unfortunately, funding for the project was delayed, and my position as an intern disappeared. Nevertheless, my interest in working with the head teacher and the students continued. I was intrigued by the goals of the *Whole Kids; Whole Community* project. At the same time, I was disappointed that a program inspired by the notion of building community through utilizing the strengths of the community could be thwarted because of a lack of funds. Certainly some

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adjustments would need to be made, but I believed that the true strengths of the community were still available. This study evolved as I reflected upon the needs of the students at Jefferson, the philosophy of the teachers at Jefferson, the resources in the community, and my own strengths and interests.

Background of the *Connections* Project

The students at Jefferson have multiple needs. In the traditional school setting, many of them were identified for low academic motivation and achievement, moderate anti-social behaviors, non-adaptive learning style, and a need for more immediate learning feedback and individual teaching support; many of them also have a history of truancy and substance abuse. But most Jefferson students are also creative caring individuals, and they all have a variety of individual strengths and talents. They are, in essence, underdeveloped resources. In concluding remarks to his study of over 600,000 high school students, Coleman (1961) wrote, "The adolescent will spend his energy in the ways he sees fit. It is up to the adult society to structure secondary education that it captures this energy" (p. 329). This study was designed to capture some of this energy and positively direct it toward greater involvement in the community.

The educational philosophy at Jefferson is similar to the philosophy that forms a foundation for many alternative programs. The teachers seek to make high school "a warmer, more personal place for the student" (Glasser, 1969, p. 219), a place where they can succeed. Jefferson teachers de-emphasize facts

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and "the right answers," seek discussion and critical analysis of issues and ideas, and strive to bring relevancy into the classroom on a daily basis. *Connections* was created to be an experience in perspective taking, engaging in discussion, and being actively involved in the community. Thus, teacher strategies of instruction and the principles of *Connections* were congruent. Patricia, the lead teacher at Jefferson, was fully supportive of a project that would help the students connect/reconnect to the community. Her enthusiasm and receptiveness were the primary reasons I decided to carry out my research at Jefferson.

Lynnwood is located in a community of people with widely varying backgrounds, interests and needs. The city has a small-town atmosphere, but it is also the home of the University of State, a large, land-grant university. According to the mission statement of University Outreach, the University of State has "maintained a special covenant with the larger society that created and sustains it. Flowing from this covenant has come the responsibility to ensure that the University's vast knowledge resources are put to optimum use in service to society." I was eager to see how individuals on campus would respond to a request to share their knowledge in a youth and community development project. International students on campus—including nationals of more than one hundred different countries—were also perceived as a rich resource. Clearly, international students offer a unique perspective of the world, but in actuality, elements of these cultures are part of our national fabric. International students can help us to understand the cultural backgrounds of our fellow Americans.

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Perhaps more importantly, interaction with diverse others offers an opportunity for us to reflect on ourselves, our culture, and the values that we hold as a society. People with different cultural backgrounds and life histories challenge us to consider why we think the way we do about the things that we think about.

My own personal strengths and interests played a significant role in the design of *Connections*. During my college years, I spent a year in Germany as a foreign exchange student. After completing a bachelor's degree in history with a concentration in international studies, I accepted a position teaching conversational English to children in Japan, a position I retained for two years. These years of overseas experience, as well as other journeys abroad, afforded innumerable opportunities for self-reflection. Through my efforts trying to understand how people from other countries view the world, I gained a clearer view of my own perspective. I also learned how to be a flexible thinker, able to consider and respect multiple realities. I wanted to give the students at Jefferson a taste of what I had experienced. *Connections* would be the instrument to do this.

Need for the Research

According to a report presented to the Lynnwood School Board in November 1997, students involved in the alternative program "have felt disconnected from [the regular] school[s] and often from the community as a whole for many years, sometimes as far back as elementary school" (Liberty, 1997). As one of the fundamental institutions of society, schools can, however,

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be instrumental in bringing members of the community together. Adolescents, particularly those considered to be "at-risk," are all too often treated as problems that need to be "fixed" and "controlled" (Howard, 1997; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996; Nathan & Kielsmeier, 1991). Thirty years ago Glasser (1969) lamented the disconnection between adolescents and the community: "Responsible adults in the community talk to each other about the students instead of talking with the students about their common world" (p. 222). The results of a recent study of Lynnwood youth conducted by the Minneapolis-based Search Institute suggest that this detachment persists. According to this study, Jefferson students are not unique in their sense of isolation from the Lynnwood community. A survey of 1390 of the high school and middle school students revealed that only 17 percent of these youth felt that the community "values" them (Search Institute, 1998). Responses to individual survey items indicate that many students are "not sure" how the community feels about them; 44% are not sure "if they matter" to people in their town or city.

How does a community tell young people that they are inherently valuable? More than mere rhetoric seems necessary. I believe that members of the community need to actually become involved with youth. They can share their time, their energy, their experience, and their wisdom, both in their capacity as professionals and in their role as citizens. Robert Kennedy once said, "One person can make a difference and each of us should try" (quoted in Brown, 1995, p. 2). For most public problems, however, in order to make a sustained difference, enough of us must put forth effort. This study explores one way of

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bringing people together and reminding them of their interdependence as members of a community. This research attempts to make a difference by working through a key American institution, the public schools, to involve the community in youth development. Kennedy suggests that we "should try"; I believe that as citizens of a democratic nation we have an inherent *responsibility* to become civically involved. When we understand the reality of our interdependence, we understand that within the framework of a good society our personal lives are enhanced.

Purpose of the Research

This study utilized qualitative methodology to explore the concepts of community and connectedness from the perspective of alternative high school students. The study involved three phases: initial interviews, the *Connections* project, and follow-up interviews. *Connections* was a critical component of the research, because this project took the abstract notion of community and integrated it into an educational learning experience. Initially, Jefferson students who were at least eighteen years old were invited to be interviewed; I presumed that older students would be more interested in community and their role in the larger society, because they are on the edge of greater independence. This study was also designed to investigate the *process* of engaging high school students in a discussion and in a curricular innovation focusing on community and connectedness. I was interested in how the students anticipated and then actually experienced the *Connections* project.

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A qualitative approach enabled the Jefferson students to become more involved in the study. Interview-discussions before and after *Connections* were primary sources of data. Interview transcripts, written field notes, and reflections recorded on audiotapes helped me to realize the extent to which the process of being interviewed and included in the development and evaluation of *Connections* had an impact on the students.

The goal of the initial interviews was to answer the following questions: (a) How do high school students define community? (b) What characteristics help to create a good community? (c) What traits would typify a bad community? (d) How do students perceive their place in both the school community and in the local community? and (e) What do students think of the proposed project, *Connections*? These interviews served as my formal introduction to the students, many of whom had seen me "hanging around" their school, talking to their teachers and occasionally sitting in on their classes. The interviews were also used to inform students about *Connections* and the theory behind its design.

The *Connections* project was an opportunity for members of the Lynnwood community to meet at a local church and engage in dialogue with diverse others, to work together in the planning process of community projects, and to gain experience and knowledge by actively contributing to the community through those projects. In addition, a sense of connectedness, enhanced self-esteem and the knowledge that each of us can make a difference are some of the less tangible outcomes that could result from involvement in *Connections*.

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After the completion of *Connections,* follow-up interviews with the students provided unique insight as to how the students experienced the entire project. Answers to the following questions were sought: (a) How will the students describe *Connections*? (b) What will be the affective response from the students? (c) Did the students gain any new insights about themselves, the community, or the larger society? and (d) Are the students able to see any relation between *Connections* and their concept of community? Interviews were also conducted with two of the Jefferson teachers, two community members who were involved in both phases of *Connections*, and three international graduate students who were also involved in both phases. Input and evaluative comments were sought from these individuals in order to provide a richer interpretation of the intervention. The interviews evolved from a simple evaluation of *Connections* to a discussion on topics ranging from civic values and diversity to community involvement in education and youth development. The interviews allowed me to enrich my own understanding of these topics.

"As observers and interpreters of the world, we are inextricably part of it; we cannot step outside our own experience to obtain some observer-independent account of what we experience. Thus it is always possible for there to be different, equally valid accounts from different perspectives" (Maxwell, 1992, p. 283). The design of *Connections* was based on my experiences in and interpretations of the world. It was an opportunity—an excuse, if you will—for people to socially interact with diverse others in the community. Through a "thick description"—a phrase introduced by Geertz (1973), which includes both detailed

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description and interpretation—I hope to help readers better understand the *Connections* project.

Theoretical Perspectives

There were two major theoretical approaches used as a framework for this study. The first approach focuses on the development of the self through interactions with others. Robert Selman's Theory of Interpersonal Understanding also examines qualitative changes in the individual's ability to understand the world from the perspective of other people. The second approach, Lev Vygotsky's writings on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), emphasizes how the more competent and experienced help the young and the less competent reach a higher level of understanding and thinking.

<u>Selman: Interpersonal Understanding</u>

Robert Selman's model of interpersonal understanding may be useful in conceptualizing the thought processes of the Jefferson students. For this study, I have extrapolated from Selman's basic theoretical approach in order to include the possible effects of discovering that there are a variety of cultural perspectives. Selman (1980) makes the assertion that "the understanding of selves and the understanding of relations among the perspectives of various selves are interacting conceptions that nourish and enhance each other" (p. 24). Thus, we develop a sense of self in the context of our contact and communication with others. Selman further reasoned that social interactions provide a source of "conceptual conflict" between one's ideas and those of

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others. This, in turn, may promote a greater depth of understanding of oneself and of one's social systems. Thus, within the cooperative process of positive engagement in society, the individual can learn to become a more flexible thinker, capable of not only self-reflection, but of social rationality (internalization of a sense of equity), as well. Selman's approach is intriguing because it invites us to consider "changes in understanding of relations *between* persons and changes in concepts of relations *within* persons" (p. 34). For example, the Jefferson students in this study may become more aware of the influence of culture on the relations among feelings, thoughts, and actions.

Selman's model of interpersonal understanding identifies stage advances as qualitative changes in one's ability to view the world from the perspective of other people. Although only Stage 4 is relevant for this study, all five stages and their identifying characteristics are provided in order to place Stage 4 in proper context:

> Stage 0: Undifferentiated and Egocentric Perspective Taking (about Ages 3 to 6)
> Stage 1: Differentiated and Subjective Perspective Taking (about Ages 5 to 9)
> Stage 2: Self-reflective/Second-person and Reciprocal Perspective Taking (about Ages 7 to12)
> Stage 3: Third-person and Mutual Perspective Taking (about Ages 10 to 15)
> Stage 4: In-depth and Societal-Symbolic Perspective Taking (about Ages 12 to adulthood)
>
> (Selman, 1980, pp. 37-39).

Through the *Connections* project, participants were encouraged to examine human interactions from a variety of perspectives. Two distinguishing features of

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the fourth stage are: 1) awareness that motives, actions, thoughts, and feelings are shaped by psychological factors (including "unconscious processes" within a person), and 2) appreciation of the idea that personality is a product of traits, beliefs, values, and attitudes, a system with its own developmental history (Selman, 1980). Figure 1 illustrates how the fourth stage of Selman's model has been applied to this study. In both sides of the figure, the self considers both the self, the other, and the self-other interaction.

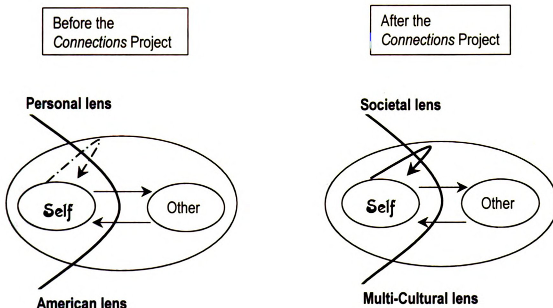

Figure 1 – Perception of self, others, and the self-other interaction through various lenses (Liberally adapted from Muuss, 1996, p. 227).

Before the *Connections* project, the individual views the world and his or her interactions with others primarily through an American cultural lens. After the *Connections* project, discussion and interaction with internationals has enabled participants to become cognitively aware of what were previously "invisible"

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cultural influences. Students discover that the "American perspective," which is intuitively familiar to them, does not accurately describe the motivations and sentiments of people from other cultures. Adolescents reaching this extrapolated fourth level understand social facts as being interpreted by each individual according to that individual's culture. Individuals at this level can more accurately communicate and understand diverse others. The right side of the figure illustrates qualitative advances in the individual's ability to see the world through a multi-cultural lens. After the *Connections* project, participants also have a deeper understanding of self.

Vygotsky: The Zone of Proximal Development

The complex and somewhat elusive writings of Lev Vygotsky are both instructive and inspirational. Vygotsky (1978) describes the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). For this study, the ZPD illuminates an important function of the interviewer. One of the goals of this study was to examine how young people understand the concept of community. It was presumed, however, that adolescents rarely have the opportunity to engage in dialogue on this topic. Through interviews with an adult, adolescents could increase their consciousness of community and related concepts. "Consciousness plays an enormous role," writes educator Jerome Bruner (1986), "consciousness armed with concepts and the language for forming and

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transforming them" (p. 73). Thus, consciousness may be the first step to active involvement.

According to Vygotsky, a Zone of Proximal Development exists in all forms of knowledge acquisition. This study presumes that social knowledge—including discussion of the concepts of community, connectedness, and citizenship—should be a fundamental component of general education. In order to engage the interviewees in meaningful dialogue on community and other related abstractions, the subject matter needed to be targeted at individual Zones of Proximal Development. [See Figure 2.]

Initial Interview	**Follow-up Interview**
The topic of community is targeted at a level above the ZPD; students are overwhelmed and will be unable to actively engage.	The topic of community is targeted at a level above the ZPD; students are overwhelmed and will be unable to actively engage.
Zone of Proximal Development	**Zone of Proximal Development**
The topic of community is targeted at a level below the ZPD; students are bored and will not choose to actively engage.	The topic of community is targeted at a level below the ZPD; students are bored and will not choose to actively engage.

Figure 2 – Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and student interviews about community.

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Figure 2 illustrates the location of the ZPD, based on the presupposition that the interviewer was able to target the student's ZPD during the initial interviews. In the first interviews, the interviewer should target dialogue around the concept of community, a topic rarely discussed by adolescents, at a lower level, primarily because there is a greater risk of overwhelming the students. During the follow-up interviews, the concept of community is recalled (as opposed to being introduced). Consequently, there is a greater risk of boring the students.

In an unsuccessful initial interview (one that did not target the ZPD), the student may have passively listened, but he or she did not become actively engaged. Under these circumstances, the student would probably be indifferent during the second interview or would not wish to be interviewed again after the *Connections* project. It is also quite possible that this student would be ineligible to be interviewed a second time, because he or she chose to be absent on the Fridays when the first phase of the project was implemented. The interviewer, in this case, was unable to present the project in such a way that piqued the interest of the student.

As the interviewer, I was not an expert on the concept of community; I was an interested citizen who also wished to expand my own perspective. Bruner (1986) reminds us that the source of the meaning of social concepts is neither in the world, nor in the "meaner's head," but rather in the process of interpersonal negotiation. Thus, an individual may have an understanding of democracy, community, or citizenship, but the reality of meaning can only be achieved through the "*sharing* of human cognitions" (emphasis added, p. 122).

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Depending on our prior knowledge and experience, through dialogue we may either reconstruct existing ideas or become conscious of new ones.

Overview of the Study

Although Selman and Vygotsky provide a clear framework for the theoretical process of this study, it is also necessary to examine philosophical contributions and contextual realities. In Chapter 2, I will explore some of the more subjective themes that run through this study, namely the concept of community, the meaning of citizenship in a democratic country, and the relationship between the public and the public schools. I will also examine empirical studies that support the inclusion of community service projects in the school curriculum. Although I believe this study could have been conducted at any high school, the design of *Connections* was based on what is known about effective alternative education programs. Several longitudinal studies are also discussed because of the insight they provide as to how connections protect. Finally, a conceptual model that incorporates theoretical, philosophical, empirical, and contextual considerations will be articulated.

I will begin Chapter 3 with a brief discussion of the theory behind qualitative research. Then, I will inform the reader of the method used for data collection and data analysis. Next I will provide background information on the Lynnwood Alternative Program (Jefferson). This will include not only the historical background, policy and procedures of the school, but also a general profile of the student population and a more detailed look at the students who

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were interviewed. Finally, I will inform the reader of the procedure followed both for the research and for the *Connections* project (initial interviews with the Jefferson students, implementation of *Connections*, and follow-up interviews with both the Jefferson students and other participants in the *Connections* project). Finally, qualitative research allows the researcher to discover new patterns and themes as the study progresses. Thus, Chapter 4 is entitled "Discoveries." First, I will examine how the Jefferson students defined community. Then I will reveal how these students experienced the *Connections* project. Finally, I will discuss how the process of the study impacted the Jefferson students.

In Chapter 5, I will provide a synthesis of this fairly complex study. Themes that contributed to the overall design and implementation of this study will be woven together with the unique, yet simple, insights and discoveries attained through carrying out this research. I will also discuss how I would change *Connections* if it were to be repeated, and what I believe the broader implications of the study are. I will conclude the chapter and the study by offering some final reflections on the concept of community and connections.

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CHAPTER 2—REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I will examine the literature in the following six areas: the concept of community, citizenship in a democratic society, community service, the public and the public schools, effective alternative education programs, and connections that protect. Following the literature review the conceptual model will be articulated.

The Concept of Community

The concept of community entices us because of the potential inherent in the ideal. This allure is effectively summarized as political theorist Glenn Tinder (1980) reflects upon the writings of Plato and Jean Jacques Rousseau in his book, *Community: Reflections on a Tragic Ideal*:

> In Plato's ideal city, people would be united according to the demands of their own essence; social unity would not infringe upon, but would be the very condition of, personal wholeness. . . . When Rousseau discussed the "general will," he was trying to formulate the concept of a social will that would be identical with the innermost will of every member of society. Obeying such a will, the citizen would be simultaneously at one with others and wholly free (pp. 1-2).

Thus, theoretically, there is no conflict between what will benefit the individual and what will benefit the group. In reality, however, individual and societal wants are not perfectly correlated. It is often the case that our emphasis on individual rights leads to less than desirable consequences for society as a whole. For example, we believe we have the right to make personal life-style decisions regarding diet and exercise—even when those choices force us to seek frequent

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medical attention. In the end, when health care costs skyrocket for everyone, we complain. Clearly, personal decisions that primarily benefit the individual in the short term often have deleterious effects for society over the long term. [See Brown (1995) for an interesting discussion of social conventions and how they benefit the individual.] Our interdependency should compel us to make personal choices in the context of both our community and our society. What Plato and Rousseau describe may be unreachable, but, according to Tinder, we should nevertheless strive for this "tragic ideal."

Early in the history of the United States, French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville (1969) captured what he found to be a unique component of American society: the propensity of citizens to act together in self-appointed groups (associations) in order to strengthen their communities. Tocqueville believed that these citizen associations were a cornerstone of American communities:

> Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. . . . Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association (p. 523).

Tocqueville observed that the common man played a significant role in the life of the community; Americans acted on a communal impulse.

Today there is a renewed interest in the role of the community in both education and youth development. In *Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth*, a report produced by the Search Institute, Blyth (1993) writes: "No one alone is in a

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position to address the needs or create the kind of support, values, and competencies young people need to grow up healthy" (p. 7). Although Blyth directs this statement to the development of youth, it appears to be equally applicable to the healthy development of all people. Brown (1995), Pratte (1988) and others remind us of our interdependency as a society; we rely on others (both individuals and collections of individuals, associations) to support us, to help us determine our values, and to create and develop our individual competencies.

Although community is a familiar term, it has many nuances. The American Heritage College Dictionary, 3rd Edition, offers multiple definitions:

> **community** **1.a.** A group of people living in the same locality and under the same government. **b.** The district or locality in which such a group lives. **2.** A group of people having common interests. **3.a.** Similarity or identity. **b.** Sharing, participation, and fellowship. **4.** Society as a whole; the public.

All of the above interpretations are closely related, and all are relevant to this study. Those who participated in the *Connections* project live in the same general locality and, therefore, presumably share a responsibility to the locality. Collectively we determine the strength and the health of our communities. The primary goals of *Connections* were to give participants the opportunity to discover their similarities, to share their ideas and opinions, to participate in the planning and carrying out of community projects, and to engage in fellowship.

Within communities, people are connected both through institutional and individual relationships. Cortes (1996) introduces the concept of "mediating institutions," those institutions which not only connect us to each other, but also

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"buffer the family—society's most fundamental institution—from the effects of the largest institutions—the state, the market, the media and so forth" (Paragraph 12). Historically, this has included religious congregations, libraries, schools, workers associations, settlement homes, and a variety of community organizations. These institutions have had the capacity to pull us into an associational web of both friends and strangers. The *Connections* project served a similar purpose as diverse individuals from different social circles gathered together.

Our attitudes toward strangers can either strengthen or weaken our communities. Norton (1991) makes the distinction between impersonal relations, which are "a convenience whose necessity is the necessity of convenience," and depersonalized relations, which "attack the personhood of those engaging in them" (p. 147). Impersonal relations are inevitable in modern society, but depersonalized relations—interactions that are inherently destructive—are often the norm. According to Norton, depersonalization—the act of regarding those with whom we interact as non-persons—leads to a weakened conception of self (both for the depersonalizer and for the depersonalized). This damage occurs most seriously in the early stages of development, when the individual already perceives him- or herself in greater isolation from others. It seems reasonable that connecting young people to the community through personal, and even impersonal relationships, could help nurture healthy self-development. Providing positive opportunities for adolescents to interact with diverse others can help them practice more personalized relationship building.

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The notion that community provides a context for individuals to achieve a clearer sense of self is well supported in the literature. It is through the "pressure of contact with other minds and other viewpoints" (Chapman, 1991, p. 220) that we are able to take a more objective look at ourselves and others (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lightfoot, 1997; Norton, 1991; Piaget, 1965/1995; Pratte, 1988; Selman, 1980; Tinder, 1980; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Thus, the process of self-realization is achieved only in relation to others. Enhanced relationships contribute not only to a greater sense of community but to a greater understanding of self as well. Communitarian Amitai Etzioni (1996) asserts that communities to which we belong guide us with an inner moral voice that reflects the values of the community. Etzioni suggests that we are more likely to respond to those with whom we feel a connection. Thus, a clear sense of membership in the community helps us to maintain a tension between making decisions that benefit us personally and those that enrich the lives of others.

Today, it is widely assumed that communities are in decline and are no longer serving the important social roles they once did (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Cobb, 1992; Cortes, 1996; Etzioni, 1993; Garbarino, 1995; McKnight, 1995; Merz & Furman, 1997; National Commission on Civic Renewal, 1998; Putnam, 1995; also see Dewey, 1927, for a discussion of the decline of community in the first half of this century). Many people seem to be experiencing a shortage of both time and energy in the rapid pace of the Computer Age. When we are not trying to "catch up," we devote ourselves to friends and family. Although clearly we have responsibilities to those who are

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close to us, Bellah and his colleagues (1985) remind us of our responsibilities to those who are more distant in their book *Habits of the Heart*. Tocqueville (1969) warned: "Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself" (p. 477). If, however, we are aware of our interdependence (Brown, 1995; Pratte, 1988), we are compelled to acknowledge our obligation to look after the greater society.

