Youth empowerment, engagement and identity: A participatory action approach to exploring marginalized youth perceptions of their role identity and the effects on civic engagement

By

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Abstract

This research investigates how underserved, minority adolescents understand civic engagement and how they view their roles in their community. Utilizing a participatory action research methodology, adolescent participants acted as co-researchers and were provided with a platform through which to investigate issues that is important in their lives. This research provided three themes related to adolescent role identification. The first theme highlighted adolescent identification with role that are predetermined by adults or society. The second theme related to low confidence perceptions by adolescent in identifying their roles within the construct of their community. The third theme discussed adolescents who had difficulty identifying roles or who felt a sense of rolelessness. The findings of this research suggest that participatory action research is a useful methodology to promote youth empowerment and civic engagement and highlight beneficial considerations for adult researchers as they embark on similar pursuits.

Keywords: adolescents; civic engagement; role identification; empowerment; participatory action research
Dedication

For Mom and Dad, you instilled in me a love of knowledge and a desire to make the world a better place. Your guidance, support, and love make me believe anything is possible and that one person can make a difference. Thank you for being the role models for the person I aspire to be.
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To my advisor, Jamie, thank you for introducing me to the world of action research and instilling in me a desire to step outside the box and try something new. Your guidance and belief that I could do it made me believe in myself.

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Civic engagement is a vital part of any operating democracy. In order to ensure that society evolves in ways that benefit and coincide with the wishes of the people, it is imperative that individuals have venues for making their voice heard and for impacting the change they want to see in their communities. Although there are a multitude of ways for most citizens to be civically engaged, marginalized populations of people, particularly minorities and youth, have fewer opportunities and much more difficulty gaining access to these opportunities.

While visiting informal settlements in the Dominican Republic and South Africa, I met young adults who had visions for their communities. These visions were directly related to youth livelihood and opportunities for education. They recognized particular needs in their community and when they became aware that little was being done to impact the change they envisioned, they decided that they had to take action. Although they faced numerous barriers along their journeys, these young adults maintained their vision and incorporated other members of their communities into their efforts. Ultimately, these young adults made a difference in the lives of community members and developed infrastructures that helped to improve opportunities for fellow youth. Learning about the ability of a young person with conviction and vision to impact change inspired me to investigate ways to empower youth around the world to take a stand in their communities. Through this research, I endeavored to understand the perceptions, expectations and visions of underserved youth who otherwise may not feel like they have a voice in their communities.

The Research Question

This research investigated how underserved, minority adolescents understand civic engagement as well as how they view their roles in their communities. In this investigation, I
conducted a participatory action research study with adolescent members of the Midvale, Utah Boys and Girls Club. During this study, I involved minority youth participants in a group with their peers to critically think about their communities and then collectively identify something they would like to change about their community. We then worked together to design and execute a project that aimed to impact that change. Through my participation with this group of adolescents, I gained insight into their goals for their community and what roles they think they play in attaining these goals. This grassroots investigation, combined with a detailed literature review, provides the framework from which recommendations are made in regards to the empowerment of youth within diverse communities. Through this process, I investigated the following research questions: How can their involvement in a research project impact adolescents’ understanding of civic engagement? Does such a project impact how they see their roles in their community?

**Root Causes Addressed**

The root causes addressed by this study are poverty and disenfranchisement in underserved communities. Many communities are underserved because of a lack of resources available to improve conditions for citizens. These inequities spur from institutional and political structures existent in communities, many of which perpetuate inequalities for underserved ethnic groups and members of low socioeconomic status families (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002). As a result of these material deficits, youth in these communities are faced with many more social, economic and political challenges than their more privileged counterparts (Martinek & Hellison, 1998). By empowering youth to become more engaged in their communities and to become advocates for their neighbors, it is possible that underserved communities can garner newfound attention and support.
Underserved populations around the United States suffer from a lack of resources that affects many aspects of their lives. In particular, the institutional structure that exists primarily to serve the nation’s youth, our education system, is racked with fiscal inequities that negatively affect underserved youth (Kozol, 1991). Due to the current system of providing funding to schools often based on local property values, youth from more impoverished regions attend schools that receive less education funding (Ladson-Billings, 1998). As a result of the constrained budgets, school buildings are often in varying states of dilapidation, students do not have access to appropriate materials, and teachers are overburdened and stressed (Mickelson, 2003). These concerns take attention away from the process of education and often result in lower standardized test scores that are used to judge student performance and provide better education opportunities for them (Kozol, 1991; Mickelson, 2003). This is just one example of the institutional structures in place that adversely affect underserved youth and lead to at-risk behaviors.

These inequities are often further perpetuated in communities with high numbers of minorities. As will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, critical race theory argues that race affects all aspects of society and individuals’ lives (Ladson-Billings, 2005). As a result, it is imperative to investigate the ways in which race impacts youth’s experiences and perceptions of their roles in their communities.

Stemming from poverty and the marginalization that occurs in underserved communities, youth are often disenfranchised. As Martinek and Hellison (1998) note, “The stories of children and youth at risk in the United States are often highlighted by school dropout, criminality, drug abuse, prostitution, and hopelessness. At the heart of such despair…is their belief that they have been abandoned by society” (p. 47). This disenfranchisement leads to challenges in engaging
youth through empowerment and educational opportunities (Hughes, Newkirk, & Stenhjem, 2010, p. 22). In order to combat these challenges, it is imperative to understand the environments that underserved youth experience as well as their perceptions of those environments. Armed with this understanding and subsequently promoting leadership growth in these communities, it may be possible to foster indigenous leaders who are ultimately more empowered to be catalysts for change.

**Significance and Importance**

A large portion of the research surrounding youth civic engagement is oriented around existing programs and their impacts (Harris, 2010; Nagda, McCoy & Barrett, 2006; Wagaman, 2011). While this is beneficial and is investigated further in my literature review, in this study I was interested in learning from the population these programs are aiming to impact and engage. Similar to using needs assessments in developing communities, this research asked the population of interest what they want and how they view the world. Through these conversations and the theories related to development and race, I endeavored to provide recommendations that can be used to increase the impact of programs and environments aiming to escalate youth civic engagement and empowerment. If the goal is to provide a better future for undeserved communities, then it is imperative that the members of that community be engaged in the discussion and decision making that will impact them.

**Delimitations**

Due to the time and resource restraints of this research, I focused my attention on only one Boys and Girls Club in Midvale, UT. This geographic concentration enabled me to identify characteristics specific to this community and, through my literature review, allowed me to apply my findings in Utah to other communities around the country and elsewhere in the world. This
geographic focus also permitted me to focus my attention on building rapport with a limited number of participants in order to more effectively facilitate group sessions.

In this study, I included both boys and girls but decided not to investigate the role of gender in civic engagement. I observed interactions and discussions between all participants without investigating differences between how boys and girls interact or engage. I considered each group member as an individual in order to emphasize research and analysis on minority and underserved statuses and how these impact youth’s understanding of and interest in civic engagement.

**The Boys and Girls Club of Midvale, Utah**

For this research, I worked closely with the Boys and Girls Club in Midvale, UT. The mission of the Boys and Girls Club is “to inspire and empower youth, families and communities to realize their full potential as productive, responsible and caring citizens” (Boys & Girls Clubs of South Valley, 2012, para. 1). Through this research, I gained insight into areas of interest for youth and investigated how to empower and inspire this population to be leaders in their communities. In addition to informing my research, this information has been particularly useful for the Boys and Girls Club in planning future leadership and civic engagement programs for their youth members. Ideally, this research will help to inform Boys and Girls Club leadership on how to incorporate techniques and environments into their programs that are engaging for underserved, minority youth and will promote positive impacts for the youth they work with.
Chapter 2 – Review of Related Literature

A significant amount of research has been conducted around the topics of civic engagement and youth empowerment. In general, this research is focused in three major areas: (1) best practices associated with increases in positive behaviors related to civic engagement and youth empowerment (Boog, 2003; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Christens & Dolan, 2010; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Gusfield, 1975; Hughes, Newkirk, & Stenhjem, 2010; Martinek & Hellison, 1998; Zeldin, O’Connor, & Camino, 2006); (2) qualitative research on programs aiming to promote civic engagement (Harris, 2010; Nagda, 2006; Nicotera, 2008; Pearrow, 2008; Wagaman, 2011); and (3) theories surrounding the effects of ethnicity, social class and race on civic engagement (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lawrence, 1987; Leonardo, 2004; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002; Solorzano, 1997). These areas provide insight into the diverse research being conducted in the field and offer a framework for understanding the catalysts for and impact of civic engagement within underserved youth communities.

For the purposes of this research, I addressed the root causes described in chapter one, namely the disenfranchisement and marginalization of underserved youth. In this examination, I investigated the literature’s depiction of these populations and reviewed theories related to these groups and their role in impacting social change. This review provided the framework for my research as I investigated the following questions: How can their involvement in a research project impact adolescents’ understanding of civic engagement? Does such a project impact how they see their role in the community?

Themes in the Literature

Using a participatory action research framework, this research investigated minority
youth civic engagement and their perceptions of their roles in their communities. Through an examination of the literature surrounding youth civic engagement and empowering underserved minorities to have a voice in their communities, four primary themes emerged. These themes, in concert with the critical race and critical social theories described below, provided the framework for investigating how youth understand civic engagement, their communities, and their role in these two important areas.

Civic Engagement & Youth Civic Identities

Civic engagement is a complicated term that elicits different perceptions from people depending on their backgrounds and the group participating in the civic engagement. For the purposes of this research, I utilized the definition highlighted by Camino and Zeldin (2002) describing civic engagement as the ability “to influence choices and collective action; it is the purview of every citizen, not only officials and professionals” (p. 214). Because civic mindedness is inherently relative, a person’s culture, socioeconomic status, and race influence his or her predilection to be engaged as well as the forms of engagement in which he or she participates (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002). It is also important to note that avenues and opportunities to be civically engaged “are not evenly distributed by social class or race or ethnicity” (Flanagan & Levine, 2010, p. 159).