Citizenship in a Democratic Society

Active citizenship is at the heart of any democratic community. Sergiovanni (1994) suggests that the Bill of Rights should more accurately be thought of as the Bill of Obligations, for "without a commitment to accept the obligations of active citizenship, any litany of rights becomes a litany of empty platitudes" (p. 123). The notion of citizenship includes privileges, rights, and duties. Tocqueville's (1969) *Democracy in America* is a poignant political analysis of American democracy. Tocqueville wrote, "The free institutions of the United States and the political rights enjoyed there provide a thousand continual reminders to every citizen that he lives in society. At every moment they bring his mind back to this idea, that it is the duty as well as the interest of men to be useful to their fellows" (p. 484). For Tocqueville "fellows" are not only friends and neighbors but strangers in the community as well. Public relationships are not constant and fixed; they are continually being formed, eroded, and reformed.

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Nevertheless, we must give enough of our attention to these relationships in order to solve public problems and contribute to the common good. The language of citizenship proposes that "self interests are always embedded in communities of action, and that in serving neighbors one also serves oneself" (Barber, 1992, p. 249).

Today many people perceive a significant imbalance between what Americans perceive as their rights and what they accept as their responsibilities. Barber (1992) suggests that America has become a place where individuals wish to champion their personal rights, while delegating responsibilities to others or to the government. In the preface to the final report of the National Commission on Civic Renewal (1998), co-chairs William Bennett and Sam Nunn declare that the report is "about all of us in our capacity as citizens" (p. 3). Our capacity as citizens is another way of expressing how we might lead our lives as ideal citizens. In a statement that summarizes what much of this study is about, Barber (1998) insists: "There should be a place for us in civil society, a place really for *us*, for what we share and who, in sharing, we become" (p. 38).

Community Service

There is clearly a developmental process in the formation of citizenship. How do young people grow into adults who maintain a strong civic engagement? According to the literature on community service, active participation is a more effective method of achieving civic engagement than is simple awareness of civics rhetoric (Barber, 1992; Barber, 1998, Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Pratte, 1988;

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Youniss & Yates, 1997; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Youniss, McLellan, and Yates (1997) suggest that adolescence is the ideal time to develop the civic component of identity. They propose that service in the larger society allows young people to "see society as a construction of human actors with political and moral goals rather than as a distant, preformed object" (Paragraph 19). Service in the community helps individuals understand that they can make a difference in their world.

Quantitative studies suggest that community service projects can help young people connect to the community. Conrad and Hedin (1982) reported that students involved in service or other experiential programs developed more positive attitudes toward both adults and toward the types of organizations/institutions and people with whom they were involved. Newmann and Rutter (1983) found that students who participated in community service projects achieved a better sense of social competence in tasks such as communicating to groups, starting conversations with strangers, and persuading adults to take their views more seriously. Thus, experience in the community helps teach youth the social attitudes and skills that contribute to future success in a variety of contexts.

Some scholars suggest that within the context of community service relationships, individuals are also able to explore the concept of self (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Rhoads, 1997). Rhoads maintains that community service offers educators an opportunity to encourage the development of more caring selves. Community service enables the individual to "take the role of the other and walk

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with the other" (p. 91); thus, service experiences can introduce students to new perspectives and ways of viewing society and the world. In order for youth to internalize the benefits of community service, however, they must be given the opportunity to process these experiences.

"Action without reflection rings a bit hollow and fails to achieve many of the ideals stressed by critical views of education and society," notes Rhoads (1997, p. 180). Researchers have consistently found that the opportunity to reflect on service experiences has a significant impact on outcomes related to the social aspects of development (See Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Rhoads, 1997; and Youniss & Yates, 1997). Discussion encourages youth to extend beyond the moment and beyond themselves; they can begin to contemplate the vision they have of the community, society and the world, as well as their place within these contexts (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Noddings, 1992; Rhoads, 1997). Thus, as young people are given more opportunities to become involved in the larger society they begin to see themselves as a part of that society.

The Public and the Public Schools

Schools were originally established in the United States for the purpose of preparing young people to lead a meaningful, economically productive life for themselves, while simultaneously contributing to the "common good"—betterment of society as a whole (Barber, 1992; Barber, 1998; Boyer, 1983; Cobb, 1992; Dewey, 1916/1951; Dewey & Dewey, 1915/1924; Noddings, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994). Thus, public schools served public ends by educating the

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individual. Just as children learned a great deal about roles and responsibilities in the family from their parents, they learned much about roles and responsibilities in the community through their experience in the public schools. Through education young people encountered the meaning of their experience in life in a societal context (Friedenberg, 1959/1964). This was an important goal of public education when schools were established. Today, instruction in civic matters is still considered to be a worthy aim of public education, but it is questionable the extent to which this ideal is actualized.

In 1997, Phi Delta Kappa, the Center on Educational Policy, and the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) conducted 28 forums across the country to determine public attitudes about the public's schools. Forum participants identified two primary purposes of the schools: preparing graduates to be responsible citizens and to be economically self-sufficient (Rose & Rapp, 1997). Parents and the general public believe that education should be a priority, and yet somehow, Americans' actions seem to fall short of their stated intentions. Unquestionably, the vast majority of parents in this country *want* their children to succeed in school. [See Steinberg (1996) for a discussion of what he refers to as "slippage" between parents' intentions and the end result.] Correspondingly, as a society, surely we recognize that children are our only "source" of adults. We also *want* capable people in the work force as we look to enter retirement. Wanting, however, is not enough. "Our sentiments for children are qualified by our ambition for ourselves," admonishes David Brown (1995). "It is possible that enough children will have to become so dysfunctional or such a

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menace that we can no longer ignore their presence or tolerate their plight" (pp. 137-138). Our children's future is shaped not only by the values of their parents but also by the policies we create and support as a nation (Edelman, 1993). In my opinion, if we want schools to develop citizens who will perpetuate the kind of country in which we wish to live, we must begin by improving the public; each of us needs to make the personal decisions that support youth and community development.

The responsibility to socialize young people was once more evenly spread across the schools, families and extended families, neighbors, the church, and other community institutions (Merz & Furman, 1997). Unfortunately, a general sense of loss of community, as discussed in previous sections, has had a deleterious effect on the schools. Increasingly, the schools have been made more accountable for the healthy development of the nation's children. The schools alone, however, do not have the resources to succeed in this process. All citizens must ensure that this process is successful. David Mathews (1996), President of the Kettering Foundation, offers the following thoughts on "the public" in his book *Is There a Public for Public Schools?*:

> I don't mean individuals, an audience, or a constituency; I mean citizens, people who might engage one another in taking responsibility for their common problems and act together to improve their common future. I am not thinking of saints or key leaders in a community, and I don't limit the definition to parents of school-age children. I have in mind busy, worried, preoccupied people of all kinds, who are joined together as a society of citizens (p. 25).

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This study was designed to enable the public, both individuals and institutions in the community, to contribute to the healthy development of Lynnwood youth through the public schools.

Effective Alternative Education Programs

In an opinion questionnaire completed by 810 school board members from across the country, nine out of ten believe that alternatives to traditional schooling should be provided. The majority of school boards say that the primary purpose of alternative education is to provide appropriate services (Upperman, 1996). Dewey and Dewey (1915/1924) also understood the need for such specialized services:

> The inflexibility of the ordinary public school tends to push the pupils out of school instead of keeping them in. The curriculum does not fit them, and there is no way of making it fit without upsetting the entire organization of the school. One failure sets a pupil back in all his work, and he soon gets the feeling that his own efforts are not important, because the school machinery works on at the same rate, regardless of any individual pupil (p. 190).

Different learning styles, a lack of social skills, fewer support systems, and a general sense of alienation from the traditional school system are some of the more common reasons why students choose to attend alternative high schools (Gagne, 1996; Gold & Mann, 1984; Morley, 1991; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). These students typically cannot engage in the educational process of the traditional classroom.

Many students who enroll in alternative programs are also substance violators, truants, or pregnant minors, all of whom require extra care and

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concern. Public schools, however, often do not have the resources to deal with the multiple challenges these students face on a daily basis. Consequently, these students may feel isolated and disconnected in a more traditional school. "Each day [they have been told] in various subtle and direct ways that they are not good at anything. The message is that they are not and cannot be successful" (Wehlage, et al., 1989, p. 8). These students may view school as both a hostile place and a hopeless waste of time. They disengage, first mentally and then physically.

Effective alternative high schools, on the other hand, are schools of support; they are places where students want to affiliate (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Butchart, 1986; Gagne, 1996; Gold & Mann, 1984; Wehlage, et al., 1989). The unique nature of the relationship between students and teachers who have both chosen to be there is a critical component (Butchart, 1986; Gagne, 1996; Raywid, 1985). Teachers in these programs often serve as advisors, friends, mentors and advocates. They also maintain a persistence with difficult students, and they preserve an optimism about students' potential for learning (Wehlage, et al., 1989). They consciously seek to provide experiences that build on the strengths of their students (Butchart, 1986; Gagne, 1996; Morley, 1991; Wehlage, et al., 1989). The interpersonal relationships fostered by a caring school environment may be the first steps to connecting these youth to the larger community.

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Connections that Protect

According to Sergiovanni (1994), universally we strive to maintain a sense of fitting in, of constancy, of being connected to others and to ideas and values that bring meaning and significance to our lives. Educators familiar with alternative high schools recognize that these students often have limited positive connections with adults and that many also feel isolated from the community in general. The smaller size of most alternative programs is conducive to establishing relationships. "At some level," noted Patricia, the lead teacher at Jefferson, "[our students] see and respect others like themselves who have felt like outcasts in their own community. [They] accept them as family—as different as they may be." Students in alternative programs are often able to establish a degree of bonding to school that was previously unimaginable.

The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, a two-phase study carried out by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), examined the effects of multiple social contexts on behaviors that promote good health. Approximately 90,000 youth in grades 7 through 12 answered brief questionnaires in the first phase; in the second phase, interviews were conducted with about 20,000 students and their parents (Resnick, et al., 1997). The first reports of this study demonstrate that, when demographic characteristics are controlled, the quality of social contexts are important. Specifically, the research team found "consistent evidence that perceived caring and connectedness to others is important in understanding the health of young people today" (p. 830). The report also notes that connectedness with school,

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including perceived caring from teachers, is a significant protective factor in the lives of young people.

Alternative schools are generally associated with "at-risk" students. But as Henderson and Milstein (1996) point out, "Characteristics of resiliency can be discovered in almost everyone, if they are examined for signs of resiliency with the same meticulousness used in looking for problems and deficits" (p. 4). Resiliency is a term used to describe individuals', families', and communities' capacities to bounce back despite adversity. According to Rutter (1985), "Resilience. . . seems to involve several related elements. Firstly, a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence; secondly, a belief in one's own self-efficacy and ability to deal with change and adaptation; and thirdly, a repertoire of social problem solving approaches" (p. 607). Thus, although resiliency is internal, it is developed through interactions with others. Positive connections with others protect, because they build characteristics and capacities that lead to resilience.

Werner and Smith's (1992) research on resiliency in the Kauai Longitudinal Study indicates that certain protective factors have a more general effect on adaptation than do specific risk factors. In *Overcoming the Odds* (1992) they identify five clusters of protective factors. Cluster 1 included temperamental traits of the youth that helped him/her to evoke positive responses from a variety of caring persons. Cluster 2 encompassed skills and values that enabled the individual to utilize whatever talents he/she had. Cluster 3 included characteristics of parents and parenting methods that reflect competence and encourage self-esteem. Cluster 4 consisted of supportive

adults who foster trust. The final cluster was the existence of opportunities at major life transitions. Werner (1992) emphasizes that the study documents a "*chain* of protective factors, *linked across time*" (emphasis added, p. 264). Nevertheless, the findings of this major study have important implications for any program that seeks to help youth. Young people must learn the social skills necessary for interacting with people of diverse backgrounds; youth need to be able to contribute their special talents and receive recognition for these efforts; they need adults who unwaveringly believe in the "possibilities" of their future; and they need pro-social opportunities.

A study by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in Washington, DC, also found that positive connections protect youth. According to the final report, attachment and pro-social integration can provide a buffer against health compromising behavior (*Urban delinquency and substance abuse, initial findings, 1994).* Researchers discovered that attachment and integration are achieved through: 1) developing social and personal skills that allow youth to be successful in a pro-social context (as opposed to an antisocial one), 2) opportunities to participate in pro-social activities, and 3) association and involvement with pro-social peers (Mundy, 1996). Thus, providing pro-social activities with pro-social peers in a pro-social context can be a step towards a stronger overall sense of connectedness.

There is a certain amount of anxiety that usually accompanies any new situation or relationship, but the ability to accommodate and adapt is one of the most crucial lessons of life. "It doesn't matter whether children grow up in

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poverty or wealth or somewhere in between," writes Brown (1995). "They all will eventually have to get along in a world of strangers who will not excuse their behavior because of where they came from" (pp. 138-139). Our ability to socialize effectively not only makes our lives easier, but it also paves the way for the "future learning that springs from easy and ready contact and communication with others" (Dewey, 1938/1952, p. 68). In modern society, we must also be prepared to communicate with diverse others, people whose perception of reality may be shaped by other experiences. The diversity in the United States is a microcosm of the diversity in the world. I believe we should strive to appreciate both. Dewey recognized global interdependence in 1915 when he wrote, "In a society where railroads and steamboats, newspapers and telegraph, have made the whole world neighbors, and where no community is self-supporting, the desirability of really knowing these neighbors is obvious" (p. 171). Clearly, our lives have become dramatically more entangled—both directly and indirectly—over the last eighty years.

Conceptual Model

As practical, applied research this study weaves together many different ideas. At the heart of the study is faith in democracy and the potential power of citizens working together to build community. In the introduction to the book *The Careless Society*, McKnight (1994) writes, "Care is, indeed, the manifestation of a community. The community is the site for the relationships of citizens. And it is at this site that the primary work of a caring society must occur" (p. x). We

may have become **careless**, but I don't believe that we have become **uncaring**. In fact, I presume that as a society we are becoming increasingly aware that we are truly dependent on one another. It is not only in our best collective interest, but in our best individual interest as well to care about those around us—including their ideas and perspectives.

Jose Ortega y Gasset once wrote, "When shall we open our minds to the conviction that the ultimate reality of the world is neither matter nor spirit, is no definite thing, but a perspective?" (cited in Lightfoot, 1997, p. 131). In order to make sense of our world we must become flexible thinkers, able to consider multiple realities. I have approached the subject of perspective taking with the assumption that competent democratic citizens require this skill, and without it, a healthy sense of community and connectedness is threatened—particularly in a heterogeneous nation like the United States. Dialogue and collaborative efforts with diverse others can help to build a stronger community and a stronger democracy.

These ideas about community and citizenship are an integral component of *Connections*. In addition, I designed the *Connections* project to incorporate what is known about effective alternative education programs and healthy youth development. Robert Selman's (1980) Theory of Interpersonal Understanding and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) Theory of the Zone of Proximal Development offer key concepts that can guide the reader in regard to the aims of this study. Both of these theories were highlighted in the previous chapter.

Selman (1980) puts forth the hypothesis that an "advanced level of social perspective taking represents a shift, qualitative in nature, in the child's understanding of persons and of the relationship between self's and others' points of view and hence of selves and of others" (p. 49). Thus, flexible thinking and the ability to consider multiple realities qualitatively improves the development of the social individual. As a truly social process, one can only develop a more advanced ability in this domain through interaction and dialogue with others. *Connections* was an opportunity for students to discuss specific topics within a diverse group of individuals in the community.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) offers an account of how the more competent assist the young in order to reach a higher ground than they could reach on their own—ground from which more abstract reflection on ideas and values can take place. When support is targeted within the ZPD, it aids in development through internalization of the supports provided. During the initial interview, I hoped to introduce *Connections* and the topic of community on a level that would engage the students and encourage buy-in for the remainder of the study. My aim was to make the interviewees more conscious of the concept of community and related topics.

Figure 3 is a conceptual map of the multiple themes running through this study. The study began with initial interviews with eight Jefferson students—this is shown at the top of the figure. At this time, students were introduced to both the concept of community and the *Connections* project; I endeavored to pique their interest. In the center of the figure, I review the three phases of the project

and highlight established goals—first for all of the participants and then specifically for the Jefferson students. After *Connections*, six of the original eight interviewees were available for follow-up discussions. I asked them to evaluate the project; we also discussed the relationship between *Connections* and the concept of community. The expanded model of Selman's fourth stage of interpersonal understanding is also included in the map. I hypothesize that all participants in the study enhanced their ability to understand themselves, others, and the self-other interaction as a result of discussions with internationals. Community members, international graduate students, and Jefferson teachers were also interviewed following *Connections*. In Chapter 3, the various components of the conceptual map will be discussed in greater detail.

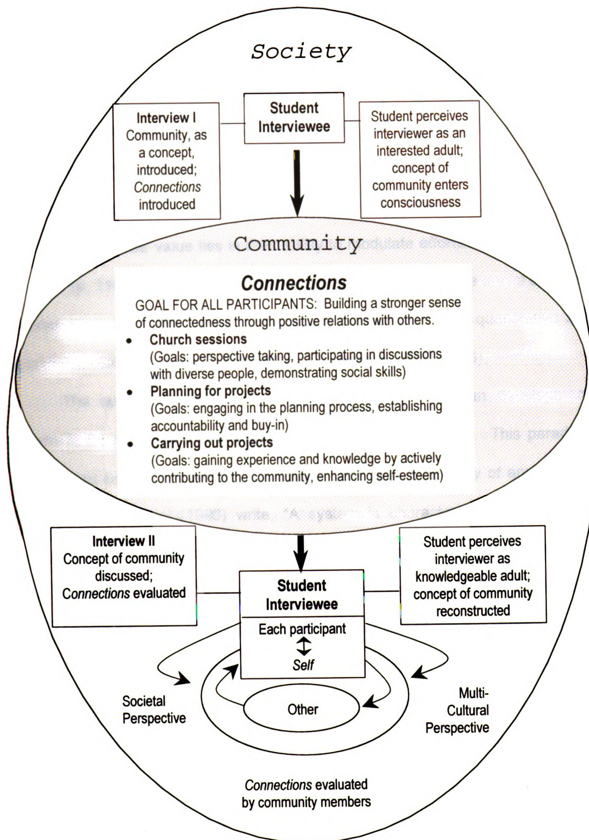

Figure 3 - Conceptual map.

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CHAPTER 3—IMPLEMENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF *CONNECTIONS*

Theory of Qualitative Research

Generalization is often seen as a primary aim of science; thus, prediction and control are key elements. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note, however, that, scientifically speaking, "generalizations are assertions of *enduring* value that are *context-free*. Their value lies in their ability to modulate efforts at prediction and control" (p. 110). They further suggest that research done in the *social* sciences cannot be context-free. Thus, generalizing from data of both quantitative and qualitative studies is "always problematic" (Firestone, 1993, p. 16).

The systems perspective, found in the field of human development, seems to be compatible with the tenets of qualitative research. This paradigm encourages us to examine the interdependence and complexity of any system. Galvin and Brommel (1996) write, "A system is characterized by its unique experience of change. If one component of the system changes, the others will change in response, which in turn affects the initial component. So, a change in one part of the system affects every part." Neither individuals nor studies exist in a vacuum. The results of this study are the unique result of interaction between this researcher, the participants, and the community where *Connections* evolved. This research was not context-free. Another researcher would both design and conduct the study differently.

Qualitative research is often criticized under the guise that the results may not be generalizable to other settings. Robert Stake suggests, however, that

case studies are often the "preferred method of research because they may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience and thus to that person a natural basis for generalization" (quoted in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 120). I encourage the reader to discover how the findings of this study may apply to his or her own situation.

The design of *Connections* is woven from the threads of numerous quantitative studies and the theories of many scholars, but ultimately it reflects the insights of the researcher and the resources of the community. According to Firestone (1993), the researcher has an "obligation" to "describe a broad range of background features, aspects of the processes studied, and outcomes" to enable the reader to "assess the match between the situation studied and their own" (p. 18). Essentially, he considers case-to-case transfer to be a type of generalization. My intent is to provide the reader with a "thick description" of the background and procedure of this study. Clearly, a more intuitive approach to making generalizations is necessary.

According to the basic characteristics of qualitative research identified by Maykut and Morehouse (1994), qualitative methods were well suited to investigate the aims of this study. Qualitative research has the advantage of enabling the researcher to collect data in the natural setting; thus, a deeper understanding of the experience of subjects in context is possible. Perhaps the most significant characteristic of qualitative research for this study is the emphasis placed on the "human-as-instrument." For this study, the researcher served the dual role of both interviewer and change agent. I attempted to target

the students in their Zones of Proximal Development in order to help them reach a higher level of understanding and thinking in regard to such social concepts as community and citizenship. I sought their opinions and encouraged them to reflect on their attitudes and beliefs. These interviews were, essentially, guided discussions. The information collected in the interviews is a reflection of the questions posed to the interviewees. Qualitative research also allows the participants to speak for themselves. "When you get people talking," advises Zinnser (1976/1994), "handle what they say as you would handle a valuable gift" (p. 79). Thus, the researcher has the responsibility of skillfully weaving the words of the interviewees into the descriptive material that provides the appropriate context for the quotes. Finally, a qualitative design allows new questions and new perspectives to emerge as data are collected and analyzed.

Data Collection

As previously indicated, there were three phases to this study: initial interviews, implementation of *Connections* (church sessions, planning projects, carrying out projects), and follow-up interviews. The following timetable clarifies the chronology of the study:

March	➢ Initial interviews with Jefferson students ➢ Sessions at Azaro Baptist Church (13th, 20th, 27th)
April	➢ Letters sent to community members inviting them to participate in phase two of *Connections* ➢ Community members verbally invited to participate in phase two ➢ Meeting with a group of six Jefferson students to discuss projects

May	➢ Planning for projects continues ➢ Project: presentation at a local elementary school (20th, 27th) ➢ Project: serving lunch at a shelter in Jacksonville (28th, 29th) ➢ Follow-up interviews with Jefferson students
June	➢ Follow-up interviews with Jefferson students ➢ Interviews with Jefferson teachers ➢ Interviews with international graduate students from the University of State
July	
August	➢ Interview with a couple who participated in both phases of *Connections*

Initial interviews and follow-up interviews with the Jefferson students were the most significant sources of data. Interviews with community members and teachers also provided a valuable perspective. Data collection during the *Connections* project was limited, essentially because my role as coordinator of the project took priority over my role as researcher. The primary source of data during *Connections* included audio-tape journal recordings made immediately after the sessions and limited written notes.

Data Analysis

All interviews with Jefferson students were tape recorded and then transcribed in detail. The interviews with teachers and community members were tape-recorded, and then extensive notes were taken based on the interviews. Data from the student interviews were color-coded thematically.

Emergent topics from the initial interviews included: descriptions of Jefferson, school in general, important adults, background (family and individual) information, community, the city of Lynnwood, future plans, challenges and personal strengths, and thoughts about *Connections*. For the follow-up interviews with the students the following themes emerged and were color-coded: description of *Connections*, affective response to *Connections*, assigned seating for church sessions, inclusion of teachers, community projects, most interesting component, community and *Connections*, appropriateness of title, success of *Connections*, and "deeper stuff." Notes from interviews with teachers, community members, and international graduate students were highlighted according to the above themes. These data were used to support and enhance student descriptions of *Connections*. As the interviewer and the transcriber of those conversations, I became fully immersed in my primary sources of data; new themes emerged, as the data became more familiar to me.

Excerpts from the student interviews are included throughout the paper. The student's words are in boldface when dialogue between the student and the interviewer is provided. In addition, for this paper, three ellipsis points (. . .) indicate a pause, rather than omitted words or sentences. A longer pause is shown by the use of additional ellipsis points.