This lack of opportunity to be civically engaged is intensified for youth. Many of the conventional methods by which citizens engage with their community are not accessible to youth (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). In other cases, youth are deemed too immature or unknowledgeable to be active participants in civic discussions or projects (Harris, 2010). As Flanagan and Levine (2010) argue, there are ten characteristics of citizenship that demonstrate civic engagement:

(1) Belonging to at least one group, (2) attending religious services at least monthly, (3)
belonging to a union, (4) reading newspaper at least once a week, (5) voting, (6) being contacted by a political party, (7) working on a community project, (8) attending club meetings, (9) believing that people are trustworthy, and (10) volunteering. (p. 161)

These characteristics represent problems for youth who are looking to become more engaged in their communities since some of these, in particular voting, have a minimum age requirement. Having age restrictions limits youth civic engagement and isolates youth from meaningful participation during their formative years. Since youth are not generally afforded opportunities to be involved in “groups that build civic identities and skills. Social class disparities in civic participation that begin in the pre-adult years are exacerbated by unequal opportunities for gaining civic practice” (Flanagan & Levine, 2010, p. 166). As a result, many youth are never exposed or introduced to meaningful civic engagement and do not develop the understanding or skills necessary to be active participants in their communities (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

There is an inherent complexity in youth civic engagement because of adolescents’ evolving understanding of themselves and their place in society. As Harris (2010) discusses:

The ideal of an homogenous [sic], continuous social world which is dependent on shared attachment to a local place, the absence of conflict, and mainstream forms of civic engagement is complicated for young people, as they shift towards partial, multiple and unconventional civic identifications, and as they grapple with communities that exclude or problematize their diverse experiences, voices and concerns, in part by treating them as an homogenous ‘youth problem’ that must be managed [sic]. (p. 579)

Further intensifying this concern is the way that youth, in general, are viewed by adults. In contemporary society, youth are frequently not viewed as being an important part of civil society and are instead considered to be “a source of worry or threat, not potential” (Camino & Zeldin,
This is problematic for the future development of a civically engaged populace and perpetuates the marginalization of youth.

When an encouraging environment is fostered, youth civic engagement can have very positive impacts on both youth as individuals as well as the community as a whole. As Christens and Dolan (2010) identify, “where it is being effectively implemented, youth organizing changes public perceptions of youth, citizenship, and norms for participation in local politics” (p. 544). In other words, this is a cyclical process that builds on itself and through fostering youth civic engagement, the community as a whole grows and develops a new perspective of youth roles in society. Additionally, Sánchez-Jankowski (2002) argues “if a country is to maintain its democratic appeal, it must teach young people what it means to be both civic minded (knowledgeable and attitudinally supportive of the political system) and engaged (actively involved)” (p. 239).

**Youth Organizing**

Youth organizing is the process of enabling youth to have a voice in their communities and to impact the change they would like to see (Christens & Dolan, 2011). Through a review of numerous youth organizing initiatives, Christens and Dolan (2011) developed a list of four characteristics necessary for successful youth organizing: (1) the effort must concentrate on the conditions faced by the young people involved, the nature of these conditions, and the role of power in creating and maintaining these conditions; (2) youth should learn strategies for collaboratively harnessing their collective social power; (3) youth should choose issues that are most important to them through collective decisions making; and (4) youth must take the lead in decision making. These factors position youth as the leaders of the group and allow them to dictate the direction and actions they would collectively like to take during their efforts.
However, as was highlighted in the review of many youth organizing initiatives, it is easy for initiatives to put these structures in place but only to superficially use them (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Christens & Dolan, 2011; Jennings, et al., 2006; Pearrow, 2008). When this happens “civic involvement/development projects for youth risk becoming tokenistic [because] youth are equipped only with the techniques of involvement, not with the knowledge and experience of leadership and administration” (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 218).

As the literature on youth organizing demonstrates, there are significant benefits that result from youth engagement in society. In particular, “contributing to the larger community through authentic engagement can help adolescents combat rolelessness; in turn, meaningful roles can provide youth with opportunities to develop positive self-identity, increased sense of self-worth and enhanced self-efficacy” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 43). By incorporating youth into efforts that affect their lives, youth also gain an important and unique understanding of power structures in their communities (Christens & Dolan, 2011).

Youth organizing also has a positive impact on the broader community. As youth learn how to work with their peers and to impact change, they improve their attachment to their communities and contribute to the greater good (Nicotera, 2008). Through their review of youth organizing initiatives, Christens and Dolan (2011) found that when youth organizing exhibits the four characteristics described earlier, it “changes public perceptions of youth, citizenship, and norms for participation in local politics” (p. 544). Additionally, when youth engage in community organizing initiatives, the results of these initiatives frequently produce “ripple effects” throughout the community where they operate (Jennings et al., 2002, p. 50). These effects range from impacting the community to impacting individuals. Multiple research efforts discovered a direct correlation between youth engagement and adult perceptions on youth
Youth organizing. As Christens and Dolan (2011) found:

> The feelings that the youth expressed were ‘eye opening for the adults,’ who realized through this process that youth were really suffering in a way that they can’t express often enough. Adults also realized that youth were limited in their opportunities to ‘do things to vent that or change that.’ (p. 533)

Youth organizing impacts both adults and youth who participate and it promotes positive community growth in the future. By changing public perceptions on youth engagement, opportunities for youth involvement will continue to grow and these marginalized populations will begin to have a greater voice in their communities.

**Youth Empowerment**

Similar to many of the terms discussed throughout this review, *empowerment* is a term that can be understood many different ways and the research on youth civic engagement spans these disparate definitions. One area of common agreement seems to be the various levels at which empowerment can occur. As Jennings et al. (2006) discuss, “empowerment is a social action process that can occur at multiple levels, e.g., individual, family, organization, and community” (p. 33). This breadth further complicates the effort to focus a definition of empowerment and how to effectively empower individuals.

For the purposes of this study, drawing on the work of M. Alex Wagaman, I will use the term *empowerment* to mean the personal characteristics that provide awareness and a critical understanding of an individual’s environment and their place in it. In particular, as Wagaman (2011) describes it:

> Empowerment is the process by which adolescents develop the consciousness and skills necessary to envision social change and understand their role in that change. Adolescents
who are empowered are more likely to take action and exercise their power to transform social conditions. (pg. 284)

Rather than giving youth power, the literature on youth empowerment emphasizes the importance of providing youth with critical analysis skills and a lens through which to engage with their community (see discussion of Critical Social Theory later in this chapter for additional information). From this perspective, empowerment is focused on developing a set of skills rather than providing youth with actual power. As Jennings et al. (2006) describe, “youth are not truly empowered if they do not have the capacity to address the structure, processes, social values and practices of the issues at hand” (p. 48). These skills benefit the individual by assisting them in developing a greater understanding of their community but also provide adolescents with the critical analysis skills needed to consciously avoid some of the risks and hazards associated with growing up (Wagaman, 2011). Empowered youth are also more likely to take an active role in their communities in order to impact social conditions (Wagaman, 2011).

**Community Development & Social Change**

The term community is broad and can encompass disparate notions of what characteristics make a community. In order to remedy this confusion, Gusfield (1975) distinguished between two forms of community that he referred to as territorial communities and relational communities. Within this framework, territorial communities refer to geographic-based communities such as neighborhoods and cities, while relational communities refer to relationships that emerge out of personal interaction. This concept of relational communities is particularly beneficial for youth who are likely to identify with a community based on virtual and transnational connections rather than merely geographic borders (Harris, 2010). This
understanding of how youth identify with others and form their own communities is an important distinction for this research.

Building on the concept of communities described by Gusfield, it is also imperative to investigate individual perceptions and sentiments toward their communities. Through a review of differing definitions of communities, McMillan and Chavis (1986) propose a definition for *sense of community*. In their words, “sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). McMillan and Chavis (1986) also argue, through an analysis of research done by Ahlbrant and Cunningham (1979), that a sense of community is an “integral contributor to one’s commitment to a neighborhood and [their] satisfaction with it” (p. 7). Unfortunately, as Harris (2010) notes, “participation in community is only recognized when it is enacted in conventional, formal ways” (p. 574). This can be particularly problematic for marginalized populations because of the lack of access to traditional venues for participation. In particular, since youth are often not afforded opportunities to be involved in their community, they may feel particularly disenfranchised when it comes to having a voice in their communities.

Significant research has been conducted on the benefits of incorporating diverse voices and forms of participation into community initiatives. When a more diverse population of people is engaged in community decision-making, the democratic process is improved and disenfranchised populations are more likely to have their voices heard (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002; Jennings et al., 2006). Additionally, in order to impact change in a community, it is often necessary to change the systems and structures in place that maintain the status quo. Since “changing systems necessarily involves changing individuals – it should come as no surprise,
then, for human development and community development processes to be most efficient when intertwined” (Christens & Dolan, 2011, p. 543). As youth grow up and learn about their communities, deciding what they would like for their role to be in their community, it is important that they are involved in community development efforts. This involvement will likely give them insight into the evolving direction of their communities and will also provide them a platform to share their perspectives on community development efforts.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory and critical social theory emerged repeatedly throughout the literature on youth empowerment and civic engagement (Jennings, et al., 2006; Leonardo, 2004; Pearrow, 2008; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002; Solorzano, 1997). Critical race theory investigates the role that ethnicity, social class and race have on a variety of social factors. Critical social theory emphasizes the role that critical analysis and examination have on social growth. Together, these two theories provide a framework and basis for my research oriented around underserved, minority youth civic engagement.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is a field that builds “from the premise that race and racism are endemic [and] permanent” in society (Solorzano, 1997, p. 6). The theory argues “in a racialized society where whiteness is positioned as normative, everyone is ranked and categorized in relation to these points of opposition” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9). In other words, we are, in a way, indoctrinated in our respective cultures and societies to perceive people and their actions based on their race. Even when individuals do not believe that they are participating in this type of racism, Charles R. Lawrence III (1987) postulates that:

We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs
about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions…. a large part of the behavior that produces racial discrimination is influenced by unconscious racial motivation” (p. 322).