Policy and Procedures of Jefferson Alternative High School

> The Alternative Program provides an avenue of success for students who previously have been unsuccessful at Lynnwood High School, who intend to drop out before graduating, or, who, despite passing classes at Lynnwood High School, may be able to more fully develop their potential in a different setting.
>
> —*Lynnwood Alternative Program (Jefferson), Student Handbook*

The Lynnwood School District organized its own alternative program in the fall of 1994. Although Lynnwood had previously participated in a tri-district effort, a drastic change in state funding compelled the district to count pupils more carefully. Jefferson is a part of Lynnwood High School, however, it is located in the Community Education Center in Azaro, a neighborhood bordering the Lynnwood city limits. Housed in a small brick building that was built in the 1920s, Jefferson has a certain charm, but the age of the building contributes to heating problems in colder weather. The physical structure includes three classrooms, a lounge—primarily used as a baby room for the teen parents—administrative offices, two smaller instructional rooms where students can work in small groups, a staff restroom, and a men's and a women's restroom.

In the first year of the program, 28 students enrolled. Over the last five years, the program has grown steadily; it now carries a continuous waiting list of between ten and twenty students. During the *Connections* project, the core Jefferson community included 42 students and three full time teachers. Students interested in attending Jefferson enroll by choice—although in the 1997-1998 school year one student was placed in the program by an administrative

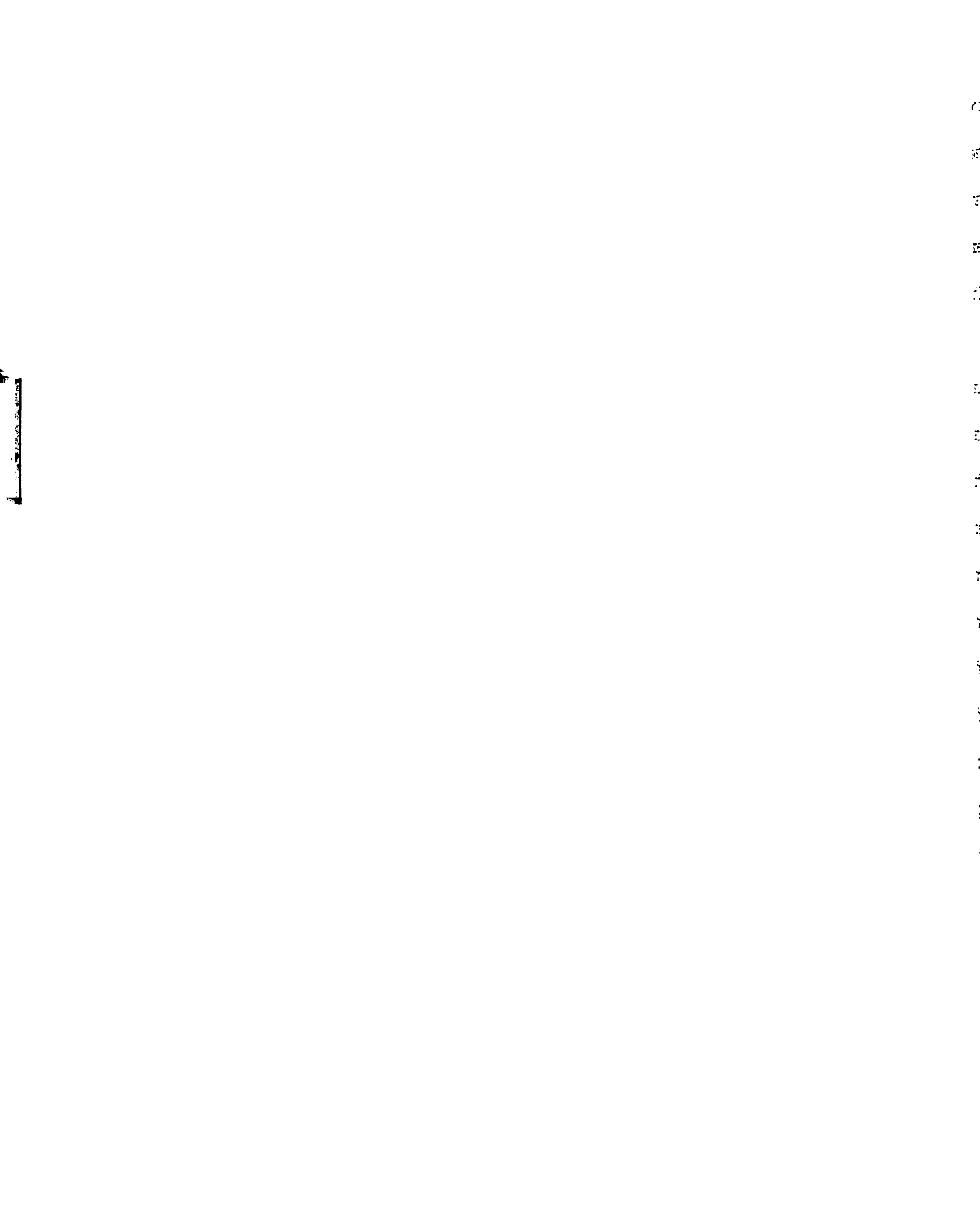
directive. A student may be referred to the program by a Lynnwood administrator, counselor or teacher, by a parent or guardian, police officer, support professional, or by him- or herself. Each student is initially asked to fill out an application form which requests information on current educational situation (last school attended, difficult and easy subjects), reasons for applying, perceived strengths, and other demographic information including whether the individual is pregnant or has children. Then the student must set up an interview with the lead teacher; a parent or guardian must also attend this meeting. Finally, a screening committee goes over each application, assesses the needs of the student, and determines "goodness of fit" with the program.

Although students attend Jefferson for a variety of reasons, almost all of them are directly related to the smaller size of the school. Whereas Lynnwood High School has a student body of over 1250 students, Jefferson will enroll no more than 55. Students acknowledged that the teachers at Jefferson are able (and willing) to give them more individualized attention. They feel that they are held more accountable, and this helps them stay on task. These students want to complete high school, but they often don't have the self-discipline to make the choices that will enable them to graduate. Essentially, they are searching for a niche. They want to know that it makes a difference to someone whether or not they attend school and complete their assignments. They want to know that someone cares.

One of the unspoken goals of high school is to graduate young people who have learned to internalize values and base their decisions on them.

Attending high school regularly, completing assignments in a timely manner, working together with classmates on group projects, and interacting with others in a socially appropriate manner reflect important skills and values necessary for a vast array of jobs and careers. Thus, it is in the students' best interest to work toward these goals. Attending classes should matter to *them* because doing so will help *them* find meaningful work. Presumably the majority of students at Lynnwood High School understand this. Most Jefferson students, however, have yet to internalize this self-discipline. The grading and attendance procedures at Jefferson are designed to help the students achieve greater self-discipline. These policies incorporate high levels of accountability but nevertheless make it possible for Jefferson students to experience success. [See Appendix A and Appendix B for descriptions of these policies.]

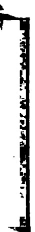
Truancy was a serious problem for many of the students when they attended Lynnwood High School. "It was so big," commented Radwan, one of the older students at Jefferson. "They didn't even know I was in class." Several students expressed feelings of being lost and discounted. "It was kind of hard for me to go to school with all the people around," reflected Samane, a soft-spoken African American male. "So my counselor thought it would be better for me to come over here, because in this small environment it's hard for me just to leave. So, I came here. I thought it was a good idea, too, because I want to graduate." Thus, for some students, a main component of their truant behavior was that their attendance or non-attendance didn't matter to anyone. Part of the strategy for encouraging students to maintain attendance is a level system upon



which the program is based. [See Appendix C for a description of the level system.] Problems with truancy are not solved at Jefferson, but students sense that their teachers genuinely care that they come to school. And statistically speaking, student attendance at the Alternative Program increases an average of 30% over attendance at the main campus (Liberty, 1997).

Another reason that a smaller environment is positive for Jefferson students is that it enables them to get their work done. Lori, a single mother, has attended Jefferson off and on since it opened. She initially experienced difficulties at Lynnwood because teachers didn't know how to work with her disability. "They were like too busy doing something else, or they didn't have time to show you. I have dyslexia, so it's harder for me to work. And like nobody had the time to show me what it was, how to do it," she recalled. "So I just said fine, if nobody's going to help me, I'm not going to come!" At Jefferson, Lori found teachers who worked with her one-on-one and helped her to "see it on paper and then think it as well." Sarah, another single mother, also discovered greater academic success at Jefferson. "I get a lot more stuff done," she told me. "This is the first time I've ever gotten A's and B's in a class or on a test since 6th grade," she recalled with a nervous laugh. Sarah was clearly proud of the academic success she has achieved at Jefferson.

A stronger, more personal teacher-student relationship is another reason why a smaller environment is amenable to the students. Everyone, including the teachers, is on a first name basis at Jefferson, and this seems to contribute to the quality of the relationships there. Samane felt that most adults stereotype



teenagers: "You know they'll talk to you, but they still, you know have that little thought in their head like. . . oh, it's a teenager, and he might do something wrong or some stuff." When I asked him if there were certain adults who didn't treat him like a teenager he replied, "Paul [a teacher at Jefferson] and them, they treat us with respect. They communicate with us." Respect and effective communication are prerequisites of most constructive relationships. As Samane explained, "Respect is that you give people respect to get respect." The majority of Jefferson students feel that the teachers not only respect them, but that they genuinely care.

Life at Jefferson Alternative High School

The first day of school at any high school is charged with a mixture of excitement and tension; the first day of school at Jefferson in the fall of 1997 was no different. The "regulars" talked amongst themselves and could generally be recognized by their loud seemingly confident voices; the new students tended to silently observe and soak up their unfamiliar surroundings. As the students mingled they consumed the available donuts, bagels, milk, and juice. After about fifteen minutes the teachers, students and staff crowded into one of the classrooms. Patricia, the lead teacher, introduced the adults present and then moved on to a more general discussion about goals for the year.

Patricia encouraged the students to represent themselves and the school well. She specifically referred to respecting the property immediately surrounding the school—including the church parking lot located directly across

the street. There had been some tension between the school and the Azaro Baptist Church in past years, primarily due to unwanted activity in the parking lot and carelessly tossed cigarette butts. Patricia asked the students to think about the school's reputation and how the community perceived them. She prompted them to consider why outsiders might have a negative impression of the program. One student mentioned that the sight of groups of students hanging out at the school gate and smoking probably cast a negative shadow. Patricia then asked the students to think of positive ways they, as a school, had contributed to the community in the past. Several students simultaneously mentioned the Thanksgiving baskets that were put together for needy families. Others remembered Christmas decorations that they had painted for display during the holiday season. Alternative students and their teachers are aware of the negative stereotype that most of society have given them. From the very first day Patricia delivered the message that although stereotypes exist, the students should conduct themselves in a way that would encourage others to see their good sides. She urged them not to leave cigarette butts or other garbage in the street, in the neighbors' yards, on church property, or on school grounds. She insisted that little things do make a difference.

In small communities, people know something about everybody. This knowledge may simply be that "Mary keeps to herself" or "Bill thinks he's too cool for the rest of us." During the first few weeks of school, as students are trying to establish an identity among their peers and teachers, some of the returning male students engage in what the teachers refer to as "posturing." Through their

words, actions, and reactions students build their reputations—sometimes rather dramatically. "Get off me!" is heard as all eyes turn to the back corner of the room. One of the new teachers has touched a student on the shoulder and asked him to pay attention. Everyone in the room is quiet, and the tension rises as all wait to see how the teachers will respond. But they are prepared. Patricia calls out the student's name sharply as she raises her eyebrows. Paul goes to the back of the room and sits next to the student to make him conscious of his inappropriate behavior. Posturing is a game of sorts. The teachers understand its purpose for the students, but they also realize that how they react sets the standard for the new students. Posturing is most obvious on the first day of school when students have some apprehension about how they will mix with the new people.

The laid back atmosphere permeates every aspect of the school day at Jefferson. The pop machine is accessible at all times, and students are occasionally given permission to go to the local convenience store to purchase something to eat or drink. It is commonplace for a bag of potato chips, a plate of ramen noodles, a bag of M&M's, or a pizza to be located on the tables alongside textbooks, notebooks, and pencils. Students readily share food. They also sometimes share punishments. During breaks, groups of students head to the other side of the school gate to "have a smoke." Some of the students are of legal age, but others are breaking the law. On more than one occasion, the police have driven up to an assembly of Jefferson students gathered at the gate, selected one of the younger looking teens, checked this individual's

identification, and, when appropriate, ticketed the offender. Other students, particularly those who also engage in the illegal behavior, will often contribute to payment of the $50 fine.

My presence at the school was ignored by many of the students; others wondered who I was but weren't concerned enough to ask. My appearance made it easier for them to overlook me. To the casual observer, I could have been mistaken for a high school student. I usually wore jeans and often had a backpack slung over one shoulder. I sat among the students and sometimes participated in the lessons. My attentiveness probably puzzled them.

During the fall of 1997, I attended the health/child development class about once a week. Patricia always welcomed me. This class was very informative and practical. During the chapter on sex and birth control, different types of birth control were brought to class, and the teacher encouraged a candid discussion of their history and use. The emotional side of intimate relations was also included. Students were amazingly receptive—most likely because this information came from a caring adult who they respect. In another health class I attended, the students were asked to play the role of counselors advising parents who were having problems with their teenage children. Issues addressed included topics particularly relevant to their lives: sex, drugs, television, violence, respect, skipping school, and handling money.

Counsel on sex and pregnancy takes on a unique blend of humor and seriousness when teen parents are present. Jefferson students observe firsthand the physical exhaustion that comes with the responsibility of bringing a

new person into the world. One of the young men I initially interviewed worked 40 hours a week in order to take care of the financial component of his parental duties. "She lives out in New Mexico, and I don't get to see my daughter or anything," he told me. "But I still got to pay my child support." The teen mothers often come to school fatigued and distracted—in addition to caring for their children, these young women must work. Both of the mothers I interviewed had recently quit their jobs, in part because their attendance at school was suffering. But there is a constant tension between the need for money and the desire to finish school. A few weeks after our initial interview Lori dropped out of school. Jefferson students respect the teen parents, and many of them have become very attached to the babies, playing with them and holding them constantly; but I don't think many of them envy the responsibility.

Jefferson students tend to experience a greater sense of connectedness to their classmates, their teachers, and to school in general than they did at Lynnwood or at other high schools they have attended. "We're all friends here," noted Radwan. An overall discontent with Lynnwood High School is one factor that appears to provide coherence to the students. As a group, they acknowledge that the regular high school fits the needs of many of the students who currently attend, but they are also uniformly thankful that Jefferson is offered as an alternative. Frank told me that, "People over here, they can all relate to each other. . . better." The teachers at Jefferson set high standards for the students while they are in school, and they provide the flexibility and support students need to achieve that standard. Generally getting along with peers and

teachers and the relaxed atmosphere help students to get their work done. Students are able to experience more academic success, and this naturally leads to a more positive attitude toward school. This sense of bonding to the school is certainly an asset, but the ultimate success of the program is measured by how successful the students are once they leave the protective surroundings of Jefferson.

Students at Jefferson need to establish a stronger connection with the community while they are still in school. "[These students] need lots of bridges—bridges of all kinds. . . to help them make the next step," commented Patricia. Perhaps the next step is to expand the reach of the curriculum further into the community. Citizenship does not commence upon graduation from high school. As Barber (1992, 1998), Dewey (1916/1951, 1927) and others have proposed, the public schools have an obligation to teach students about public life, which includes their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society.

Profile of Jefferson Interviewees

The selection of interviewees was not random. My original intention was to interview older students. I presumed that because these students were close to graduation they would be more willing to engage in a conversation about community and their place in society. Patricia and Paul asked students who were at least 18-years-old if they were interested in being interviewed. Seventeen Jefferson students were at least 18-years-old; six of these students

(five of them females), however, would be unable to participate in *Connections* because they had classes at Lynnwood High School on Friday mornings.

Eight students were initially interviewed. One of the original interviewees, however, was expelled for bringing a knife to school one week after our interview. Lori, one of the teen mothers, left school only a few weeks after we had spoken. Consequently, conversations with six Jefferson students, five males and one female, on two separate occasions were the source of most of my information from the student perspective. The students were between the ages of 18 and 20 and came from diverse backgrounds. In the United States ascertaining ethnic and racial identity is somewhat complex. I did not specifically ask the students how they would identify themselves. Thus, the following descriptors are based on various statements made by the students. Two students were Caucasian, two of them were African American, one student was born in Lebanon, and one student was of Egyptian-Saudi Arabian ancestry. My descriptions of the students are mere snapshots of their rich but often very complicated lives. They sometimes offered rather personal information, even when such details were not solicited. I immensely enjoyed my discussions with the Jefferson students; I found them to be very polite but nevertheless refreshingly candid.

Radwan is a quiet, reflective individual. He was one of the older students in the program, and in his final semester of high school he seemed eager to graduate and move on. He responded to my questions but rarely added additional information. As a freshman, Radwan was kicked out of Lynnwood

High School; he was also asked to leave Jefferson a few times, but now he's determined to "finish it up." In response to a question on the differences between Jefferson and Lynnwood, Radwan commented, "I wouldn't even graduate if it wasn't for this school. Lynnwood, I'd never go back there." Radwan is the youngest in his family. He feels his parents and his older siblings are supportive. In the follow-up interview, Radwan revealed that his mother is from Egypt and that his father is from Saudi Arabia.

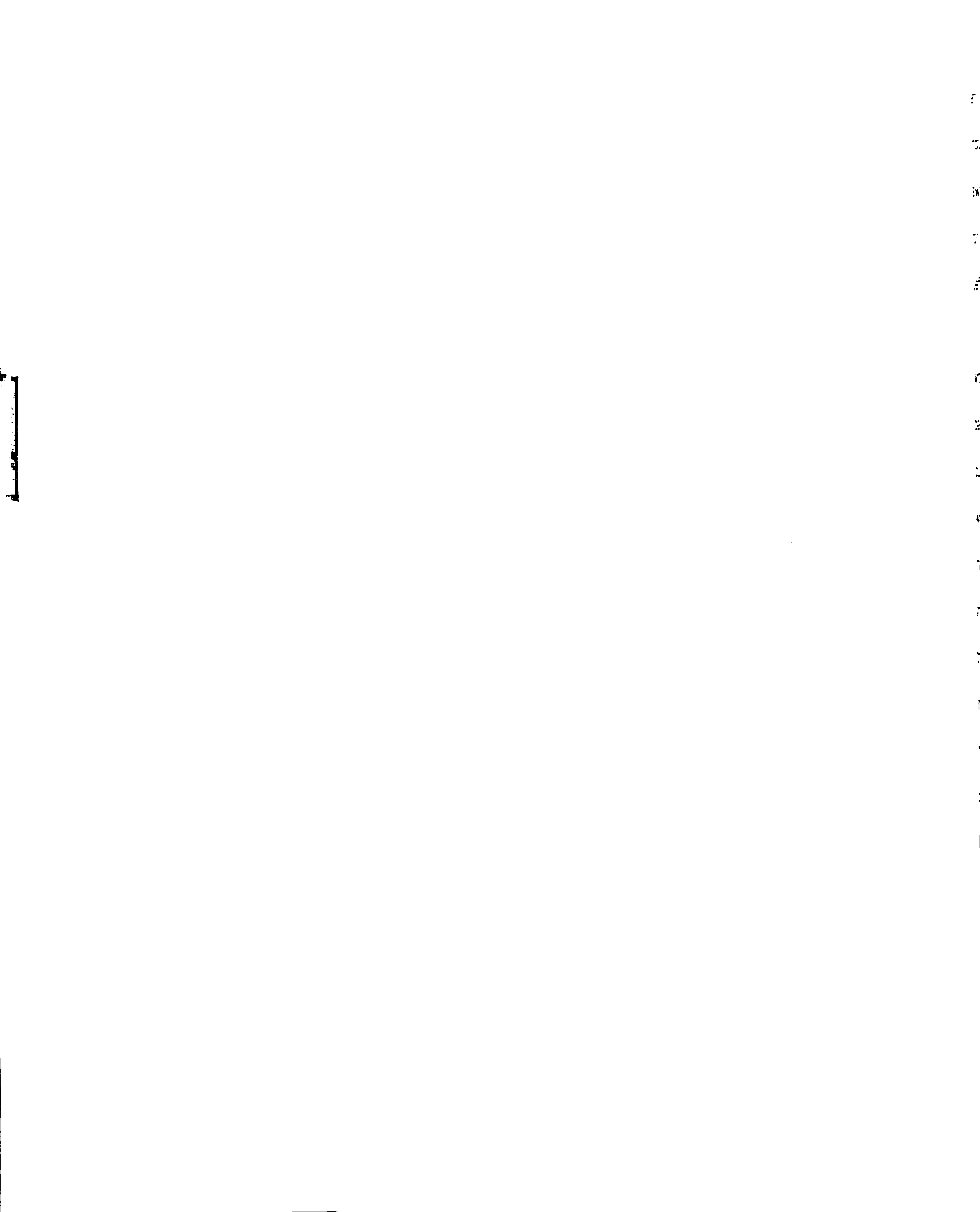
Samane, an intelligent, soft-spoken African American, is a talented basketball player. He also has a reputation for being wonderful with babies—the teen parents at Jefferson completely trust him with their children. "There's nothing in the world I can't do," he told me. But when I asked him about his biggest challenge his reply was simple: "Workin'." "I don't like workin'," he confided with a chuckle, "I'm just like really lazy." Samane seemed to realize that, left to his own impulses, he will not always engage in behavior that is in his best interest. "Lynnwood's [the city] like more calmer here," he noted. "Like you don't get into much trouble. . . . Like, if I was in Jacksonville [a neighboring city], I'd get into lots of trouble there. It's just the sort of people that I hang around with. . . . I'd rather stay here so I can stay out of trouble." Sometimes students expressed their hopes rather than their realities. Samane told me he would graduate in May. He didn't. He also expressed interest in attending the University of State; I wondered if he could possibly flourish, or even merely survive, in such a large institution.

"Every time I think about how old I actually am, I think, that's not very old," Sarah, a Caucasian, said with a laugh. She told me about her job at a local pizza take-out—a job she lost the month before our first interview. "I feel like a little kid when I was at work, and then I come home to these huge responsibilities and. . . I'd feel like I'm 30 or something—just way older." Sarah brought Benjamin, her six-month old responsibility, to the first interview. But Sarah has clear goals for herself that include more than motherhood. She likes horses and would like to go into equine management. "The University of State has a really good program," she said, "but I'm going to start at the community college first—get the two-year required stuff out of the way and then go onto the. . . good stuff." Sarah has been riding on and off since she was eight and has considered volunteering at a center that gives disabled children the opportunity to ride. According to Sarah, determination is one of her personal strengths. "Lots of people who have babies say, oh, well I can't go on to college, because I got a baby," she told me. "Mine's paid for, so I'm going!" (Sarah's aunt has offered to pay for college as long as she is able to maintain at least a C average). School is important to Sarah, but it's still one of her biggest challenges. "If we don't have a babysitter here it's really hard—it's hard to get up in the morning," she admitted. "I mean I missed a lot of school because I just couldn't get up . . . . When his teeth start bothering him, he just screams, and there's nothing I can do, so." She added, "My determination just keeps me coming here."