This unknowing bias permeates and influences all aspects of society, including civic engagement. Based on race, society often has differing expectations of how individuals or groups of citizens perceive their responsibility or role in their community. Separate from individual’s perceptions on this, the community in which they live will often have societally-instilled beliefs about them and their actions. This is particularly problematic for youth who are just starting to form their personal identity and place in their community.

In addition to community perceptions, throughout the literature surrounding civic engagement are discussions of the impact of race and ethnicity on an individual’s views on and their likelihood to engage civically. As Sánchez-Jankowski (2002) highlights in his investigation of the impact of collective group history on rates and forms of civic engagement, “the history of systematic exclusion has provided an indelible scar that continues to influence the content, amount, and intensity of [minority population’s] civic engagement” (p. 238). As a result of this history, minority groups, especially those in urban settings, are often at a disadvantage and as a result are “vulnerable to oppression, marginalization, and disenfranchisement” (Pearrow, 2008, p. 511).

The impacts of this collective history permeate beyond the present and contribute to sustained inequities experienced by many members of minority groups (Ladson-Billings, 1998). One fundamental example of the structures in place to perpetuate marginalization of minority groups is school funding. As a result of the current formulas in place providing school funding from property taxes, Ladson-Billings (1998) argues “without a commitment to redesigning
funding formulas, one of the basic inequities of schooling will remain in place and virtually guarantee the reproduction of the status quo” (p. 21). These types of structural inequities are apparent in nearly all aspects of life and, as can be expected, they have an impact on an individual’s or group’s likelihood to participate in their community as well as their preferred mode of civic engagement. As Hughes, Newkirks, & Stenhjem (2010) note:

Youth are generally optimistic toward their own personal attributes and abilities…[but] they feel doubtful about their chances of success in a society in which they believe the system is stacked against them and in which they feel little control over their already limited opportunities. (p. 22-23)

Additionally, the discrepancy in experiences between groups of people further impacts their individual perceptions on their roles in their communities. This social relativity greatly impacts individual views on what it means to be civically engaged and “a person’s socioeconomic position and their ethnic group’s history in America influence the type and intensity of their civic involvement” (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2001, p. 243).

As researchers endeavoring to encourage civic engagement and youth empowerment, it is exceptionally important to understand the role that race and ethnicity play in these areas. However, as Charles R. Lawrence III (1987) so eloquently warns, “acknowledging and understanding the malignancy are prerequisites to the discovery of an appropriate cure. But the diagnosis is difficult, because our own contamination with the very illness for which a cure is sought impairs our comprehension of the disorder” (p.321). We need to be aware of these unconscious sentiments and as we work with youth from diverse communities and races it is important that we frame our engagement and research to investigate how youth are impacted by these biases. By understanding biases inherent in societal interactions, especially as they relate
to youth, we may be better able to empower marginalized populations of people to impact change in their communities.

**Critical Social Theory**

Critical social theory emphasizes the role of critical thinking in social empowerment programs and promotes activities that encourage activism and community engagement (Pearrow, 2008). Through the process of critical analysis, individuals are challenged to review institutional and systematic barriers, how these were created, and then how to mitigate their negative impacts (Leonardo, 2004). An investigation into the human condition and nature of oppression is an important part of critical social theory. As Leonardo (2004) states, “although different forms of critical social theory may debate the nature of oppression… they converge on the idea that social inequality is stubborn, the persistence of which subverts students’ full learning potential” (p. 13). Through critical examination, marginalized groups of people can become empowered to actively participate and contribute to the construction of “stronger, more equitable communities” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 40).

It is important to note that while critical social theory focuses on individual critical analysis, a large component of this theory is oriented around collective efforts in communities. In particular, education plays a large role in promoting collective social action for youth. Leonardo (2004) emphasizes that “quality education is as much about teaching students the ability to read the world more critically (ideology critique) as it is imagining a better world that is less oppressive (utopian critique)” (p. 16). In other words, teaching youth how to be informed, critical citizens is key to their personal empowerment. Furthermore, by utilizing their critical analysis skills and working together, youth are better able to impact social change in their respective communities (Pearrow, 2008).
Synthesis and Research Gap Recognition

The research examined here provides strong arguments for the promotion of youth organizing and outlets for youth participation in civic engagement. In the pursuit of these opportunities, it is important to consider cultural, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of youth as well as their collective histories. By promoting youth engagement in society, individual youth as well as the community as a whole benefit and start the evolution toward a more inclusive and democratic society.

Although there is significant research in the areas of youth empowerment and civic engagement, there is very little oriented around youth civic engagement and their role in their communities. Much of the qualitative research conducted in these areas relates to the evaluation of existing programs aimed at improving youth civic engagement and empowerment. Rather than focusing on existing programs or best practices, in this study, I engaged youth in discussions surrounding their perceptions of the concept of civic engagement and how they view their roles in their communities. Building on these discussions, I facilitated the group of participants in developing and executing a project focused to impact change related to a specific aspect of the participants’ community.
Chapter 3 – Methods

In order to learn about ways in which underserved, minority adolescents understand civic engagement and their role in their communities, I conducted a participatory action research (PAR) study in Midvale, UT, a suburb of Salt Lake City. This method allowed me to engage directly with participants in the study and to observe how they interact with each other. Contrary to traditional research methods, PAR includes participants as co-researchers and provides participants a platform through which to investigate an issue that is important in their lives (Boog, 2003; Dold & Chapman, 2011; Fine, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007; Klocker, 2012; London, 2007; Van der Meulen, 2011). Participants in this study were engaged in all phases of research including the development of our research question, data collection, and analysis. The ultimate goal of this study was twofold: (1) to better understand minority, adolescent perspectives on civic engagement and their role in their communities; and (2) to develop a project that assists in impacting change in the participants’ communities on a topic that is important to them. By conducting this PAR study, I garnered insight from the perspective of the participants and the adolescents who participated gained exposure to skills and insights about themselves, their peers and their communities that increased their civic awareness (Berg, 2004).

Context

The participants for this study were drawn from the Midvale, Utah Boys and Girls Club. The population of Midvale includes 24.3% Latino/a (as compared to a statewide rate of 13%) and 24.7% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (as compared to a statewide rate of 14.2%). Sixteen percent of the population in Midvale lives below the poverty level and 25% of the population of the city is below the age of 18 (United States Census Bureau, 2012).
The Midvale Boys and Girls Club includes 65 registered members who range in age between 12 and 18. The Club’s members are 63% Latino/a, 18.5% Caucasian, 12.5% Multi-Racial, 1.5% African American, 1.5% Pacific Islander and 3% who identified as “Other.” At least 80% of the Club families live at an income level below the poverty line and 45% of the members come from single-parent homes.

**Research Participants**

This study included two distinct groups of participants. The first set will be referred to throughout this thesis as core research group participants and were those participants who attended research sessions and served as co-researchers within this study. The second set of participants will be referred to as survey respondents and were participants who, as their title suggests, completed and returned a survey as part of the core participants’ action project. These two groups of participants are described in detail below.

**Core Research Group Participants**

Core research group participants in this research were selected from members of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club. For the purposes of this study, participation was initially limited to seven to ten participants between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. However due to the interest of a few members who were older than sixteen, the core research group ended up including participants between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. Participation was limited in order to maintain a manageable group size where all participants had ample opportunity to express their opinions and engage in critical discussion. Participants included both male and female youth. In order to be included in this study, youth were required to be members of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club and had to have conversational skills in English in order to actively participate in group discussions. Although initial outreach and information regarding
participation in this study was provided to Keystone Leadership Club members, participation in
this study was not limited to members of this specific group within the Boys and Girls Club.

The Keystone Leadership Club is a club within the national Boys and Girls Club network
that aims to promote personal character development and leadership skills in adolescent
members between the ages of 14 and 18 (Boys and Girls Clubs of America, 2012, para. 1).
Within this club, members work closely with one another and a staff mentor to complete
community service projects, conduct minor fundraising for events within their respective club,
and engage with members of the community through a variety of activities. At the Midvale Boys
and Girls Club, this group consists primarily of female members who were asked to join the
group due to their positive leadership and mentoring skills.

As I worked to identify youth to participate as members of the core research group, I
worked closely with the Unit Director of the Club and Teen Program Director and I accepted all
of the students who submitted their consent and assent forms by the start of the research. In
order to increase awareness of this study and the opportunity to participate, I hosted a meet-and-
greet event at the Club in December of 2012 to share information about this study and to answer
any questions members or their parents had regarding participation. Due to the participants’
extisting relationship with the club, I did not have issues gaining physical access to potential
participants. However, as this PAR study required active participation and engagement from all
members of the group, I started spending time at the Boys and Girls Club in the month prior to
beginning research to meet with the participants in order to start building rapport.

The core research group included six adolescent members of the Midvale Boys and Girls
Club. Even though participation was not limited to members of the Keystone Club, all of the
core research participants were members of this club. In order to maintain confidentiality, all
participants’ names have been changed to pseudonyms selected by each of the participants. Below is a brief background on each of the core research participants including information regarding their participation in the research sessions.

**Alana.** Alana was a 16 year old eleventh grader who had been a member of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club for six years and a member of the Keystone Leadership Club for three years. For two of those years, Alana served as Vice President of the Club. She was half Native American and half Caucasian. Although she made her high school’s softball team and was no longer able to attend our research sessions after Session 4, Alana served as a very active participant in the group for the first four weeks. During this time she was the group comedian who often cracked jokes but also offered very personal insights regarding her community and personal experiences. Alana participated in Sessions 1-4 of the core research group sessions.