Frank is a charming, non-confrontational African-American. Sports are an important part of his life; he has dreams of getting a scholarship to play collegiate

sports. But he seemed hesitant about the academic side of college. "I'm kind of lazy," he told me, "[I need to] just get out of that. . . just try harder, instead of being lazy all the time." Frank recognizes his mother as an adult who has had a significant impact on him. "She like always encouraged me to do good," he reported, "telling me like in order to get somewhere you have to think of school—she tells me that like every day and stuff, and she keeps like pushing me and pushing me—to keep doing my work and stuff, to succeed in life." Frank's father left when he was "real young, like probably four," so he looks to his older brother, a professional basketball player in Europe, to serve as a role model.

Ahmad hesitated to be interviewed. He told me that he wasn't very articulate, and that he didn't think he would be "very good" at interviewing. Ahmad was born in Lebanon and came to the United States about seven years ago. When he first arrived he didn't speak any English. Consequently, he was put down three grade levels in school. Ahmad revealed some of the primary differences between the American and Lebanese school systems, as he had experienced them. Lebanese schools are single-sex, and everyone wears uniforms. "You got no messin' around at all! Yeah, you can't mess around at all," he reflected. "You have to get your grades. It's pretty much enforced." When asked about his preference between the two systems he told me, "I prefer to be here because it's easier. . . nobody makes you do anything here. So you do what you want—pretty much. But I prefer to be there, because you learn more there. Because there they force you to learn, here they give you a chance to leave school." Ahmad has had a difficult time adapting to the more stress-free



environment of American schools. He was able to make more decisions—including whether or not to attend school. Ahmad recognized that he wasn't always able to make the best choices. Poor attendance was his primary reason for attending Jefferson; he needed the greater accountability that was part of the Jefferson philosophy.

Kurt is a Caucasian male from a "good family." Of all my conversations with the Jefferson interviewees, those with Kurt were the liveliest. He actively participated in our discussions and insisted that I clarify some of the vaguer questions I put to him. We disagreed on a number of issues, but he was always willing to listen to my opinions. Kurt seemed to be struggling with what he feels may be "the right thing to do" and a desire to respond to more self-centered impulses. "Yeah, I do what I want, but that's not good," he told me. "I get in trouble, you know, so that's not good." When I asked him about adults who had influenced him, he told me about Miss Sanders, a teacher at Lynnwood. "She made me think what I had to do, what I needed to do," he remembered. "We got on a personal level and I just, I enjoyed doing good in her class." Kurt's parents have also been an important source of support. "My parents, of course, influenced me because of their opinions," he said. "I really, I care what they think about me, you know? That's a—like the most important thing."

All of these students need clear boundaries, and all of them desire to "matter" to those who set the boundaries. Many of them have not yet internalized the self-discipline necessary to make decisions in their own best interest and in the better interest of society. The following lengthy excerpt from

my interview with Kurt offers insight into not only the nature of the conversation and the sincerity of the student but also into the struggle between wants and needs and between thoughts, words, and actions. As in all of the interview excerpts to follow, the student's words are in boldface.

So, uh, what school did you go to before you came here?

The high school. Lynnwood High School.

And—how was that?

It wasn't good. I didn't go really. I always felt the need to skip.

So what made it not good?

What at the high school? Just, I guess, I made it not good, you know, because I just felt like skipping every time I went there. 'Cause all my friends were there, and I just made it bad for myself. I didn't get a good reputation over there.

Umm. So you didn't—I mean—was there something about—so besides the students—so the students you didn't get a good reputation or—?

No, the teachers.

The teachers.

The staff. . . 'Cause I'd always come to school and just skip, just leave. You know, I'd leave for like weeks.

Where did you go?!

I just skipped. But it didn't even matter. We'd go out and walk in the cold. It didn't really matter, we'd just skip. I have no idea. We'd go out and hang out at the hill outside of the school—just do whatever.

So, it's important for you though now to get your degree, or—?

Yeah. I went into high school not knowing exactly what to do. I went in there with like an open mind, you know, and I got there and I skipped once, and they let me. And I went with it, you know. I was like, oh, they're lettin' me do this. So I just kept on going. To the

point where it was out of control. And my mom recommended that I go here. And I didn't want to at first, 'cause—

So what did your parents think about you skipping?

They didn't—they didn't really know as much, because I'd wake up in the morning like normal, go to school, maybe go to 1st hour—pshh—and then I'd leave, you know. They didn't know. They wouldn't get notes. They didn't get notes. They didn't get phone calls. Nothing. I don't know—they just forgot about me or something.

Yeah, so if it worked—

Yeah, it worked—I was getting away with it! Right. I figured I could do it. And then after, come my junior year I realized, you know, I'm not going to graduate on time. I'm going to be here longer than I should. So I came here to do it—they don't let you skip over here. 'Cause you'll fail if you do.

And is that a good thing?

Yeah. Keeps me on time. Yeah.

So are there any things that they're cracking down on that's good?

Here? Good for whom?

Well. . .

Me myself or the community and society?

[Laughter] As far as society. . .

Yeah. I'd say they're doing stuff for the society.

So what are the differences between like what's good for you and what's good for the society?

What I want to do—well what's good for me and what I want to do is different, I guess. Yeah, they're doing stuff that's better for me, but what I want to do they're not letting me do, you know. So.

Kurt was testing his boundaries when he began skipping school. Unfortunately, when there was no definitive response from the teachers and the administrators,

Kurt chose to continue his truant behavior. Kurt takes responsibility for "making it bad for himself"; he recognizes that he failed to establish a good reputation with the staff, but he also recalls a feeling of isolation as revealed in the statement, "I don't know—they just forgot about me or something." Kurt seems to be searching for a balance between what's good for him and what he wants to do.

Edgar Friedenberg (1959/1964), author of *The Vanishing Adolescent*, reflected, "What I have noticed is young people who, having no concept of fixed stars, have also no gift for navigation" (p. xvi). As a society we have not only the task but the responsibility to instruct youth in the finer points of astronomy. As a society it is our mission to guide youth and to teach them how to guide themselves.

Theoretical Support for the *Connections* Project

After a few months of coming to the same small building with the same forty people, a certain level of comfort is established. Sometimes the students seemed *too* comfortable. Life at Jefferson felt distant from reality. I wondered if the students might not experience more self-growth if they were placed in situations where they encountered a bit more uncertainty. Two theories are compatible with these thoughts. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi discusses the concept of flow, or optimal experience, and how we can more fully engage in everyday life; William Gudykunst's theory of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM),

found in the literature on intercultural communication, examines anxiety and its impact on interactions and connections with strangers.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) argues that in order for an individual to find flow, or optimal experience, there needs to be a balance between the level of challenge and the skills that individual possesses. [See Figure 4.]

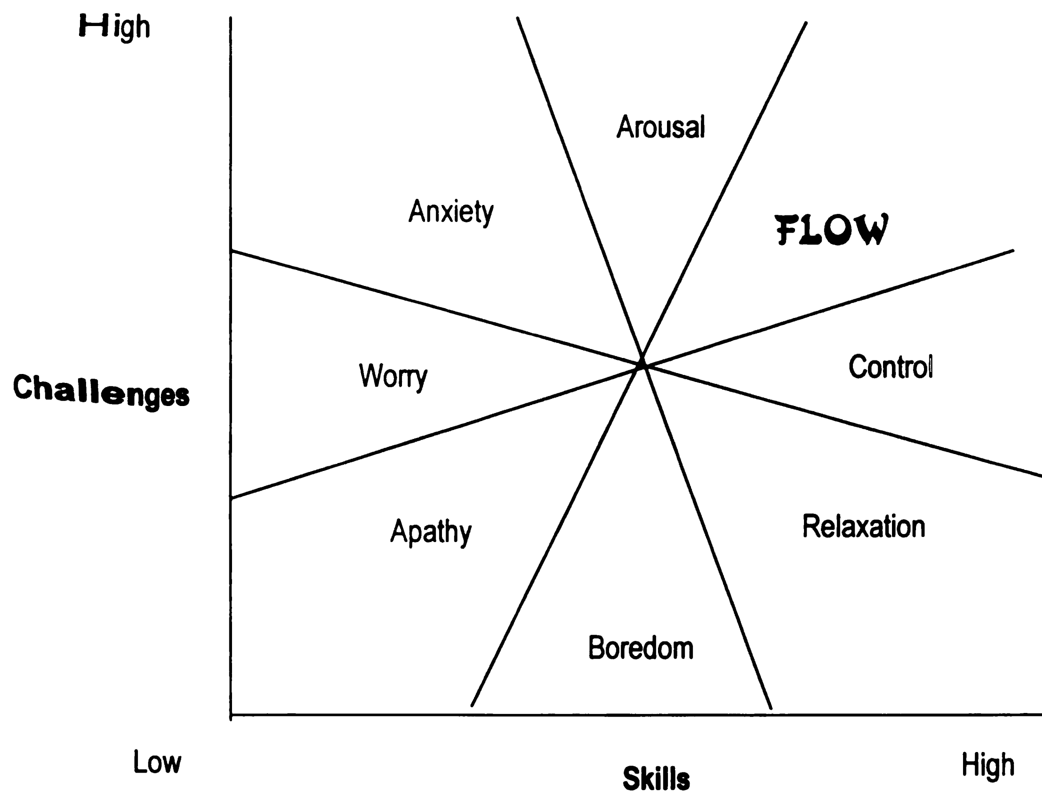


Figure 4 – The quality of experience as a function of the relationship between challenges and skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 31).

Csikszentmihalyi writes, "Usually we feel too bored and apathetic to move into the flow zone" (p. 33). We are *comfortable* and it is simply easier for us to remain where we are. "Or," he continues, "we feel too overwhelmed to imagine we could develop the appropriate skills" (p. 33). But the power of achieving the flow experience is that it acts as a magnet for learning. Achieving flow gives us

confidence and encourages us to seek new skills and new challenges. Education is a life-long learning process, and I believe that public educators should instill this idea in all of their students. *Connections* provided a variety of opportunities for students to tap existing skills in order to successfully meet a variety of challenges; they had the opportunity to find flow.

For many of the students at Jefferson, interaction with strangers of any nationality—perhaps Americans in particular—can be a formidable experience. "My students have years and years of people telling them they're wrong, or that's stupid," Paul told me. "[They] are very reluctant to put themselves on the line for fear of saying something which other people perceive as being ignorant or stupid." Gudykunst (1995) specifically addresses this concern in his proposed theory of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM). Although complicated—there are 47 axioms in the main theory and 47 axioms on variability in AUM processes—AUM theory is useful because it is highly applicable in areas of improving communication, managing diversity, and adapting to new environments. Gudykunst specifically examines the concept of connections with strangers. Axioms 26 through 30 describe situational influences on communication with strangers; I believe *Connections,* in reference to the experience of Jefferson students, takes all of them into consideration.

> **Axiom 26**: An increase in the complexity of our scripts for communicating with strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our confidence in predicting their behavior.
> **Axiom 27**: An increase in the informality of the situation in which we are communicating with strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our confidence in predicting their behavior.

Axiom 28: An increase in the cooperative structure of the goals on which we work with strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our confidence in predicting their behavior.

Axiom 29: An increase in the normative and institutional support for communicating with strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our confidence in predicting their behavior.

Axiom 30: An increase in the percentage of our ingroup members present in a situation when we interact with strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety (p. 35).

Connections is about interactions with others. I anticipated that Jefferson students would be reluctant and somewhat anxious about these interactions. It was my hope, however, that initial anxiety would dissipate given the nature and structure of the project. These axioms support the design of *Connections* —non-confrontational, informal interactions with unknown others, where Jefferson students are in the majority and receive institutional support from the school. Axiom 26 is a desired *outcome* of the project. Following *Connections* Jefferson students should have a greater repertoire of scripts for dealing with unfamiliar people in unfamiliar situations.

The theories of Csikszentmihalyi and Gudykunst are complementary. In order to find flow, there must be a challenge. Furthermore, we must be willing to stretch ourselves out of what is comfortable and predictable. Gudykunst's theory is useful because it helps to organize knowledge about how we interact with strangers and how we can lessen the intensity of our affective response, namely anxiety. With this theoretical background in place we are now ready to proceed to a more thorough discussion of the *Connections* project.

Participants in the *Connections* Project

"It was certainly an eclectic blend," summarized one of the participants in the project, "and I think it makes sense to do that." About 40% of the participants in *Connections* were internationals. In a study that proposes to examine community, one may question the rationale behind assigning international students such a significant role. Upon further reflection, however, it becomes clear that the contradiction is somewhat imaginary. First of all, if transience were a determining factor in community membership, a large percentage of Americans would be ineligible. For example, international graduate students are no more transitory than American graduate students; I would be deeply offended, however, if someone suggested that I was not a member of the community. Secondly, existing intergroup tensions in the United States—the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, for example, which reflected divisions among African Americans, Hispanics, and Korean Americans—recommend that we seek to better understand differences among our countrymen that are based in cultural and ethnic roots. Finally, as reviewed in the Theoretical Perspectives section in Chapter 1, we can better understand ourselves when we interact with diverse others. I will articulate the other advantages of this blend of individuals in the forthcoming paragraphs.

Approximately 70 people participated in the three sessions held at the Azaro Baptist Church, the first phase of the *Connections* project. The exact composition and size of the group varied from week to week, but included international graduate students from the University of State (4-8), international

students from Lynnwood High School (LHS) (15-18) and their English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher (0-1), adults from the community (many with international experience or interest) (2-5), and the teachers (3) and students from Jefferson (30-35). The numbers in parenthesis offer the range of individuals from each group who attended the sessions at the church. Participants were divided among ten tables, and each of these tables had at least one adult and usually two or three internationals. Figure 5 represents the desired combination—enough diversity for the Jefferson students to feel some uncertainty, but at least two of their peers present so that they wouldn't be overwhelmed. The adult at each table could serve as the facilitator if small group discussions faltered.

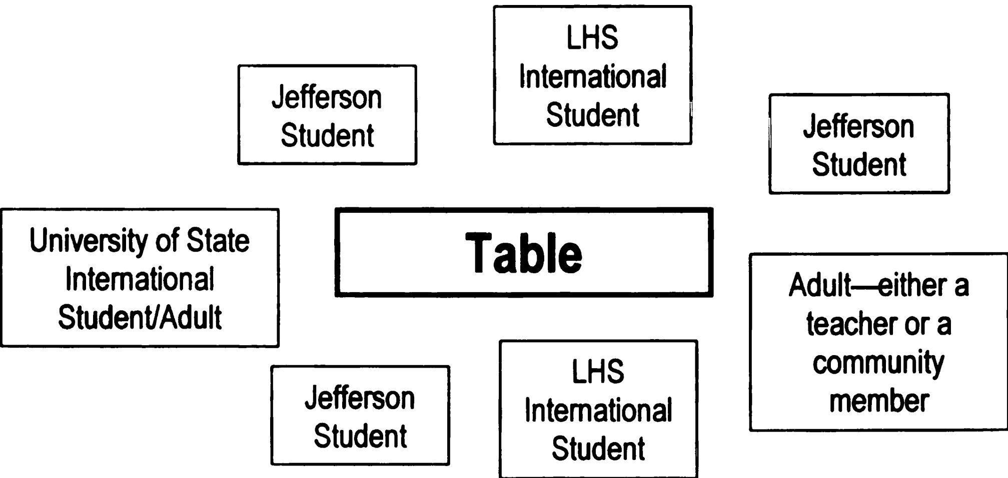


Figure 5 – Desired combination of people around a table at the church sessions of the *Connections* project.

In the week before the first session at the church, Patricia expressed concern that her students would be uncomfortable in the presence of so many

strangers. I assured her that these were rather non-threatening strangers. First of all, it is doubtful that any of the international students—either from Lynnwood or from the University of State—had a preconceived conviction of alternative high school students. For most of them, the concept of an alternative high school was completely new. Furthermore, the ESL students from Lynnwood clearly were faced with the most anxiety producing circumstances. Not only were they placed as a minority among strangers, but they were also expected to communicate in their second language.

The globe was well represented in these sessions. Students from the University of State included men and women from Germany, South Africa, China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. The Lynnwood ESL class contributed nationals of Korea, Pakistan, Iran, Hong Kong, China, Spain, France, Nepal, and Malaysia. One of the community members who joined all three sessions was born in New Zealand; another had spent five years in Africa. Although *Connections* explicitly highlighted the sharing of perspectives from various national cultures, other differences also emerged. The three most predominant distinctions were as follows: nationality (American and international), age (youth, old youth, and non-youth), and educational identity (Jefferson, Lynnwood, the University of State, and other). [See Figure 6.]

The significance of Figure 6 lies in the observation that seemingly diverse individuals often shared some significant commonality. Nationality and age had

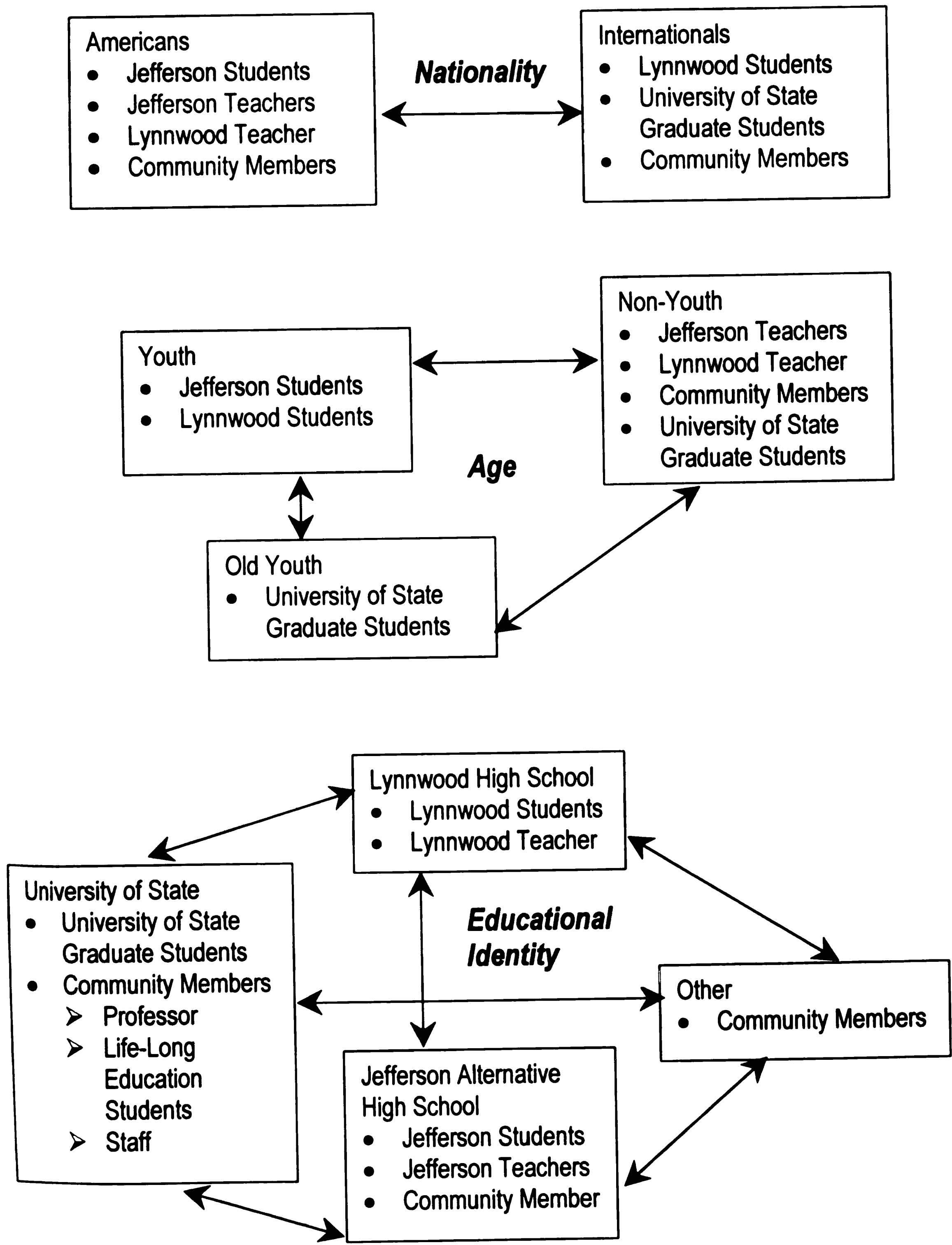


Figure 6 – Three significant differences that emerged during the *Connections* project.

a significant impact on the nature of the personal interactions, while educational identity played a significant role in the process. For example, initially, Jefferson students may have had some anxiety about interacting with international students, who they perceived to be very different. Over the course of the three sessions, however, they were able to discover common ground. The high school students became more interested in commenting on whether they liked the speakers and the sessions than in manifesting their cultural differences. A shared sense of being a high school student united them.

The significance of educational identity became clear as I dealt with the issue of consent forms. This experience is truly enlightening, because it showcases how underlying belief systems influence procedural considerations and realities. The University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) obligates all investigators who will conduct research that involves human subjects to follow a research protocol—including obtaining informed consent of the subjects. The UCRIHS Procedure Manual reads, "Non-compliance means significant failure by an investigator to abide by the University and federal regulations protecting human subjects of research. Instances of non-compliance would include. . . misuse or non-use of approved consent forms." I thought it would be sagacious to follow proper procedure.

Mrs. Matthews, the ESL teacher at Lynnwood, was instrumental in ensuring that consent forms for all of her students were returned. She encouraged the students to share the letter with their parents/guardians; she also stated that if they had any questions they could contact her, either at home

or during the school day. If students did not return the forms, she called their homes. Return rate on consent forms for students at Lynnwood was 100%.

My success with the Jefferson students was disappointingly different. Only two forms were returned with parental signatures. Patricia had warned me that this issue might pose a problem; she had suggested that I draft a "no response is consent" form. Clearly, however, such a form would be unacceptable to UCRIHS. Consequently, I was faced with the formidable task of retrieving these forms "on my own." I mailed letters and consent forms to the parents of all of the students. Once again there was no response. Fortunately, initial interviews were able to continue without delay, because the students I was interested in speaking with were of legal age and could sign the forms for themselves. [Note: Originally, I had planned on audio-recording the discussions during the sessions at the church. Although this would have been difficult in any case, the lack of signed consent forms rendered this source of data unattainable.]

Procedure for the Project and the Research

There were essentially three phases to this study: initial interviews with the Jefferson students, implementation of *Connections,* and follow-up interviews with the Jefferson students (along with supportive interviews with teachers and various community members who participated in *Connections*).

Initial Interviews with the Jefferson Students

During the week and a half prior to the first *Connections* session at the church, I conducted individual open-ended interviews with eight Jefferson students, six males and two females. All were between the ages of 18 and 20. Four students were Caucasian, two of them were African American, one student was born in Lebanon, and one of them was of Egyptian—Saudi-Arabian ancestry. The interviews took place in the small instructional rooms at Jefferson, usually in the morning during the regular school day. Our discussions ranged in length from thirty minutes to one hour. Although the purpose of these initial interviews was to obtain information about adolescents' experience of community, I discovered a more important mission: establishing a positive relationship and good rapport with the students.