**Diaria.** Diaria was a 14 year old ninth grader at the local middle school and was Latina, specifically of Mexican descent. Diaria had been a member of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club for seven years and this was her first year in the Keystone Club where she served as Secretary. She was generally a quiet member of the group and offered her perspectives only when asked directly. After missing a few sessions during the beginning of the study, Diaria no longer thought she was allowed to participate, resulting in her absence from the middle research sessions. After being explicitly invited by the group to continue her participation, she returned for the final three sessions. Diaria participated in Sessions 2, 6, 7, and 8.

**Edna.** Edna celebrated her 18th birthday during our research sessions and was a senior at the local high school. She was half Latina and half Caucasian. She was a very active member of the community and participated as a member of her high school cheerleading squad. Edna had been a member of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club for nine years and was a member of the
Keystone Club for six of those years. Edna served as President for the Keystone Club. Although she was generally a quiet member of the group, when she spoke up she had important contributions and insights to add to the conversation. Edna was accepted to her top choice of colleges and will be staying in Utah to attend this prestigious university in the Fall. She received a major award from the Boys and Girls Club in 2013 recognizing her engagement and leadership within the community and club. Edna participated in all core research group session except for Session 5 when she was absent to accept her award.

**Gretel.** Gretel was a 14 year old eighth grader who attended the local middle school. She was Latina, specifically Mexican, descent. This was her first year in the Keystone Club and she had been a member of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club for five years. Although she was one of the youngest members of the group she was one of the most active and engaged members of the core research group. Gretel was generally a very happy person and was the first Boys and Girls Club member I met when I started coming to the Club in December before the research began. She participated in all eight core research group sessions.

**Harry.** Harry was the only male and non-minority member of the core research group. He was 14 years old and although he did not live within the boundaries of Midvale, he attended the local middle school and has been a member of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club for a year. This was his first year in the Keystone Club. Harry was a self-professed lover of video games and although he was a more soft-spoken member of the group he remained very engaged throughout the research study. Harry participated in all core research group sessions except for Session 6 when he was absent with the flu.

**Veronica.** Veronica was an 18 year old senior at the local high school. Throughout group sessions, Veronica often took a leadership role and assisted with guiding group
conversations and promoting group engagement. She was of Mexican descent and although she went to school in Midvale and had been an active member of the Boys and Girls Club for ten years she resided in West Jordan, a city to the west of Midvale. This was her second year as a member of the Keystone Club. Although she had not yet decided what college to attend in the fall, Veronica had narrowed her options to well-known and respected universities located in the Northeast of the United States. Veronica received a major award from the Boys and Girls Club in 2012 recognizing her engagement and leadership both within the community and the club. Veronica participated in all eight core research group sessions.

**Survey Respondents**

Survey respondents were selected by each of the core research group participants. These participants included classmates and friends of the core research group as well as other members of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club who were not a part of the core research group. Nearly all of the respondents had lived in Midvale for over three years and were between the ages of 14 and 18. Unfortunately, survey respondents were not asked to provide their gender or race so additional demographic information is available for this group of participants.

**Data Collection**

One of the primary focuses of this study was to learn about participant perceptions and values related to civic engagement and their communities as a whole. Rather than interviewing youth and collecting data from a variety of questions, I was interested in observing youth as they worked together on a project related to their community. To do this, I engaged youth participants in a PAR study that provided them with a platform to investigate something that concerns them in their community. As a group, the participants worked together to first identify an issue that they were interested in and then they devised a plan for how they wanted to
approach the problem. I engaged with the participants at every step in this process and acted as a facilitator for their discussions and work.

PAR inverts the typical research paradigm and places the decision making and research focus in the hands of those who are often the subject of research, in this case, minority youth (Fine, Tuck, Zeller-Berkman, 2007). By pursuing knowledge using this framework, this study endeavors to “speak critical truths to those in power” (Fine, Tuck, Zeller-Berkman, 2007, p. 8) and “positions youth inquiry as a tool of political struggle” (p. 9). As participants serve as co-researchers, the research questions were considered, investigated, and analyzed from the perspective of the participants. As a result of this engagement with the research process, participants shared ownership of the research (Dold & Chapman, 2012). Additionally, “working from the inside out, PAR creates an opportunity for the production of new knowledge and the development of new theory” (Cahill, 2007, p. 363). Rather than focusing on research from a privileged perspective, PAR highlights the perspective of marginalized groups of people and as a result provides insights that may be missing from conventional research studies and understanding.

Through a review of the history and basis of PAR, Fine (2009) argues that PAR is particularly useful for marginalized populations because of its premise that “critical expertise lies in those most oppressed” (p. 2) and that “PAR also embodies a radical commitment to inquiry-inspired action” (p. 2). From its very nature, PAR is intended to be emancipatory and empowering for participants (Boog, 2003; Berg, 2009; Dold & Chapman, 2012). To do this, action research develops both critical analysis and reflection skills of participants and focuses on concerns that a collective group of participants have together in order to impact social change (Berg, 2004; Cahill, 2007).
Research Process/Activities

This research was split into eight sessions covering four phases: rapport building, planning, action, and reflection. During each hour-long session, I facilitated group discussion while observing participants as well as their group dynamics. In the following sections, I will describe each of these phases. Due to the emergent nature of PAR studies, in instances where the schedule or plan for the sessions was modified, I include a discussion of the plan as well as a depiction of the actual session occurrences.