I followed basically the same procedure with each student. As each one entered the small instructional room, we greeted one another. Then I explained that I was a Master's student, and that as part of my degree I was studying the concept of community from the perspective of adolescents; I stated that I was interested in their opinions and ideas. Each student came in empty-handed, so I handed each one a copy of the cover letter and consent form. Most students had not read these documents in advance, so I gave them a few minutes to accomplish this. I told them that the consent form informed them of their rights, and that, in this case, they had many rights. If they didn't want to answer certain questions, they could refuse; if they were bored in the middle of the interview, they could get up and leave. After they signed the forms, I asked for their

permission to tape-record the conversation. I explained that my shorthand wasn't very good, and that I wanted to be sure to get their exact words. After this introduction, they were intrigued. These interviews were about their opinions, and I tried to make it very clear that there were no right or wrong answers.

My questions were not limited to prepared ones, but the main questions were as follows:

1) How long have you been at Jefferson?

2) What has your experience in this school been like?

3) How long have you lived in the Lynnwood area? Would you like to stay here? Why or why not?

4) Tell me about the adults who have had an impact on you. How have they influenced you?

5) After you finish high school what would you like to do?

6) What do you see as the biggest challenge to realizing these goals? Which personal strengths will help you to reach these goals?

7) What does the word community mean to you? How would you describe a good community?

8) The next three Fridays we're going to go over to the Baptist Church to do this project, *Connections*. It's going to be all of you, international students from Lynnwood, international students from the University of State and then teachers and a couple people from the community. There's going to be a presentation—not like a lecture—and then we're going to get in small groups and discuss. This first Friday is going to be on hunger. What do you think about this?

Through this interview I felt that I was able to establish a relationship with the students. This interview also served as an introduction to *Connections*.

Description of *Connections*

Educators in alternative programs often have different priorities than educators in traditional high schools. Many of the students at Jefferson do not respond to educational strategies that are based on achieving knowledge through objective achievement tests. They find these methods not only uninteresting, but irrelevant as well. Morley (1991) describes alternative education as "a means of recognizing the strengths of each individual by seeking and providing the best available options for all students" (p. 6). Students must be given opportunities to be successful in contexts that they perceive to be relevant.

The design of *Connections* was influenced by the program philosophies of *Contact,* a successful Canadian alternative high school located in Toronto. One of the three priorities of this program is to connect students to the world by "providing opportunities to enhance their awareness and increase their participation in the school and in the larger community. This priority also aims at providing opportunities for students who are alienated to rejoin the world on a personal level" (Gagne, 1996, p. 317). Students in alternative programs are often skeptical of how to make connections with adults in the community. Adults are also hesitant to make contact with adolescents, particularly "at-risk" students who "must" attend a special school. But adolescents who remain disengaged from society cannot reach their full potential. This alienation has a deleterious impact not only on the students but on the community as a whole. *Connections*

gave Jefferson students an opportunity to take tentative steps into the community.

The sessions at the church were designed to provide pro-social opportunities for the students at Jefferson to increase their ability to take another perspective, to participate in discussions with diverse people, and to demonstrate social skills. The topics of the sessions were Hunger Awareness, Perspective Taking, and Perceptions of Africa. The sessions were modeled after the format used for the meetings of LATTICE (Linking All Types of Teachers In Cross-cultural Education), an organization at the University of State. The Hunger Awareness and Perceptions of Africa sessions were presented by academics from the university, both of whom had prior experience presenting these topics in schools. I led the more informal session on Perspective Taking; this session was less knowledge based and allowed more time for participants to get to know one another on a personal level.

I had hoped that the sessions would be comprised equally of instructional presentation and small group discussion. The speakers were to provide interesting material that could be carried to the small, culturally diverse groups, where participants would hear each other's responses to the presentations and have the opportunity to share their own unique perspectives. Commonalities of culture could be recognized and emphasized at the same time that differences were learned and respected.

Session One—Hunger Awareness

There was a certain amount of excited uneasiness as the different groups converged upon the Azaro Baptist Church. For Jefferson students, it was a new experience to enter this building that they had passed hundreds of times. This session began with a Hunger Awareness Meal—a simulation to raise consciousness among students regarding issues relating to hunger. Participants randomly drew slips of colored paper as they entered the fellowship hall; this divided them into three groups that represented the percentages of the earth's population that have varying access to food. Group one, 20% of the earth's population, represented the rich nations that have enough or more than enough to eat. Individuals with purple slips of paper received a full slice of pizza and a large cup of soda. Group two, 30% of the earth's population, represented the intermediate nations whose people have ongoing access to some food but are hungry at least some of the time and suffer varying kinds of nutritional deprivation. Individuals who had chosen green slips were given a small slice of pizza and a small cup of water. Group three, 50% of the earth's population, represented the peoples of the world who do not have enough caloric intake to maintain body weight or do light work. Those who were unfortunate enough to have selected a yellow slip were provided with a burnt corner of pizza and a tiny cup of brownish water. Participants sat to match the color of their slips of paper with a colored paper place mat. The meals were spread out so that each table represented the approximate percentages of the world's population with varying access to food. Thus, at a table of six, only one person would have a full piece

of pizza and a cup of soda. Participants were allowed to interact for about five minutes, and then a discussion ensued about their initial reaction and how they felt as they realized the unequal distribution of food. Then the topic changed to underlying reasons for hunger worldwide and eventually to hunger in the United States. This topic was then given to small group discussion. The meal concluded with a large group discussion of what the students might do to become involved in projects that help alleviate hunger.

Session Two—Perspective Taking

The second session was later affectionately referred to as "the grasshopper session." Group collaboration was required from the beginning as participants volunteered to help serve coffeecake, bananas, apples, and milk. All participants had been assigned to tables, and while they ate, I suggested that they introduce themselves, perhaps with the assistance of the world map on each table. I inquired as to whom in the larger group had eaten grasshoppers; a handful of people responded affirmatively. Several students wondered whether I was referring to the cookie. . . or perhaps the drink? Then I took a small package of the soy-marinated insects, which I had purchased in Japan, and offered them to everyone. This opening livened up the group considerably.

Then groups were asked to send one person to the front of the room to get a large piece of newsprint paper. They were instructed to create a poster that represented their group. In the middle, they were to draw something that they all had in common; on the outside, each group member could draw something unique to him- or herself. Then each group presented their poster.

Usually one person introduced the other members of the group, and then he or she proceeded to explain what was illustrated on the posters.

The second component of this session was taken from Robert Kohls' and John Knight's (1994) *Developing Intercultural Awareness: A Cross-Cultural Training Handbook*. The title of the exercise was "Observations of Foreign Visitors about American Behavior." The goal was to increase awareness of how others perceive most Americans. Each group was handed two different quotations, each of which was taken from actual comments made by foreigners about Americans. Two examples follow:

> Visitor from The Netherlands:
>
> Imagine my astonishment when I went to the supermarket and looked at eggs. You know, there are no small eggs in America; they just don't exist. They tend to be jumbo, extra large, large or medium. It doesn't matter that the medium are little. Small eggs don't exist [in America] because, I guess, they think that might be bad or denigrating.
>
> Visitor from Cameroon:
>
> It is shocking to me to see how the father and mother in America kick out of their family their own children when they become eighteen years of age. The most surprising thing about it all is that the young people do not seem to mind it or think it is too cruel to be thrown out of their own family, but they accept it as the natural and normal way of behaving.

Many of the quotations were somewhat critical of American behavior, but all of them were provided to increase awareness of how others perceive most Americans. [See Appendix D for a complete list of the quotations used for this exercise.] After reading the quotations, groups were asked to discuss the following questions:

- What is the issue?
- Is the criticism true? Fair?
- What underlies it? What is the logic behind it?
- How could you explain or defend it?

Finally each group presented its discussion on one of the quotations to the larger group.

Session Three—Perceptions of Africa

After the participants found out to which table they were assigned, they helped themselves to fruit and various types of homemade bread. This session began with a series of overheads that showed various map projections. The speaker informed the group that maps are often based on projections that distort the actual size of the continents. For example, in the Mercator projection, the meridians are drawn parallel to each other, but the parallels of latitude are drawn as straight lines whose distance from each other increases with their distance from the equator. Thus, the continents in the Northern Hemisphere appear larger than they are in reality. South America and Africa, both of which straddle the equator, on the other hand, are drawn disproportionately small.

Then the presenter discussed typical images of Africa as displayed through advertisements: naked savages, cannibalism, poison darts. He also mentioned that many people believe that Africa is generally backward and dirty. As a large group we discussed the advertisements and how they portrayed certain false images of Africa. The last ten minutes of the session were devoted to small group discussion.

Planning for Community Projects

The second phase of *Connections* focused on planning for projects that could somehow be shared with the community. The primary goals for this component were to engage the students in the planning process and to establish some accountability and buy-in from the students. In early April, community members and international students from the University of State who had participated in the church sessions were solicited to serve in a mentoring/guiding role for the community projects. [See letter/form in Appendix E.] Although only one form was returned, I had the opportunity to speak with many of the international graduate students and community members in person. [Note: The international students from Lynnwood were invited to participate in planning and carrying out the community projects, but scheduling and transportation were obstacles that we were unable to overcome.]

At the end of April, I invited six Jefferson students—four of them interviewees—to join me for lunch so that I could get their input on the community projects. I explained that they would work with community members and international people to plan something that could be shared with the community; they were also given the option of organizing a service project. We discussed several options, including serving food at a shelter and helping elementary school children learn about and prepare a simple international dish.

Carrying Out Projects

The third phase of *Connections* was carrying out the planned projects. The objectives for this phase were enabling students to gain experience and

knowledge through making active contributions to the community. On May 20th and May 27th, community members from the first phase, Jefferson students, and I went to a local elementary school and engaged in "layered" mentoring with a class of 1st grade students. On May 20th, an American couple who heads the local Japanese Cultural Foundation came to the school to teach four Jefferson students about traditional swordsmanship and basic writing and counting in Japanese. We also talked about how to interact with 1st graders on an age-appropriate level. After approximately one and a half hours of instruction, discussion, and planning, we went to the elementary school and shared our new knowledge with a 1st grade classroom. On May 27th, a Japanese student from the University of State repeated the same sequence of instruction, discussion and planning; this time everyone learned how to prepare *sushi.* Members of the community mentored the high school students, and then the high school students served as mentors for the elementary school students.

On May 28th and May 29th, groups of approximately ten Jefferson students and international students from the University of State served lunch at a shelter in Jacksonville, a neighboring city. A Jefferson teacher joined us on both days. Altogether there were 4 community projects, and over half of the Jefferson students participated in at least one of the projects; a few students contributed to the success of several of them.

Follow-up interviews

After the community projects and during the last two weeks of school, I conducted individual follow-up interviews with six of the eight Jefferson students

with whom I had originally spoken—the two students who were not interviewed again were no longer attending Jefferson. Once again, the interviews took place in the small instructional rooms at Jefferson during the regular school day. Our discussions ranged in length from thirty minutes to one hour. I did not limit my questions to prepared ones, but the contents of the main questions were as follows:

1) Which of the sessions at the church did you go to? How would you describe those sessions to someone who wasn't there? What do you remember? I'm not testing you. . . I'm interested in what stands out in your mind from those sessions.

2) Overall what did you think?

3) How did you feel about having your teachers participate in the sessions at the church?

4) For the 2nd and the 3rd sessions I purposefully assigned people to certain tables. What did you think about that? Was it a good idea?

5) What did you think about the community projects?

6) Do you think this should be repeated again next year? Why or why not?

7) What suggestions do you have for making it better?

8) Did talking to people from other cultures and other countries give you any new insights about yourself or American society?

9) Have your attitudes changed toward people from other countries?

10) What is the most interesting thing you have learned through your participation in *Connections*?

11) Do you remember in our first conversation we were talking about community—community and your definition of community? Do you think the *Connections* project has anything to do with community?

12) Is *Connections* a good title?

Interviews were also conducted with two of the Jefferson teachers, two community members who were involved in all three phases of *Connections*, and three international graduate students who were also involved in all phases. These interviews took place at a time and location convenient to the teacher, community member, or graduate student. The primary purpose of these interviews was to evaluate what the individual thought of his or her participation in the *Connections* project. These interviews were based on the same questions as the interviews for the Jefferson students. Questions three and four, however, were not asked, and question eleven was altered to read, “Do you think the *Connections* project has anything to do with community?”

CHAPTER 4—DISCOVERIES

Overview

The unabashed candor of the students was intriguing. From the beginning of my involvement with the program, I had observed this in the classrooms and in the hallways. I was confident that this refreshing honesty could be an extraordinary asset for a qualitative study. The following exchange with Radwan during the initial interview explicitly reveals this. I had provided an overview of the *Connections* project and was seeking his reaction.

What do you think about this project?

I mean. . . it's a good idea, but I wouldn't really care about it. . . but that's me. But you. . .

You wouldn't really care about it, in what sense?

Like at all! [Laughter]

[Laughter]

You know, you might care about it so. . .

I have to care about it!

Yeah.

You don't think it'll be interesting?

Yeah, but not to me. I just don't really care about it, but. . .

You might be surprised. . . no?

About hunger? For other countries?

Yeah.

> **Yeah. It probably would be interesting, but. . .**
>
> Well, hopefully, after this is—this is going to be interesting to me—after this is done, I'm hoping to interview you again. . . and then you can tell me. Yeah, you know, I told you it wouldn't interest me, and it really was boring. Or you can say, hey, that was really great!

Toward the end of the interview we had one more exchange on the topic.

> Any other thoughts on my big, exciting project that's coming up?
>
> **[Laughter] Ummm. . . . . I mean it sounds good. You just got to see if it's interesting when it comes up. . . and then I'll let you know how it went.**

The students always seemed slightly amused by my enthusiasm and my personal interest in their opinions—particularly on topics such as community. The reader will recognize the straightforwardness of student comments throughout the study, but particularly in regard to evaluation of *Connections*.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First I will examine how students defined community in the initial interviews and how they described both a good community and a bad community. Then I will describe how the students experienced and evaluated *Connections*. The final section will be an analysis of the impact of the process on the student interviewees.

Perceptions of Community

"What does the word community mean to you?" I asked the Jefferson students during the initial interviews. People were central to every definition. Some students spoke of community using very neutral language, while others talked about community as a place where people worked together and got to

know each other. I prodded the students to describe both a good community and a bad community. This general discussion usually led us to talk about how they felt about the Lynnwood community in particular.

For Ahmad community is "the people around us." Good people make for a good community, "good people that don't like try to start trouble or anything." Ahmad made the following comparison to explain one difference between a good community and a bad community: "Comparing stuff here [in Lynnwood] to Jacksonville—when you think Jacksonville, you think, you know, like Sutton [Street] or whatever or Park [Street]. You think, you know, bad street, troublemakers—that makes a bad community, I guess." Ahmad has a multi-cultural perspective of community. Interestingly, the image of Lebanon projected by the media that focuses on the prevalence of war is drastically different from the description Ahmad offers as one who was born and raised there. When I asked him if there was a difference in community between the United States and Lebanon, he told me that in Lebanon community was "more positive." "People are all friends. People don't act over there. They're like what they are, actually," he reported. "There's a little more trust." This is a good example of what I have previously referred to as "multiple realities." Whose image of Lebanon is more accurate? It depends on your perspective.

Frank described community using neutral language, "People in general—like people, the town, the city or something." A good community is a place that is "low in crime and drugs and stuff" and "just everybody getting along with each other. . . . You don't really hear about any problems or anything." He described

a bad community as the opposite, "Like high crime rates, lots of drugs and stuff." Frank thinks that Lynnwood is a good place to live. He would like to stay in the area because, as he told me, "I know everybody well, I know like everybody in it. That's basically why I'd live here." Frank has established a good relationship with enough people in the community that he feels comfortable remaining in Lynnwood.

"People working together, community. . . staying together, you know. . . ." reflected Radwan. I asked if he would consider Jefferson to be a type of community, and he replied, "In this school? In a way, it is a little community." I pushed the issue and asked whether he thought that Jefferson had a *better* sense of community than the regular high school. He unhesitatingly responded, "That's if you don't like big classes, yeah, you know, but if you like, you know, the high school, then that's your community." On a variety of topics Radwan was able to differentiate between what he thought was good for him and what might be good for other people. When I asked him how Lynnwood was as a place to live he told me, "It's alright. A little boring, but. . . it's a nice place to live. . . . You know, nothing wrong with it."

Sarah's definition of community began with a description of the local boundaries of community; then she added a more affective component. "Umm, basically just a neighborhood, like this is a really nice neighborhood," she told me, "People get together here in the summer, and they have like tug-of-war games against streets." Sarah is referring to the Community Day held every summer at the Azaro Community Center/Park. People gather to play games, to

talk, and just to see people they haven't seen lately. Sarah feels it's important to know the people in her neighborhood. She describes the ideal community as a place with "neighbors who help you out. . . and you help out, too. Just being close knit. Just, uh, having gatherings and so forth—you know, community things like they do here." [Sarah was the only female Jefferson student interviewed for this study. The reader may find that Sarah tends to emphasize relationships and responsibilities in our discussions about community and related concepts. This study did not, however, specifically address the impact of any demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, family composition) on how these adolescents think of and experience community.]

Samane told me that for him community meant, "People who are like friendly, people who are like neighbors, people communicate with each other, not just people that you live by." When I asked him to describe a bad community we had the following exchange:

> **Just like it is now. People just don't want to get to know you, they want to be foreign. . . . We should, you know talk to people, more friendships, people work together, like the neighborhood watch stuff. Everybody knows everybody, you know, problems and conflictions like fighting among kids and that—if everybody knew each other, you know there wouldn't be a lot of violence in the neighborhood.**
>
> So you think now. . . it's bad community?
>
> **I mean—**
>
> I'm just trying to understand. . . .
>
> **No, it's not, I mean, the majority of the communities aren't bad, everybody just don't want to work together and be friends and**

socialize, I mean this community, everybody, it's quiet, but, I mean, people don't talk to us, and we don't talk to people. Like the church parking lot, they don't want us over there, I mean if we all just got to know each other, maybe it would be no problem for us to be over there.

At this point I mentioned that we would be starting the *Connections* project at the end of the week. I informed Samane that the first part was going to take place in the fellowship hall of the Azaro Baptist Church—he responded with a quiet chuckle. Later he told me, "I think it'll get us talking to people at the church. Like I said, maybe help us out from causing some friction." [Note: Although all members of the congregation, including the pastors, were invited to join us for the sessions at the church, no one was able to attend any of the sessions. Consequently, although there was potential to significantly improve the relationship between the school and the church, realistically, only very modest changes occurred.]

Kurt was the only student whose definition included institutions and associations. "It's got its little bad parts, but, it's mostly positive, I think," he told me. In reference to the mostly positive things, he said, "Like, umm, education, police—I mean, they do their job, you know? Umm. . . . . I don't know much about like the laws and the taxes and all that. So that doesn't affect me, but the way they treat their—umm, teenagers and the way they treat their young people, I think is good. There are all sorts of things to do, you know, to better yourself around here." Kurt believes that his lack of knowledge about the laws and taxes renders him "unaffected." Throughout our conversation, he seemed unaware of

any civic responsibilities. The following exchange demonstrates my attempt to help Kurt expand and deepen his perception of community.

> I think there are—to me there are two levels of community. There's that greater overarching community level—the stuff you were talking about—
>
> **The police and the education and all that, uh-huh.**
>
> Right. And then there's, so this is just my definition—
>
> **Yeah.**
>
> But then there's a more—just people—
>
> **People, yeah. There is two sides, you know.**
>
> So, what—what would make a bad community?
>
> **. . . . . . Ummm. . . . I guess when they didn't do stuff to better themselves, to better the community, to fix the bad things, you know? Like, umm. . .**
>
> So who's they?
>
> **The people who deal with it, I guess [Laughter], but—**
>
> [Laughter]
>
> **Like if there's a community problem, like say, if we have too many homeless people or somethin' you know, then I don't know who deals with that, but, the upper federal government or whatever, you know. . . those people.**
>
> So which is ultimately then. . . the regular people, who vote for the federal people. . . right?
>
> **Right, right, true. . . .**

Kurt appears to be civically apathetic. "Too many homeless people" is not a societal problem or even a community problem, but rather a problem for distant unknown others in the "upper federal government."

So how much do you think—if there's a problem in. . . the neighborhood, in the community, in Lynnwood. . . who should—?

Deal with it?

Yeah, I mean of course it depends on the problem, but—

Yeah. The people—

So think of a problem. Can you think of—?

Like, let's say there's too much crime and umm, the people have to solve the problem, you know?

So how do you think they—?

They vote. They vote.

Any other ways besides voting?

Individually going out in the community and trying to stop it yourself. That's the only way I can think of.

Finally, Kurt seems aware that he can personally contribute to strengthening the community; yet, he still seems unable to conceptualize how individuals might work together to most effectively and efficiently solve community problems. He mentions the police and the education system (public institutions), but he doesn't talk about voluntary, neighborhood, or civic organizations.

The concept of community is rarely discussed. I began this study with the premise that talking about a particular subject summons it to a higher level of consciousness. And, as previously stated, I believe that awareness of the community precedes active involvement in the community. All of the interviewees, except Kurt, mentioned that working together is an important

component of a good community. Consequently, it is not surprising that the students were receptive to the *Connections* project.

I anticipated that many of the students would positively anticipate the project simply because it was a change from the regular school day. Several students also stated that they thought it was important for people to have the opportunity to meet diverse people. "I think it will be fun to get out of the normal everyday routine, because that's another thing, that just wears on me is, you know, doing the same thing over and over again everyday," commented Sarah. "Something different is always nice. It'd be good to learn more—interact with different people." Frank, whose brother plays basketball overseas, told me he liked learning more about people and different things in the world. When I asked him if this was important he replied, "I think it's real important. It's good to know what's going on so that you don't just be clueless and not know what's going on around the world. I think that's real important."

During the initial interviews I explained some of my reasons for designing *Connections*. I wanted the students to understand what my aims were, primarily because articulated goals are often easier to reach, or at least to attempt. Samane and I discussed how people initialize the communication with strangers that is important for building community.

> How do you think—so part of the reason I want to do that [*Connections*] is because I think it's hard for people to start—
>
> **Communicating—**

> Talking, yeah. So. How do you think people start—you were talking about, you know, good community and what's important. And how do you think people start doing that?
>
> **There's usually like somebody like you doin' it sometimes, you know. Like, or like somebody bump into each other and they just start talking and then their friends start talking and it just starts going like that and everybody becomes friends and it's like one person bumped into another person and they were conversating and turned out this person you have fun with him. . . and it just starts growing like that.**

While I was explaining *Connections* to Kurt he asked many questions about who was going to be there, how many people were going to be involved, and what exactly we were going to do. He told me that it sounded good, and when I pushed him for any other thoughts on the project, he asked, "What exactly are you trying to do? What's your purpose? To see different views?" I told him that I would have appreciated the opportunity to participate in such a project during my high school years. Furthermore, I explained, "When I was in college, I studied in Germany for a year, and then I lived in Japan for two years. I think it helped me—well it changed me to see how other people think. And how people look at the world. I thought—" At this point Kurt interrupted, "Stick everyone together and see what comes out!" In essence, Kurt was expressing my own belief that people can benefit from interacting with people outside of their social circles. Sharing my ideas, such as this one, with the students was crucial. Some of these older students were leaders in the school; during the church sessions, they knew what was going to happen—or at least what was supposed to happen. Because they were included in the process, I think many of them felt some responsibility for helping to reach the project's goals. Initial

interviews put these students in the mindset to "get something" out of *Connections*.

Evaluation of the *Connections* Experience

During the follow-up interviews, students seemed enthusiastic to share their opinions and reactions with me. The hesitancy that some had expressed in the initial interviews had dissipated by the follow-up interviews. I knew these six students much better by this time, because we had spoken many times during the *Connections* project. The Jefferson interviewees were invited to the planning meeting for the community projects, and I personally encouraged them to participate in at least one of the projects. The following chart illustrates the involvement of the interviewees in various phases of *Connections*. An **X** indicates presence.

	Church Session #1 (World Hunger)	Church Session #2 (Perspective Taking)	Church Session #3 (Perceptions of Africa)	Japanese Swordsman ship	Sushi Making	Serving Lunch at a Shelter
Radwan	X	X	X			X
Samane	X	X	X			
Sarah		X	X			
Frank	X	X	X		X	X
Kurt		X	X			
Ahmad	X	X		X	X	X

During the follow-up interviews, I initially sought overall affective response to *Connections*. We touched on other topics such as whether it was a good idea to include the teachers and how they felt about sitting at assigned tables with

unfamiliar others. I also explored what the students thought about participating in the community projects. One of the premises of this study is that interaction with diverse others enables us to better understand both others and ourselves. Therefore, I also asked students if they gained any new insights about themselves or American society. Towards the end of the interview I asked each student if they thought *Connections* had anything to do with community, if they thought the title was appropriate, and if, overall, they thought that the project was "successful."

Affective Response

The Jefferson students didn't give *Connections* rave reviews, and yet they still spoke positively of both the project itself and of the aims of the project. The study did not move their worlds; I do believe, however, that through a combination of the individual interviews and involvement in *Connections*, I was able to summon the concept of community and other related topics to a higher level of consciousness.

In the initial interview Radwan had explained that although *Connections* might be interesting, it wouldn't be interesting to him. In the follow-up interview I reminded him of these comments:

> So what did you think?
>
> **It was nice, you know, for the overseas people to hang out with us and us learn about what they do—different stuff.**
>
> Now remember, you told me you were gonna be honest!
>
> **I am honest!**

I know. No, no, no. But you were saying, remember, you were telling me that it was gonna be, it could be interesting, but it wouldn't be interesting for you. Do you remember that?

Oh, yeah. Last time we talked?

Yeah. [Laughter] So how was it? I mean just because I'm the one who did it, you can, actually, it's more helpful if you're really honest. . .

It wasn't bad. I mean, it's not like it was boring or a waste of time, you know. It was all right.

Why was it OK? Why was it—? You said it *wasn't* boring and a waste of time or it was?

It wasn't *that* boring. . . .

The students were always polite, but they didn't hesitate to disagree with me. I believe they told me what **they** genuinely thought and not what they thought I wanted to hear. The follow-up interviews were lively and enjoyable but also sincere.

Ahmad thought that *Connections* was "not a big deal," but nevertheless he thought it was beneficial to the participants. "I think if it was done more often. . . . It helps people get together. It helps people talk together." When I asked Ahmad what would make the project better, he suggested including the entire high school—not only Jefferson students, but the students at Lynnwood High School as well.

Although Kurt thought that the church sessions in the church were a learning experience, he also commented:

I mean, it was like you put us in a church, and it was kind of like we were forced to sit with other people. And no one did that, you know. The older person always chit-chatted and 'So where are you from?' Oh, they'd say just a one-word answer. And it was like we were

forced to talk, you know. But no one communicated with other people, it was not like I said, 'Hey, what's up, I'm Kurt', you know. No one did that at my table.

I then suggested that maybe the project wasn't such a good idea after all. He responded, "No, it was a good idea. I mean it's a start, you know. I don't know how you'd get us so people would **want** to talk to each other. Maybe start off by playing games, you know." Kurt felt that if we had spent a little more time getting to know one another, people might have been "more open about what they're discussing." When I asked him if *Connections* should be repeated, he replied, "Yeah, I think so. 'Cause it was a good experience regardless. 'Cause I don't think I'd ever been around someone from a different country for more than five minutes, besides them, you know. So, yeah, we got a little of understanding of what they're all about." Towards the end of the interview he told me, "It should be repeated—it's just got to improve somehow."

Sarah attended both the Perspective Taking session and the Perceptions of Africa session. We had the following exchange during the follow-up interview.

> And how would you describe those sessions to someone who wasn't there? So like the overall—So, in general, what I'm asking you now is not a test of what you learned, it's not a test to see—it's kind of how you felt—
>
> **Umm. I thought it was—**
>
> Oh, and the other thing I have to say first too, is that just because, I mean, you know that I'm the one that organized it, but it's more helpful to me if you tell me also things that you didn't like and things that you thought were boring or—that's fine! So, I'm not offended, I actually prefer to hear—
>
> **The first session I went to which was the second one was very interesting. It was fun. I actually learned—[Laughter]—that bugs were delicacies in other places. I didn't try one—[Laughter]—**

couldn't bring myself to do it, but, umm, it was fun to learn about other cultures because umm, we don't get it, really a chance to learn like from first hand experience with the other students who are from there. Umm, it was fun. The second one was actually a little more boring, but it was still interesting because I was learning something from, about different people. Things that I didn't know. So. I want to travel a lot so it would be nice to know at least some general ideas about how things work in other places. It was useful.

I asked Sarah if she thought something like this should be repeated, and she responded, "Yeah. 'Cause I would certainly like—even if I was sick—I would make an effort." As illness is often used as a "good excuse" to stay home for **many** high school students, Sarah's statement is clearly one of support for *Connections*.

Teacher Participation

The sessions at the church were designed so that, around the table, everyone had an equal voice. Although some of the adults took on more of a leadership role, they had not been instructed to do so. I asked the students how they felt having their teachers participate in the sessions at the church. Although I presumed that the students would actually want their teachers there, I was interested in exploring how the students felt relating to their teachers in a slightly different context.

"They helped the whole group talk together," commented Ahmad. Other students also noted that the teachers (and other adults) played the role of facilitator. "It was good," Kurt told me. "It got something going. I mean that's what they did—got everyone talking." Frank believed that the teachers became students during the sessions: "I think the teachers had to think about it and see

what they thought since they're the ones teaching people—see what they had to say." Sarah liked having the teachers participate in the sessions because it enabled her to see the teachers in a different light. She remembered:

> **I thought it was good because at first I was like, like Carl [a two-month substitute teacher at Jefferson] said something, you know, and I wasn't really expecting the teachers to really get involved all that much. But I think they found it interesting and a learning experience, too. I think it was nice to put them in a peer group situation, like, we were their peers also. So it was kind of interesting that way.**

The Jefferson teachers weren't immediately comfortable in their new role. I believe that Patricia, Paul, and Carl were somewhat concerned about the social skills their students would display in this new environment with new people. At the beginning of the first session they were seated at the tables along with all of the other participants. By the end of the session, however, all three were standing—each one monitoring their third of the fellowship hall. They had easily and naturally slipped into a position of authority. But as Paul later explained, "I was pleasantly surprised by how well they interacted with people that they didn't know." During the 2nd and the 3rd sessions the teachers seemed to be content to be just another person around the table.

Interactions with Others

As part of the design of *Connections*, I wanted the Jefferson students to stretch themselves out of their comfort zones and interact with unfamiliar others. I did not wish for them to be overly anxious, however, so the project was carefully planned. Gudykunst's theory of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management

(AUM) suggests ways to decrease anxiety and increase confidence in predicting the behavior of strangers.

According to Patricia, "When we first went over there [to the church], there was a lot of resistance and apprehension about what was going to happen." Whether or not the students felt anxiety before *Connections,* all of the students who I interviewed felt that it was a positive experience to interact with new, different people. "It was kind of weird at first," Frank told me, "and then I just got used to it after awhile." He thought it was a good idea because "you're going to be with different people sometime in your life." In the Perspective Taking session he found interaction with non-Jefferson people easier because, as he explained, "You had us do some activity where we had to work together." Samane also believed that it was a good idea to interact with other people. "That was good though, talking to—we usually, I mean 'cause all we talk to is teachers and then, you know, parents," he told me. "We really don't talk to other adults. . . communicate about different stuff, different cultures."

I asked Sarah to think about how she felt having other people participate in this school activity:

> **I think that that was—I think that's important, I think there should be more community involvement, working together. Umm, people should just, you know, take the initiative into worrying about each other more, because people just mind their own business and don't really pay attention to what their neighbor is doing, or anything like that.**

She emphasizes her belief that people need to take the initiative to care. Sarah specifically appreciated the opportunity to interact with international high school

students. "I feel that they were making an effort to come over here to—you know, they had come from the high school," she said. "We only had to go across the street and you know, they made the effort to come and help us learn and learn from us so. . . ." For Ahmad, involvement of people from the community in the *Connections* project also signified a greater sense of care in the community. "You got to know 'em. You got to know 'em. That they care, too," he told me. "Not like, so like you get to know that they want to talk to you now. Not only just sit in on. They're not like—'cause when you see 'em on the street they don't talk to you, you don't talk to them, but once you get to know 'em, then you know, you get to know a little about them." Ahmad doesn't want to be observed by adults, he wants to interact with them. I believe that the public schools are an appropriate arena for this interaction.

I asked Radwan and Frank to reflect upon how they thought international students from the University of State and community members experienced *Connections*. Frank guessed that they thought it was good, because "we were learning something new. And communities, they like to see people learn something new, and meet new people, and [see] them do something positive in general." Radwan, on the other hand, wasn't sure what other participants thought.

> **I mean, I'm not sure they liked it or not 'cause they were there. But were they there just willingly—free and willingly, or. . . ?**
>
> Free and willingly. . . without pay! [Laugh]
>
> **Yeah, so they had to have liked it. I'm sure they thought it was a good idea.**

Radwan understands that most people lead busy lives; the fact that members of the community took the time to participate in *Connections* demonstrated to the students that others were interested in both them and the aims of the project.

Kurt and I also discussed community involvement. I mentioned that some people had taken off of work to go to the sessions at the church. I explained that I had personally invited the University of State students to participate. At this point Kurt suggested that they probably came because they had "nothin' else [to do]."

> Well, no, I wouldn't say that. I think they did it partly for me because I asked them to. And I knew some of them, and I said this is for my thesis—
>
> **Yeah.**
>
> And some of them I didn't know, but some of the other community people said, 'Hey, this is workin' with—and they did it because—
>
> **People care about the community.**

One of the goals of this study was to help students become more conscious of the concept of community. The Jefferson students frequently completed my line of thinking as demonstrated in the above exchange with Kurt. This capability suggests that the students were not only engaged in our discussion, but that they were beginning to internalize some of the more abstract concepts.

Community Projects

Although Samane, Sarah, and Kurt didn't participate in any of the community projects, they were aware of the activities and had spoken to students who had participated. Initially, I asked Samane what he thought about

the "project part" of *Connections*. He told me it was good to help someone else and that he thought it was good to do something meaningful. When I asked him why he chose not to become involved, he gave me very specific reasons. He explained, for example, that some of the students at the elementary school knew him. "You can't teach kids something that you're not doing yourself," he told me. Samane recognizes that he has some bad habits; he questioned his ability to be a good role model and stated that he didn't want to be a "hypocrite." I proceeded to ask him if he had spoken to anyone who had gone to the shelter. "They said it was fun," he replied. "But it wouldn't be fun to me, because seeing people who are strugglin' is not fun. It's not fun you know. . . ." I explained that the experience had compelled me to face some of my stereotypes about homeless people. "I mean, it wasn't nothing with me, because I know a lot of people like that," he responded.

Sarah expressed regret at not having been able to participate in the community projects. "You know, I really wanted to go [to the shelter] yesterday, like, but I kept calling her all day yesterday, but she's been sick," she told me, referring to the woman who usually comes in on Thursdays to care for her son. She noted that, "lots of students keep asking, 'Can we do it again? Can we do it again?' So I think it sounds like it obviously was something that was good to do." Sarah concluded her comments on the projects by stating, "I want to be involved somehow so I can not just talk about things, you know, easy to say something, but it takes more to actually do something." The community projects at the

shelter enabled the students to experience social issues on a more personal level.

I interviewed Kurt the day before the Jefferson graduation ceremony. When I asked him why he didn't participate in the projects, he told me, "I didn't have time really. To be honest, I'm still trying to graduate." Kurt was very focused on his school work the last few weeks of the school year—the same time the community projects were carried out. His priority was to finish up his assignments so that he could indeed graduate. Referring to the Japanese swordsmanship and the *sushi* making projects, he told me, "We gave others, the experience to, or the opportunity to experience other cultures. We took it and we taught others, you know. That's good, you know?" He had spoken to students who attended the *sushi* making session: "They said they had a lot of fun. The food was good, and that it was fun."

All of the students I interviewed who participated in the projects reflected positively on the experience. Radwan told me that, "The shelter was a good thing. That was nice. We helped 'em out." The following excerpt from our discussion demonstrates how the interviews gave students an opportunity to reflect on their participation in the community projects.

> Was it what you thought it would be—the shelter?
>
> **No.**
>
> That was the first time I had been to a shelter, too.
>
> **No, it wasn't. They had like decent food, I thought, pretty decent food.**

Did anything surprise you?

The food. . . like they had it set up. Like in movies there's just a big soup bin, and they got their soup.

I thought there would be more people.

Yeah, more people, too. I thought there would be more people. I was surprised when he said, you guys can go eat now.

Um. That was good food though. I mean. . .

And you got seconds, too, so they left full.

Umm.

And they get three meals a day.

Radwan considers his image of shelters before this experience—provided by Hollywood—and how it compares to what he observed in Jacksonville. He projected genuine care and concern for the people served at the shelter.

Frank found serving lunch at the shelter particularly interesting because his uncle is "an alcoholic and sometimes he's homeless, and he has to go there." He wanted to see what a shelter was really like on the inside. Frank had promised me that he would participate in the *sushi* making project at the elementary school. On the day of the project, however, he informed me that it was his grandmother's birthday, and that he needed to go over to her house right after school—students were required to stay after school for about one hour in order to accommodate the 1st grade classroom we visited. I persisted, and he agreed to come. I asked him what he thought of going to the elementary school.

Oh, yeah, I liked it, too. The little kids were funny. [Laugh] And that's the first time I ever really made some different—like from a

different country—not a little Mexican food and stuff, but it was, something else besides that. Yeah, it was a good experience.

So you're glad I talked you into it?

Umhm. I thought it was going to be boring, but it wasn't.

Although Frank states that his hesitation was due to his presumption that the project would be boring, it is also likely that Frank had some anxiety about working with 1st graders. Patricia mentioned that many of the students are "so afraid of making any commitments that often times they sabotage themselves and regret it later." In direct reference to the community projects she commented, "Once they heard how much fun some of those activities were, I think they regretted just not showing up." I think, I was able to convince Frank to go to the elementary school because we had established a relationship. Frank was proud of the central role he played as the *sushi* demonstrator. Mrs. Patrick, the 1st grade teacher, made a more personal connection with Frank. She remembered him from a summer school course he had taken with her ten years ago. Furthermore, Mrs. Patrick is married to the basketball coach at Lynnwood High School. As the reader may recall, sports are very important to Frank.

Ahmad actually participated in all three of the projects. He summarized his thoughts by saying, "It was cool. It was helpful." At the shelter, Ahmad and I worked together serving drinks. This is an excerpt from our discussion about the experience.

I mean people were nice. A couple of them looked a little—

But they were all—they weren't like give me, give me—

Yeah.

—they were like 'Thank you, sir. How are you?' Yeah.

I asked Ahmad if he made a connection between the hunger session and serving lunch at the shelter. I remarked how I appreciated it when my graduate coursework occasionally had a more direct application to life.

> **You got to see the facts about hunger, and you got to see people who actually went through that—**
>
> Right. And not just talking about something—
>
> **You have to see it. You have to experience it.**
>
> Yeah. Yeah.
>
> **Like when you went there, you didn't just feel like you were giving out food. You felt you were [inarticulate word], too.**

The projects were a crucial component of *Connections*. Paul believed that going to the shelter was successful, because it offered the students an experience in helping people in the local community. The Jefferson teachers discussed setting up a regular schedule to be on the volunteer list at the shelter for the next year, because they thought it was such a positive influence—"an eye opener"—for the students. I asked Paul if he talked to any of the students who went to the elementary school. "Frankly, no," he responded. "Other than just in passing, like, 'Did you have a nice time?' I don't remember any specific conversations. Other than my general feeling that I kind of got through the grapevine was that they enjoyed it. But in terms of what they got out of it, I didn't talk to them about it. Just the chaos of the day. . . I didn't have time to sit down and chat about it."

Patricia, on the other hand, told me, "They shared with me—without my asking—how much fun it had been, and they enjoyed little kids. And they told me what they had done and how excited the little kids were." She also mentioned that Frank, in particular, sounded "very proud of what he was doing with the little kids." Patricia acknowledged that most of the students are very good with young children. The projects at the elementary school enabled the Jefferson students to witness the magical excitement and curiosity that seem to be almost a natural part of life as a six-year-old. These small children were excited to learn; they paid careful attention as the Jefferson students explained how to hold a wooden sword, write in Japanese or make *sushi*.

<u>New Insights into Self and Society</u>

When I asked Jefferson students if they had gained any new or different insights about themselves or about American society, most commented on how their view of American society had changed. I believe that most responses were based on the quotation exercise in the Perspective Taking session. [See Appendix D.] Frank was surprised to discover that the United States is not always viewed positively overseas. "I really never thought like—I thought all those countries like thought America was good and stuff. . . the best country to live in and really, the opposite. Like some of them—what did they say we were? Didn't one say we're too violent? And then another said that—I can't remember! I just remember the violent one." Samane told me that he had discovered the more ominous side of American capitalism: "Americans—this country is just

money-hungry. They don't care who they hurt or what they do. It's just basically about money—that's all it's about."

When I specifically asked the students if they learned anything new about themselves, most of them told me that they didn't have "an attitude" toward internationals before *Connections*. They seemed to interpret this question as an inquiry about whether they had overcome prejudices. Although this was not the intent, I think that perhaps it was unrealistic to expect students to articulate personal insights they may have gained as a result of their experience with *Connections*. All six of the students I interviewed seemed to be accepting of diverse others when I spoke to them during the initial interviews. Sarah thought that talking to people from other cultures and other countries helped reinforce her belief system. "I mean, I'm already very open-minded about other cultures and stuff like that," she said. "But it helped, I think it helped like reassure me and, you know, keeping what I believe strong."

Unfortunately, the *Connections* project was viewed as an activity that was unrelated to the regular curriculum. Discussions that took place in the church were not necessarily continued in the classrooms back at Jefferson. The literature on effective learning through community service suggests that students need an opportunity to process these experiences (Barber, 1992; Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Rhoads, 1997) perhaps through either group discussions or personal journals. Although the *Connections* project included both action and discussion, the six students I interviewed were the only students who were directly encouraged to reflect on their experiences. I believe that the students

may have had more insights, if they had been guided through more reflective exercises following the church sessions and participation in the community projects.

Connections and the Concept of Community

I was interested to see if the students saw any relation between our discussion of community in the initial interviews and the *Connections* project. Several of the students referred to the idea that there are diverse people in the community, just as there were diverse people in the sessions at the church. Ahmad explained it this way, "Community was sort of the same, like, you put us in that one church room. Then different people that didn't really know each other—the same as in the community. You don't know everyone in your community. So it's sort of the same."

In both the initial interview and the follow-up interview, Sarah talked about the responsibilities that hold a community together. "Well, I think, community is like a people-involved situation," she explained. "I mean, everybody lives next to somebody, and that doesn't make it a community unless people are involved with each other and interact with each other." Sarah thought that the sessions at the church and the community projects helped "get people involved in, you know, other things other than their normal life that's just involved them or just their immediate family." When I asked Sarah if she felt that she had a responsibility to the community, she said:

> **Yeah, I think everybody does. But me, as like an individual, I feel it's my responsibility to help someone if I see them, if they need help. It's like, I work for a service. I work for a grocery store, and that's a**

service. I think that it's important to help people, because there are people who are older who can't lift—some of these groceries are heavy for me—and I would do it if I saw someone and I wasn't working. I feel like, you know, this person shouldn't have to do that if they don't have to, and people just pass it by. . . too often.

She further explained that if community members helped each other, we wouldn't have to rely so much on the government.

Kurt and I became engaged in an interesting dialogue following his response to the question about whether there was any connection between community and the *Connections* project. [For the full text of this conversation see Appendix F.] He initially stated that he didn't see any link between the two, because everyone "lives their own lives." At that point, I encouraged a general discussion of community focusing on interdependence, appreciation of various parts of the community, and the responsibility of individuals to their communities. Kurt clearly stated that he didn't think he had any obligation to the community.

So do you, do you think you have any responsibility towards, to make the—

To my community?

Yeah.

Uh-uh.

Really?!?!

Uh-uh. Why? No. Not really.

And does the community have responsibilities to you?

Umm. . . I don't know.

In my definition, that would be part of community.

Well, I mean, not, not, I guess it's not just me, but yeah, I'm part of the communi—well, I mean everything affects the community, but, but. . . . I don't feel obligated to do something about it, you know. That's not my— [Laughter] I don't know.

[Laughter]

That's not my thing. There's other people to do—

Kurt also differentiates between helping to prevent certain legal injustices and engaging in simple acts of caring. When I asked him how he would respond if he saw someone breaking into someone's home, he said he would probably call the police. "I'd do that probably because it affects me," he responded. "'Cause I might feel bad. 'Cause I saw it, and I didn't do anything about it. And I kept on walking." However, if he saw a woman with small children drop her groceries, he said he'd "probably keep on walking" because it's "her own situation" and "she should be able to help herself."

The exact text of this conversation is relevant because our discussion gave Kurt an opportunity to critically analyze and reflect upon his own thoughts about community. Interviews with the students were not neutral; actually, they would more accurately be described as guided discussions. The specific language used "necessarily imposes. . . a stance toward what we view" (Bruner, 1986, p. 121). Thus, alone Kurt's responses are insufficient; only by understanding them in the context of the conversation and in light of the specific language used by the interviewer can the reader understand the process. Kurt's struggle to find meaning in his own words is clear. Sometimes he would begin to

express his opinions, and then mid-sentence he would pause thoughtfully and laugh at the reality of his thoughts.

> **Let's say for instance, I think of the homeless shelter—**
>
> Umhm.
>
> **And I've been in a homeless shelter before. . . I mean I've had a friend that stayed in there. And it was just regular people, or whatever, they were just strugglin' I mean I understand that they were strugglin'—what's, what's—I don't see anything wrong with my image.**
>
> Right. But your image is accurate because you were there.
>
> **OK, let's say, um, not a shelter, but a—what else can I say? An old people's home—all right, I mean, I don't think I've ever really been in an old people's home, but I've seen old people strugglin' with change and all that. So I figure it's a bunch of normal people who got too old to take care of themselves. I understand. What else—what else is there to know?**
>
> If you went into an old people's home, a retirement community, and you talked to the people and you, then perhaps when your parents—
>
> **It's a family thing of course, I'm gonna help my parents, but why should I help these other people? I figure they have their own family to help them.**
>
> What if they don't?
>
> **Well if they don't, I hope someone, someone that they—like I don't feel obligated to help them, like I figure there's probably old people that don't have anyone—the whole family has died, but I figure someone around him, they should see the situation and maybe, maybe um, help 'em themselves [Laughter] I guess, you know.**

It is important to recall the sincerity of these students; Kurt didn't give the socially acceptable responses, but he did provide personally realistic responses. Although this candor sometimes forms a social obstacle for many Jefferson students, for this study the students' honesty was greatly appreciated.

Appropriateness of the Title

All of the Jefferson students thought that *Connections* was a good title for the project. Sarah told me:

> **Yeah, I think it's a good title, because it explains that the purpose you know of connecting us to people. Umm, but it's not specific at the same time. But I like it, because it's basically the whole purpose of the program. . . . International relations being trying to get people to be more aware that there are people who are different and not to just close themselves off into being with a certain group of people and only them and trying to circulate into the environment. Mostly, 'cause America's filled—just this town alone has millions of international people. I think that international people may feel a little left out because people generalize—you stay with your group, and we'll stay with ours.**

Samane's comments reflect the goal of the project and the reality of the depth of the intervention. He thought that *Connections* was an appropriate title, "'Cause we were connecting with people from around the world and not just people from Jefferson. . . Meet new people and connect—you know talk to 'em. . . . I mean we didn't really connect, but we got closer than what we usually do. You know, it's something that comes with time." Realistically, *An Introduction to Connections* would be a more accurate title for the project. The students seemed to recognize, however, that in aiming for a goal that was higher than realistically possible, we came closer to actually achieving that goal than we would have otherwise.

All of the students I interviewed thought that the project was successful. "We all participated and learned something," stated Frank. Most of the students felt that *Connections* was a good place to start. "I mean we did communicate with them," Kurt commented. "I don't think that well, though. But we did

communicate with them. . . . See, but if you do this in the fall, it'll get, you know, if you work on it and it gets better, then more and more people will start to appreciate it."

Value of the Process

The process of carrying out this study helped build single plank bridges to the community. Initially, the message conveyed to the Jefferson students with whom I spoke was that their ideas and opinions were important enough to be studied; their words were so valuable that someone wanted to tape-record them. Furthermore, during the interviews they were in control of their involvement. They were told that if they didn't want to answer particular questions they didn't have to; if they were bored and wanted to leave the interview, they could. I also made it very clear that I was seeking their true reactions and opinions. During the initial interviews we established a positive relationship. As the study proceeded, Radwan, Samane, Sarah, Frank, Kurt, and Ahmad would personally greet me when I came to Jefferson; frequently, I was able to engage them in a casual conversation. I enjoyed making them laugh. This connection enabled me to set high expectations for the students in terms of their participation in *Connections*. They became insiders to my presence and purpose at Jefferson.

By informing the students during the initial interviews that I hoped to get their reactions to *Connections* after the project, I encouraged them to become more active participants. Students who I interviewed experienced *Connections* on a more personal level because they were aware of the goals of the project.

Planning for the community projects was my greatest source of frustration. The Jefferson students continually failed to follow-through with commitments they had personally made to me. For example, two students had agreed to accompany me to a staff meeting at the elementary school; both were absent the day of the meeting, and neither had called the school. At the end of April, I scheduled a community project planning meeting with the interviewees and a few other interested students. We were to meet over their lunch break, and I had promised to provide pizza. All who were invited told me they would come. Beautiful weather on the day of the meeting was a foreboding sign; I arrived at Jefferson with the pizzas just in time to see the students head out in different directions. Several of them were playing basketball. Samane took a few minutes from "court time" to explain the situation. He rested his elbow on my shoulder, and, with a slightly embarrassed grin, he said, "You know, it's a beautiful day for hoops!" He suggested that we meet during 5th hour. Fortunately, Patricia allowed this deviation.

The community projects were a wonderful opportunity for the students to learn something new and be actively involved. Mrs. Patrick, the 1st grade teacher, reflected on what she thought the benefits for both her students and the Jefferson students may have been. [See Appendix G for a more complete text of the e-mail message I received from Mrs. Patrick.] She observed positive modeling from both sides:

> I think it is important for all of us, once we hit "a certain age" to maintain that childlike love for the "new" in learning! I think your students observed this in my first graders. Also, I think your students felt "good" about

> "teaching" children about something they already "knew". . . a GREAT self-confidence and self-esteem booster!! This opportunity gave them a sense of how important it is to model and respect small children and their ability to learn and think. . . . Maybe it will help or come to mind one day when they have their own children?????

Although the Jefferson students may have had some initial anxiety about interacting with a classroom of young children, they were provided with the support and skills necessary to succeed in this project.

Radwan, Frank, and Ahmad enjoyed the opportunity to help others through serving lunch at the shelter. All of the Jefferson students who participated in this service project seemed uncertain when we arrived at the shelter, but they clearly wanted to act and speak appropriately. Actually, I had never seen a group of eight or nine Jefferson students so quiet and so serious.

During the follow-up interviews the engagement of the students surprised me. If I paused mid-sentence, the students frequently finished my sentences—with tremendous accuracy. Through reading the transcripts of the interviews, I noted the subjective nature of most of my questions; nearly half of them began "What do you think. . . ?" These interviews also enabled me to confront the students individually about their inability to keep commitments. Patricia told me that many of the students at Jefferson do not have the "social skills of making and keeping a promise or a commitment. Partly because many adults in their lives have not kept commitments," she added. "So they have no role models for that." During the interviews, I could express my disappointment and frustration. I was "allowed" to have expectations of the students because we had established a relationship.

Figure 7 summarizes how the process of the study had an impact on the students I interviewed. This figure delineates some of the possible outcomes achieved through simple participation in the study. The process of being interviewed for participation in a research project was empowering. In particular, one-on-one interaction is an effective method of establishing a relationship with these students. I believe the Jefferson student interviewees came to understand that I genuinely cared about their ideas and opinions. When the first part of the *Connections* project actually began, these students were also aware of the aims of the church sessions. Consequently, they were more engaged. Planning for the community projects gave students the opportunity to practice making and keeping commitments. Carrying out the community projects enabled the students to successfully contribute to the lives of others. Finally, during the follow-up interviews these adolescents could carry on a meaningful dialogue about community and other constructs with an adult with whom they had already established a relationship.

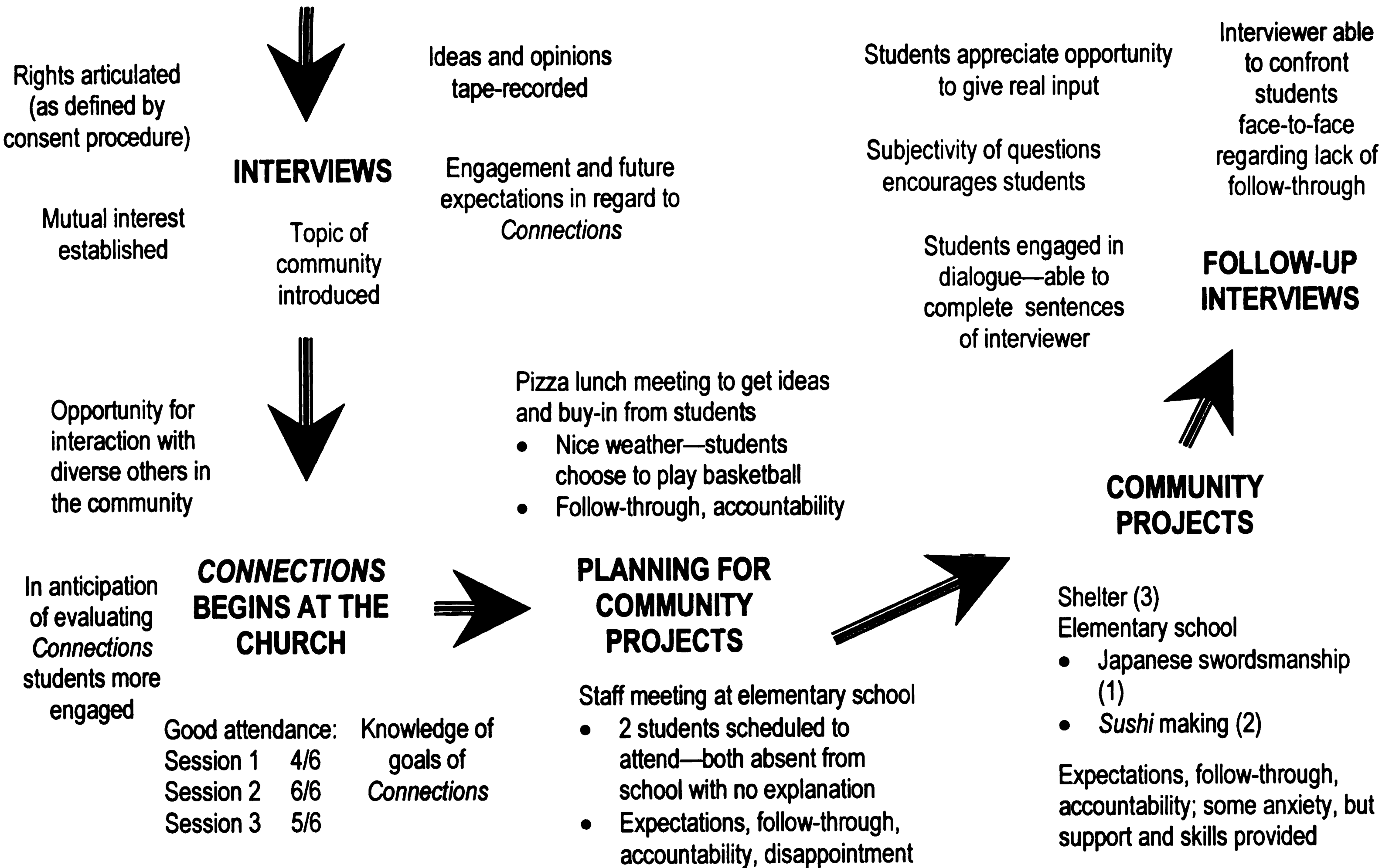


Figure 7 – Process map of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE—CONCLUSION

Summary

The first time I visited Jefferson, the Alternative Program for Lynnwood High School, I sensed it was a special place. As the fall term progressed, I understood why I was drawn to this small, one-story brick building on the outskirts of Lynnwood. The atmosphere at Jefferson is warm, supportive and personal. Jefferson teachers not only like adolescents, they genuinely care about them. They believe in their inherent possibilities, and they recognize the unique strengths of these highly creative, non-traditional thinkers, who have street-smart survival skills. All Jefferson students **are** at high risk of dropping out of school. Many of them have personal problems or moderate learning disabilities that have lead to poor academic motivation, poor school attendance, and poor school performance. Patricia, the lead teacher, told me, "We must accept a student where he or she is and design behavior expectations which will push each student toward an acceptable level, without being so high initially to frustrate them and keep them from working toward the ultimate goal of being able to succeed in more traditional settings outside of school." Jefferson is a place where students feel a sense of bonding to their classmates, their teachers, and their school. This sense of connectedness enables them to experience success in school and encourages them to adopt a more positive attitude toward education in general. This study presumed that a greater sense of

connectedness to the *community* might, in turn, lead to a more positive approach toward the spirit of community and the responsibility of citizenship.

This research began with the intent to explore how alternative high school students perceive community. In order to carry on such a dialogue, however, we needed a shared *experience* in community—something concrete to reflect upon together. Although the *Connections* project was unique, the strategies utilized in its design emerged from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The design of *Connections* directly reflects the recommendations of quantitative and qualitative studies and the beliefs of scholars regarding what youth need for healthy development. This study specifically explored how schools can support healthy youth development within a community context. The *Connections* project offered an opportunity for students to become both theoretically (through discussions) and actively (through community projects) engaged in the community.

In order for young people to make the successful transition to adulthood, societal attitudes towards adolescents must reflect a commitment to their healthy growth and development. Families, schools and communities are charged with the task of helping young people achieve a personal sense of competence and success, develop a healthy sense of identity and social integration, and acquire socially useful knowledge and skills (Wehlage, et. al., 1989). In *Schools of To-Morrow,* Dewey and Dewey (1915/1924) insist that "the role of the community in making the schools vital is just as important as the role of the school itself" (pp. 174-175). When schools are *of* the community not merely *in* the community, students are given the opportunity to establish a sense of connection with a

wider range of people, places, and problems. Unfamiliar settings, new experiences, and wider associations can lead to expanded knowledge and a clearer understanding (Conrad & Hedin, 1991), particularly when these experiences have some structure and utilize existing supports.

I believe that the route to a good society lies in the optimal development of individuals who are aware of both their rights and their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic nation. The concepts of community and citizenship are closely linked. The high school students with whom I spoke described community as a place where people "work together" and "help each other out;" it's also a place where people "communicate with each other" and "[get] along with each other." Citizenship calls for us to get involved in our communities. *Connections* not only invited the community to become involved in the education process, but it also encouraged young people to become involved in the community. Most public schools could better address the complexities of their students' lives with additional resources from the community. The importance of financial resources should not be underestimated, but neither should the value of human resources. Money does not create a caring community, committed individuals do.

This study focused on six Jefferson students who were interviewed both before and after the *Connections* project. These guided discussions provided data, but they also provided an opportunity for the interviewer to help these adolescents reach a higher level of understanding and thinking about community. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development guided

me to play the role of both researcher and change agent. This study was an opportunity for me to encourage the students to consider their relationship to the community on a more personal level.

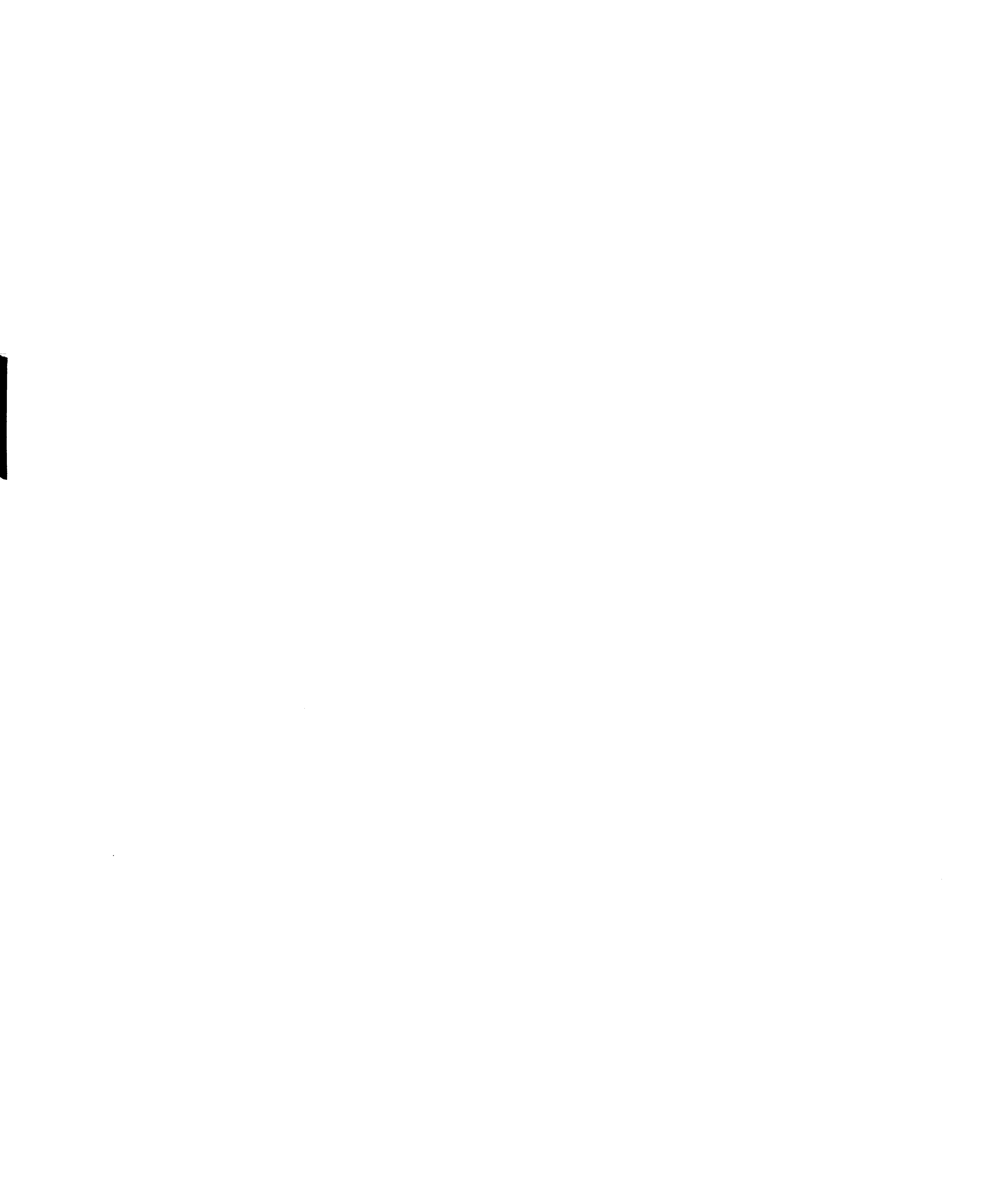
I believe these six students benefited from being directly involved in the process. But others, both personally and professionally, also gained. When approached, both the principal at the elementary school and the outreach pastor at Azaro Baptist Church expressed a desire and an intention to connect with Jefferson. This study facilitated that connection.

Some of the outcomes of this study affected individual students. For example, a young woman who participated in one of the community projects at the elementary school is currently working with Mrs. Patrick, the 1st grade teacher, as an aide five afternoons per week. In this case, an introductory connection led to a stronger, sustainable relationship. Some connections were more intangible. When I asked Frank about the most interesting thing he had learned from the *Connections* project, he responded on a very personal level. "The church, see umm, I'm Nigerian, you know, and I didn't really know they were that religious," he told me. "'Cause my Dad, he's from Nigeria, and my Mom's from here. And I never really got to know anything about Nigeria until then. I knew like the capital and stuff, I never got to know how the people were—" Frank is referring to the Perceptions of Africa session at the church. Radwan and Samane, other students with African ancestry, also found this session to be the most interesting. These students learned things about Africa

that they "never would have known"—details that were important to them personally.

The *Connections* project gave the Jefferson students an opportunity to interact with people from around the world. Selman's Theory of Interpersonal Understanding, as applied to this study, suggests that the ability to understand the world from the perspective of other people represents a qualitative change in social development. One of the international graduate students commented, "If you never have a chance to travel to another country, you don't think about others—people who think differently. Later they will appreciate this opportunity," she added. "You can meet people from other countries right in your community." I believe this project helped the students realize that multiple perspectives exist in every community, and that diversity need not be divisive.

Although no single strategy will solve every problem or transform every student, *Connections* specifically addressed some of the special concerns of this population. This includes establishing quality relationships of trust, learning through experience, building on unique individual strengths, and allowing choices. Important components of healthy relationship building involve the ability to peacefully discuss differences through effective communication and a willingness to respect others regardless of appearance, race, national origin, disability, or religion. In turn, the capacity to understand multiple perspectives helps one develop conceptual and intellectual flexibility, which ultimately leads to self-reflection and personal growth.



If *Connections* were to be Repeated. . .

"Well, I know that it's been like a rusty time. 'Cause, you know, first time is always very—[Laughter]—not as organized as you plan it to be!" noted Sarah, when I asked her for any final comments or thoughts on the project. *Connections* was, as Kurt stated, "a learning experience." During the follow-up interviews, I specifically asked the students what they thought would make the project better. Kurt suggested starting with an event "something like a sixth grade dance"—an opportunity for participants to interact on a very informal basis, before they were expected to talk about more serious issues like world hunger, stereotypes, and homelessness. Ahmad also proposed that participants spend a little more time getting to know others in the beginning. He would improve the project by enabling the participants to "have a one-on-one" with somebody they didn't know.

Although Jefferson students may have experienced some initial anxiety in their interactions with internationals at the church, 1st graders at the elementary school, and homeless people at the shelter, the interviewees unanimously expressed a belief in the value of meeting new people who may be different. Components of Gudykunst's (1995) theory of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management—specifically, how to lessen anxiety when communicating with strangers—and Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) concept of flow were both incorporated in the design of *Connections*. Students were given the support to succeed in what many of them perceived to be challenging experiences.

During the initial interviews, I had promised each student that the sessions at the church were "not going to be like lectures." After all, one of the fundamental goals of the *Connections* project was to give diverse people in the community the opportunity to meet and engage in dialogue. I believed that they needed interesting and worthwhile topics to discuss, but I didn't intend for them to merely listen together. The Hunger Awareness and Perceptions of Africa sessions delivered a lot of interesting information in a relatively short period of time. For this group of people, however, less information and more active involvement would have been preferred. Samane explained, "I mean, some things you did, you know, people weren't anxious to do. Like when the guy was talking [for the Perceptions of Africa church session]. But you split us into these groups, and we tried to talk to each other to learn a little more about these people. And that's when I started paying more attention." The more lecture-like segments of the presentations were somewhat overwhelming for both the Jefferson students, who typically do not learn well through just listening, and the international students from Lynnwood High School, all of whom were enrolled in the English as a Second Language course because of their limited vocabulary and familiarity with the English language.

Radwan thought it would be a good idea if the Jefferson students could help "pick the topics." He also suggested that students be given the option to participate. Kurt, however, recognized that given a choice, some Jefferson students might "not be willing to even try it. [But] if they're forced they might be like, oh, that was straight and go again." Kurt explained that he found the

experience valuable, in part, simply because "it was a different thing. It was a different place, where I got to sit in a different chair, in a different room with different people."

Hindsight enables us to reflect on what we might plan or do differently if we were to repeat a particular event. All of the Jefferson students I interviewed offered valuable suggestions, many of which I have tried to make known throughout this paper. If *Connections* were to be repeated, I would advocate for the following modifications:

- The project should be a more integrated part of the curriculum; themes discussed in the church sessions need to be further advanced in the classroom. In addition, students should be given the opportunity to personally reflect on their experiences, either through journals or through discussion. Reflection enables students to process their emotional responses.

- Presenters for the church sessions should be found who are willing to see their role of information dissemination in the context of the larger purpose of the project.

- International graduate students and community members should be more strongly encouraged to participate in all of the church sessions and at least one of the community projects.

- Additional efforts should be made to enable the international high school students to participate in the community projects.

- Members of the church should be more strongly encouraged to participate in the entire project, specifically in the sessions at the church.

Although I believe that funding would have enhanced certain components of the project, I maintain that the success we experienced was a result of our collective efforts and energies as citizens. If available, financial resources could be used to schedule transportation to and from the sites for the community

projects, particularly for the international students from Lynnwood. Mrs. Matthews, the ESL teacher, needed to use all of her bus passes to attend the sessions at the church. [At the alternative high school, some rules and regulations are more flexible. The teachers provided students with transportation to the shelter; I drove Jefferson students both to the shelter and to the elementary school. Clearly, if the project were to be repeated, it would be prudent to address the issue of liability directly. Nevertheless, I find it unfortunate that in modern society we seem to have made it more difficult to simply help each other out. In actuality, driving together gave Jefferson students and me the opportunity to get to know one another and to reflect on our shared experience immediately following the project.] I covered most of the expenses incurred by the project, in total approximately $80. This included pizza for the Hunger Awareness session and the community project planning meeting, refreshments for the three church sessions, cups and plates, name tags, and the ingredients necessary for making *sushi*. Learning how to affect outcomes with limited money is worthy training for spending (and fully appreciating) funds when they are available.

Broader Implications

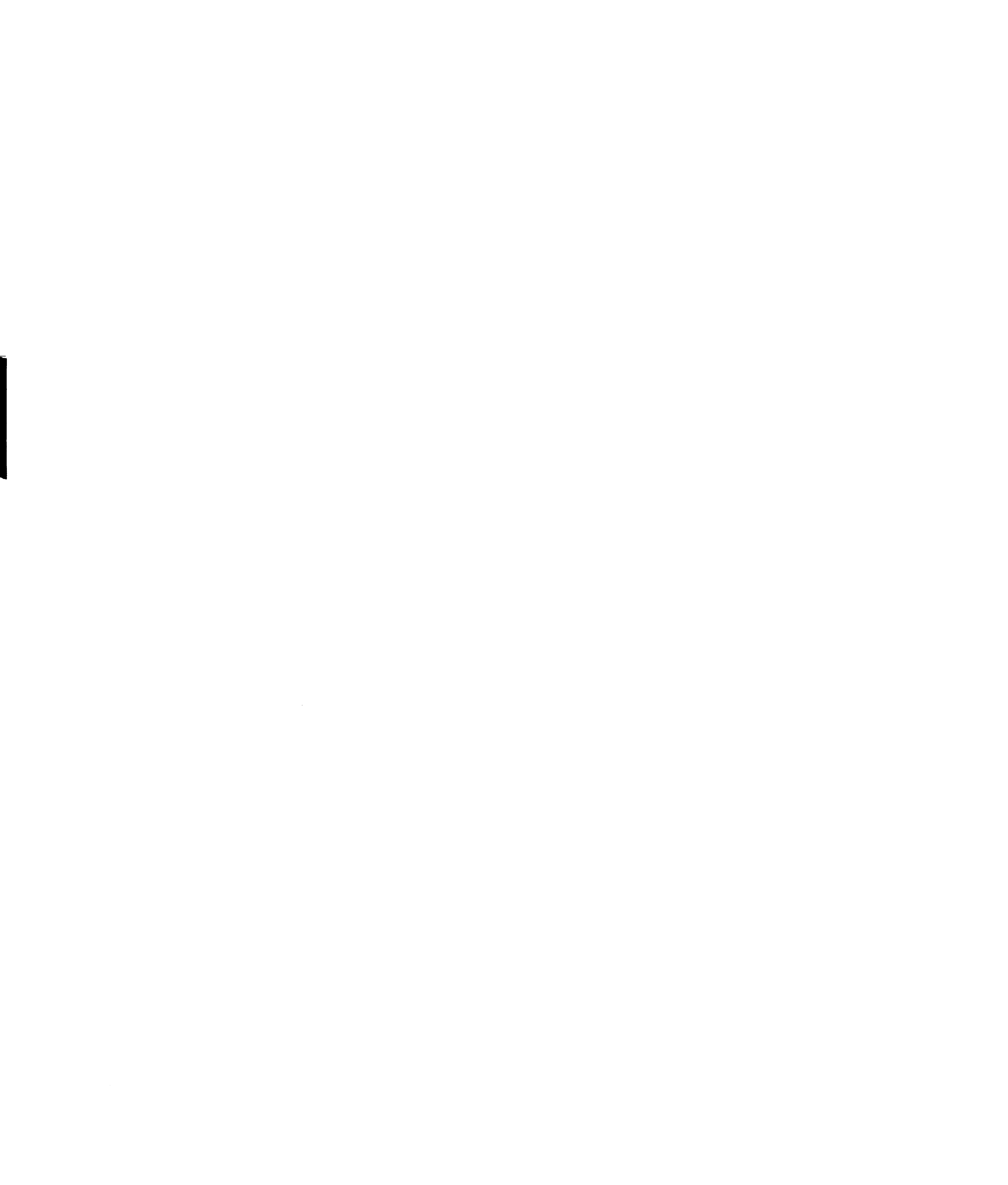
Although the *Connections* project was based on the unique characteristics of both the Lynnwood community and the researcher, I believe that energetic, caring teachers and administrators at any high school could utilize the general design of the intervention. The goals of the *Connections* project are worthy aims

for all high school students. Such an intervention, however, can only be effective if there is a key person who insists on nothing less than success—someone with passion, persistence, and patience.

Educators who hope to introduce students to the importance of community should invite the public into classrooms; they should also give students direct and active experience in the community. Initially, implementation of such a project in an individual classroom would take planning, coordination, and time. But the teacher need not create a blueprint on his or her own; many students would enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to become more involved in the course of their own education. In addition, one should consider the long-term, potential benefits for all involved. The benefits that emerge from strong connections between both individuals and institutions merit the time and effort they require to initially establish.

Concluding Remarks

Through *Connections* high school students and adults examined a variety of topics ranging from eating grasshoppers and the absence of small eggs in America to images of Africa, world hunger, and homelessness in our community. Many of the outcomes of the study are difficult to measure. Many of the participants felt that there was tremendous value in simply having positive interactions with people from other parts of the world. One of the international graduate students told me, "Not only your project connects people and people. There's something else—above the acquaintance. *Connections* makes you



open to other ideas. . . thoughts. . . kinds of things not visible. It may not be visible, but still I want to call it connections."

Connections were made both between individuals and between institutions, but I believe that participants also connected to new ideas and new ways of thinking. One of the community members with whom I spoke hypothesized that the project brought about, "an increased awareness amongst everyone—not just the younger students, but the adults also—that there is more to life than just our little sphere that we live in. That many times those spheres collide and interact. The awareness that results—I think that would be the key word: awareness." When we understand the reality of our interdependence, perhaps we will begin to truly value all youth—both through our words and through our actions. It is, after all, in the interest of all of us, to see that every young person has the knowledge, skills, and sense of self that make an individual a good worker, a competent parent, and a responsible citizen.

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APPENDIX A

Lynnwood Alternative Program

GRADING PROCEDURE

Students attending Lynnwood Alternative Program receive report cards every three weeks. Final grades for the semester are based on 6 three-week marking periods and final exams.

Students receive grades on the basis of effort and performance. While it may not be possible for all students to receive an "A" grade in every class, any student who is willing to work hard can earn average or better grades.

Students are not expected to compete with each other for grades. They are encouraged to concentrate on improving their own skills as rapidly as they can.

Success for students is determined by expectations established by the teacher. Letter grades "A", "B", and "C" are given to indicate to what extent students have met individual goals within the framework of overall classroom expectations. "D" is used on a limited basis. If a student chooses not to do the minimum required for a grade, an "N" is given which indicates NO CREDIT for that marking period.

A -Average or above potential; worked very hard; made good use of time; did everything expected.

B -May have worked reasonably well, but below potential; did not do everything expected.

C -Completed enough work to achieve the minimum expected. May have limited potential, but worked very hard to accomplish all goals.

N -Did not achieve the minimum expected; no credit given for the marking period.

I -Incomplete due to extenuating circumstances.

The emphasis at the Lynnwood Alternative Program is placed on success, no failure, on rewarding students for effort and performance.

APPENDIX B

Lynnwood Alternative Program

ATTENDANCE PROCEDURES

1. Students are expected to attend school every day. When it is necessary for a student to be absent, parents are asked to notify the school by 10:00 a.m. If a student is absent without a call from home, the school will make every possible attempt to notify the parent **on the day** of the student's absence.

2. A student's absence may be excused for legitimate reasons.

3. Evidence should be provided within two (2) school days after the absence, either by a note or parental phone call. Excuses must be submitted to the school secretary.

4. Students may receive make-up work for excused absences.

5. In order to receive a passing grade, students may miss no more than three (3) class periods in any one class in one marking period. No more than one (1) absence may be unexcused. This includes absences due to tardies.

6. Students with **excused** absences or tardies may stay after school to make up time in order to achieve a higher level. This should be arranged with the student's teachers. It should be understood this make up time is for work or community service time.

7. Students who exceed the maximum number of absences allowed because of extenuating circumstances may write a letter of appeal to the staff for consideration. No more than two (2) appeals may be written per semester. This appeal must be presented by the student, in person, to the staff after school during the first staff meeting after the end of each marking period.

8. Students with excused absences may receive an incomplete grade when appropriate. Make-up work must be completed by the end of the next marking period or the incomplete grade will become an "N".

9. Students must maintain a 75% or better attendance in order to remain in the program. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, students who fall below this expectation will be dropped. These students have the option of returning to Lynnwood High School.

APPENDIX C

Lynnwood Alternative Program

THE LEVELS SYSTEM

To achieve success at Lynnwood Alternative Program, students are expected to:

1. Attend school every day and be on time.
2. Attend class and complete school work.
3. Behave appropriately in school.

The program at Lynnwood Alternative Program is based on a Levels System, which is designed to encourage and recognize student success. The Levels System establishes minimum standards in the areas of Attendance, Academic Achievement, and Attitude. In general, students are expected to maintain a Level 2 or higher to be successful.

LEVELS SYSTEM

Level 0
Less than 75% attendance
Less than 5 passing grades

Level 1
75% attendance
5 passing grades

Level 2
80% attendance
6 passing grades
No disciplinary problems

Level 3
85% attendance
6 passing grades
3.0 grade point average
No disciplinary problems

Level 4
90% attendance
6 passing grades
3.5 grade point average
No disciplinary problems

Level 5
95% attendance
6 passing grades
4.0 grade point average
No disciplinary problems

APPENDIX D

"Observations of Foreign Visitors about American Behavior"
(Kohls & Knight, 1994, pp. 43-49)

Visitor from Iran:

"It is puzzling when Americans apply the word 'friend' to acquaintances from almost every sector of one's past or present life, without necessarily implying close ties or inseparable bonds."

Visitor from Iran:

"The first time my professor told me: 'I don't know the answer—I will have to look it up,' I was shocked. I asked myself, 'Why is he teaching me?' In my country a professor would give a wrong answer rather than admit ignorance."

Visitor from Indonesia:

"The questions Americans ask me are sometimes very embarrassing, like whether I have ever seen a camera. Most of them consider themselves the most highly civilized people. Why? Because they are accustomed to technical inventions. Consequently, they think that people living in bamboo houses or having customs different from theirs are primitive and backward."

Visitor from Kenya:

"In American schools, the children are restless, inattentive, and rebellious [and the teachers have] poor class discipline."

Visitor from Kenya:

"Parents are so occupied earning the weekly or monthly pay that they find very little time to devote to their children."

Visitor from Kenya:

". . . there is very widespread neglect of respect which children ought to give to adults [in the U.S.]."

Visitor from Algeria:

"I was horrified at the ignorance of the high school students about my country—Algeria. They knew nothing at all about it—location, people, language, political condition. What made it worse was the ignorance of the teacher herself. Her knowledge was very shallow and, in certain instances, quite erroneous."

Visitor from The Philippines:

"In the United States I have observed that the mother is the dominant parent in most families."

Visitor from Korea:

"In a twelfth-grade social studies class, the teacher gave choices of assignment for the next class. I didn't like the idea of pupils choosing the assignment. I wonder what these pupils will do later in life when there are no choices in the duty assigned them. They must learn while they are in school how to do well the jobs assigned to them from above."

Visitor from Egypt:

"My hostess asked me, 'Would you like to settle down in our country for good?' She was surprised when my answer was in the negative, though I took great pains to make it as diplomatic as possible."

Visitor from Guyana:

"The average American male doesn't leave any doubt in your mind that he is unhappy that you (as a foreigner) are here. He doesn't make you feel comfortable."

Visitor from Somalia:

"I am worried that you have too much democracy in America. There are so many separate voices and so many selfish interests that you cannot accomplish anything for the general good of the country. You are even prevented from controlling your criminal element for fear of denying the criminal his freedom. That's too much freedom for your own good."

Visitor from Lesotho:

"Some Americans I have met seem to like to live with animals, more than with people, and they treat their pets like human beings, even kissing them and holding them on their laps."

Visitor from Cameroon:

"It is shocking to me to see how the father and mother in America kick out of their family their own children when they become eighteen years of age. The most surprising thing about it all is that the young people do not seem to mind it or think it is too cruel to be thrown out of their family, but hey accept it as the natural and normal way of behaving."

Visitor from The Philippines:

"They say children everywhere are the same. In my observations I found out a couple of ways where children differ. Children in the United States are very forward in their way of speaking, even to their parents and elders. Children here show a lack of respect for old age. Also, I have observed that children here do not offer their services to their parents willingly. They either have to be told what is to be done or they have to be given some reward or compensation for what they do."

Visitor from Sudan:

"The hardest thing for me to accept and get used to when I first came to your country was how impersonal and unhuman everything was. Whenever I bought a Coca-Cola or a chocolate bar or a postage stamp I had to buy it from a machine, rather than from a living person. You can talk to a machine, and even when it gives you a candy bar, a machine cannot give you a satisfying relationship. But in your country many people want to spend their time by themselves rather than by talking to other people in a friendly conversation."

Visitor from Colombia:

""I was surprised, in the United States, to find so many young people who were not living with their parents, although they were not yet married. Also, I was surprised to see so many single people of all ages living alone, eating alone, and walking the streets alone. The United States must be the loneliest country in the world."

Visitor from Sweden:

"The difficulty with shopping from the beginning was there was so much to choose among. There were so many brands and the supermarkets were so big."

Visitor from Germany:

"When our little son had a tonsillectomy, he had some complications, needing quite a bit of blood transfusions. I was very much surprised that a blood drive was voluntarily started at the company for him. They hardly knew him, and I was relatively new to the firm. We were really touched by this kind of neighborhood help."

Visitor from The Netherlands:

"Imagine my astonishment when I went to the supermarket and looked at eggs. You know, there are no small eggs in America; they just don't exist. They tend to be jumbo, extra large, large or medium. It doesn't matter that the medium are little. Small eggs don't exist [in America] because, I guess, they think that might be bad or denigrating."

APPENDIX E

Letter/Form to Community Members and University of State Students

Dear **2 April 1998**

Thank you for participating in the Friday sessions on March 13th, 20th, and/or 27th. I hope you found them to be interesting and enjoyable. The sessions were the first phase of my Master's thesis. My intentions were to give high school students exposure to some international issues and the opportunity to discuss some of these issues in small diverse groups. Although I was pleased with all of the sessions, I had hoped that there would be more small group discussion. I strongly feel that ***all of us***, but especially high school students, need the chance to simply talk with others. Lectures certainly have a place in the learning process, but meaningful dialogue is invaluable.

The second phase of my thesis is that the students work together—ideally with the assistance of some of you—to create something to be presented to the community (See below for a clearer explanation of this). Phase one and phase two make up "*Connections*"—a project "designed to provide pro-social opportunities for adolescents to interact with diverse individuals in the community." If you would be interested in sharing your time, energy, enthusiasm, and talent please fill out the form below and return it to me—or you can call me with questions/comments (355-0166).

I understand that everyone is busy and that current obligations are stretching some of us to the limit! I have tried to plan this so that there is maximum flexibility and limited time commitment. Please think it over and get back to me (even if you are unable to participate in this 2nd phase). Thanks in advance!

Regards,

- -

Name: ______________________ Ph. #______________________

I have experience with the following cultures/countries:______________________

Special talents:______________________

Days and times available (M-F, 8:00-3:00):______________________

On the back (or on a separate piece of paper), please comment on what sort of project would interest you the most and what sort of role you would like to play in the development of this project. How might this project be shared with the community?

- I enjoy cooking and would like to teach interested students how to make *sushi* (or some other Japanese dish). We could share the finished product and how we made it with people in a retirement community or a classroom at an elementary school.
- I would like to help students design and create a mural that will help educate others on the issue of world hunger. This mural could be hung in the Lynnwood public library or the UofS Museum.

These are 2 simple ideas. Be creative! What would ***YOU*** like to do?

APPENDIX F

Excerpt from the Follow-up Interview with Kurt
Kurt's words are in boldface

Do you see any, is there any connection between the two?

No, I don't think so. I think everyone's just, lives their own lives, you know? They have the neighbors or whatever, like that, you know people on your street, you know, you know friends that somehow you got to know over the years. I mean they're different everywhere, but no I don't see the connection.

OK. Do you, do you think of, do you think community has strangers. . . in it?

I guess. . . what do you mean by strangers?

Ah. . . people that you don't know.

Yeah, of course.

So. I think for me, part of this was that, you're always, there are lots of people in the community that you don't know, that are part of your community, but they're strangers to you.

Yeah.

So that's kind of, to some degree, I think what I was trying to do with the whole—So here's a church that's right across the street, but, I mean you guys drive past it or walk past it everyday, but you don't really—

But there's—So you wanted people to recognize that relationship?

Not really. Not—

Like, I don't know you, but we're all in the same community.

Kind of. I think, I think it's good to, it's natural you stay in your little group with who you know and you do the things that directly affect you and that are—do you work?

Ummm, no, not really, not yet.

So you, you have a group of friends though—?

Yeah.

And what like do you do in your free time? I know it's a personal question—

Usually hang out. Sports, whatever, hobbies. Hang out.

But there are other parts that I think when you're looking at the big picture, don't you think—we kind of talked about this even, I think your definition of community included like education, police, and the—

Yeah.

So like for example, the elementary school, that's part of the community. I mean, what happens, what happens with those students affects us all—maybe not directly, but indirectly.

Yeah.

So, if you don't have younger brothers or sisters you wouldn't really care about the elementary school.

And I don't have younger brothers and sisters.

Right. So, but had you gone, that would have given you the experience of a different world that's part of your community.

OK, I see—

Does that make sense?

Yeah, it does.

Yeah. . .

Yeah, it makes sense.

Yeah, so I think that was, that was one of my purposes. Is that I see those things as part of the community. . . or people who came that aren't—I mean I think you guys are part of the community, too.

Yeah.

And a lot of people don't interact with you either.

So you want other people to appreciate, appreciate other parts of your community?

Yes.

. . . . . OK.

[Laughter]

That makes sense, yeah.

Do you think that's important? I mean is that a good idea, or, doesn't—do you think, do you think it matters?

I think it's fine the way it is now. I mean people, I'm sure people like, maybe even subconsciously appreciate it, you know. I mean, you can't you can't, be against the schools, you know. I mean everyone appreciates their community.

Do they understand their community? I mean so, so, another example, I would say that people are aware that there are homeless people and that there are shelters.

Right.

But your understanding of what it really, what does that really mean, I think I didn't know until I went to the shelter. I mean it was different than I thought it was gonna be. I wouldn't have known that, I mean in my mind, I had an image, but the reality and what was in my mind are different. I mean, I, I, I think it's the same thing with you guys. I think a lot of people have an image of Jefferson students.

Right.

And I think people naturally, you, you, I think it's the same with international people. You have a—

So what's the point when you realize, 'Oh, OK, it's like that. I thought it was like this, I had my own image, but oh, OK, it's like this.'

So what do you think? I mean, does that matter? Does that matter if your image is right?

Umm. I mean it's a good experience to figure out if your experience is right or wrong. It's a good experience. I mean there's always

going to be people who don't, you know, if it doesn't affect them. . . who cares?

I think it does. . . indirectly.

OK, well it doesn't like directly, you know, 'cause they're going to think like a response thing, you know, they think, that doesn't affect me directly so they're just going to keep on doing their own thing, you know. So it doesn't—it doesn't affect 'em—

Yeah, but I—I don't agree! I mean—

OK, I mean, why don't you agree?

Well, no I just think that, in your mind, like even if you don't directly say, oh I was wrong, I thought this before and now I think this. I think in your mind, somethin' clicks.

Well, 'cause I [Laughter], let's say for instance, let's say for instance I think of the homeless shelter—

Umhm.

And I've been in a homeless shelter before. . . I mean I've had a friend that stayed in there. And it was just regular people, or whatever, they were just strugglin' I mean I understand that they were strugglin'—what's, what's—I don't see anything wrong with my image.

Right. But your image is accurate because you were there.

OK, let's say, um, not a shelter, but a—what else can I say? An old people's home—all right, I mean, I don't think I've ever really been in an old people's home, but I've seen old people strugglin' with change and all that. So I figure it's a bunch of normal people who got too old to take care of themselves. I understand. What else—what else is there to know?

If you went into an old people's home, a retirement community, and you talked to the people and you, then perhaps when your parents—

It's a family thing of course, I'm gonna help my parents, but why should I help these other people? I figure they have their own family to help them.

What if they don't?

Well if they don't, I hope someone, someone that they—like I don't feel obligated to help them, like I figure there's probably old people that don't have anyone—the whole family has died, but I figure someone around him, they should see the situation and maybe, maybe um, help 'em themselves [Laughter] I guess, you know.

But who ought to do that? So do you, do you think you have any responsibility towards, to make the—

To my community?

Yeah.

Uh-uh.

Really?!?!

Uh-uh. Why? No. Not really.

And does the community have responsibilities to you?

Umm. I don't know.

In my definition, that would be part of community.

Well, I mean, not, not, I guess it's not just me, but yeah, I'm part of the communi—well, I mean everything affects the community, but, but. . . . . I don't feel obligated to do something about it, you know. That's not my— [Laughter] I don't know.

[Laughter]

That's not my thing. There's other people to do.

But I thi—in my definition, being part of the community you have, everybody who's in the community has an obligation to the community.

OK, so what would, what would my obligation be then?

Well, I don't know.

To be a kid and just hang out in my community?

Oh, you're not a kid anymore.

No, but I do that. I hang out in my community, I don't—me, I. . . .

Like so, does it matter, if you see somebody breakin' into your neighbor's house—

My neighbor's house, if I know 'em—if I know 'em—

Even if you don't know 'em—

If I don't know 'em and I see someone breakin' in, I'd probably call the cops, yeah.

So that's kind of a. . . . . responsibility to the community. I mean stuff like that—

I'd do that probably because it affects me—'cause I might feel bad 'cause I saw it and I didn't do anything about it and I kept on walking.

Oh, there you go—

It affected me.

Yeah, but I mean there's stuff like that, I mean, if you saw. . . . .if you were at the grocery store and you saw a. . . . . woman with three kids drop her bag of groceries—

Would I help her? Ummm. . . . . I think, if I was far away I'd probably keep on walking, 'cause there's probably someone—if there was someone closer than me to help her—

OK, that's fair.

—then I wouldn't.

OK, if the person who's closer, if you see them walk on—?

Umm. [Laughter] [Laughter]

Umm. I guess it would be depending on the day, if I feel motivated to go there and help her—

Do you think that kind of stuff matters?

No, she can pick up her own groceries.

She's got three small kids!

They can help her!

And the baby's crying—no, small really small.

I don't know. That's her own situation, she should be able to help herself. I mean, I don't know what to say, 'Hi, I'm Kurt, can I help?' You know. I don't see myself doing that.

Would you have to even say, 'Hi, I'm Kurt'?

No, I guess you could start just picking 'em up.

APPENDIX G

E-mail Message from Mrs. Patrick

In terms of last year, particularly at this school, ANY opportunities that the population of children in my class have regarding multi-cultural education, I feel is positive and worthwhile. Differences and ethnic groups can/have been as issue at the school. Therefore, if I can expose them to the idea that "different is just different" instead of "queer" or "not cool" at first grade level, then maybe (????) when my students get older they can be more accepting and willing to overlook differences from themselves. . . if that makes sense. My class really seemed to enjoy the interactiveness and "hands-on" experiences from your resource people and students. They seemed to react favorably to trying "new" things and attempting to learn from cultures outside their own. . . . I think that fits right into my "goal". . . . I think they also enjoyed and "looked up to" working with teenagers-high school aged students. I think it is important for all of us, once we hit "a certain age" to maintain that childlike love for the "new" in learning! I think your students observed this in my first graders. Also, I think your students felt "good" about "teaching" children about something they already "knew". . . a GREAT self-confidence and self-esteem booster!! This opportunity gave them a sense of how important it is to model and respect small children and their ability to learn and think. . . . Maybe it will help or come to mind one day when they have their own children?????

I really enjoyed having your students come in and would/will recommend the experience to some of my colleagues.

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