In addition to the sessions described below, I engaged other stakeholders to increase awareness of the activities of the study and to avoid any actions following the study that might counteract the self-determination and empowerment that may result from the participants’ engagement with the study (Boog, 2003). Although the emphasis of this study was on youth civic engagement, in order for this study to potentially have long-lasting effects, it was important to maintain open communication with adult members of the community as well. For the purposes of this research, the Club Teen Director and Club Director were very closely involved with the study and were kept apprised of all actions within the session. The theoretical framework of this study and the background surrounding PAR and youth empowerment was also shared with these Directors in order to further engage them in the process of this study.

Phase I: Rapport Building (Session 1). The first session with participants was focused on introducing ourselves to each other and discussing what we would do together. At this point, I was generally familiar with each of the participants due to the time spent at the club in the preceding month. However, since none of the participants had turned in their consent and assent forms yet, this session was focused on getting to know each other and discussing the process of this research. During this session, I explained the concepts of PAR and discussed how we would
work together to investigate and address the issue they later identified as one of interest. We discussed the basic timeline for the study and started thinking about issues of interest to the group.

I had initially planned to include a basic discussion of meeting protocol (ie. rules of engagement, attendance, respect of other members), however since I had not received the appropriate forms from participants, we kept this part of the conversation very short. In this part of the discussion, I highlighted the importance of active participation and attendance and due to the imperative for productive conversation in these sessions, I also discussed the democratic process that was to be used for decision-making (Boog, 2003).

**Phase II: Planning (Session 2-3).** This phase included the development of research questions as well as a discussion about appropriate methodologies the group would use to conduct their research or complete their project. Session two was the first active session for this research. This session initiated the conversation among participants on their community and specifically on what they liked or did not like about their community. This conversation evolved to focus on a few areas that they were interested in investigating for improvement in their community. At the end of this session the participants gave themselves an assignment to each ask five other community members what they liked and did not like in their community.

Session three built on the questions that were asked in session two and focused on discussing the results the participants collected from five community members. During this discussion we identified a few themes and decided to focus the attention of our project on spreading awareness on what community members can do to improve their community. During this session, we discussed possible projects or methodologies that could help us to do this and ultimately decided to move forward with a mural in the community that would illustrate many of
the issues related to the primary theme of “respect for community.”

**Phase III: Action (Session 4-7).** During this phase, the plan was for the research group to work on the mural that they identified during phase II and for me to continue working with the participants to assist them (as needed) in bringing their project to fruition. As is often the case in PAR, we hit a roadblock during session four due to the inclusion of outside participants who had been identified as artists for our mural. Unfortunately, the inclusion of these new participants changed the strong dynamic that the participants had built over the previous three sessions and the project started moving in a direction that was unrelated to what the participants had originally identified.

Because I wanted to ensure that this research and project were led by the research participants, I came to Session 5 with questions related to how the group thought Session 4 had gone. When the participants echoed my sentiments about the misdirection, we regrouped and decided to move away from the mural and focus on a new project that would better fit with the timeframe we had and the questions we identified in Phase II. During this session we decided to create a video highlighting our research group and the perceptions of community members related to what they liked and do not like about the city of Midvale. To collect these responses we decided to create a survey to administer in the community with the participants’ peers.

During Session 6, we focused our attention on creating the survey to use in the community. Since there were a few participants who had not attended Session 5 we also brought these participants up to speed with the new direction. At the end of Session 6 we had a final version of the survey that I told the participants I would get approved through the IRB before we started administering it within the community.

Unfortunately, due to a delay with the IRB, we did not receive the final approval for the
survey and additional participants until the day of Session 7 so we were unable to administer any surveys until after this session. As a result, we spent Session 7 focused on the video that we would create using the results of this survey. We used storyboards and developed a general framework for the video and also identified specific roles for each of the participants to fill in order to complete the video in a timely manner. During this session, participants also decided that they would each administer the survey to at least ten of their peers and would have these all completed by Session 8.

**Phase IV: Reflection (Session 8).** Going into this research, the plan was to have the project completed by Session 8. However, due to project and IRB delays the project was not completed in time for this final group session. In order to stay on our general schedule we decided to still hold Session 8 on the scheduled date and used this session to reflect on the experience up to this point. During this session we met as a group to discuss their perceptions on participation in this study. Each of the participants discussed how the experience matched their initial perceptions and if the process taught them anything about themselves, their peers or the adults they worked with. Through this discussion, I gained important insights into how the PAR study impacted the participants and if it changed their perceptions about their community or their role in it.

**Phase V: Project Completion and Final Reflections (no formal sessions).** Since we were unable to complete the project prior to the completion of the planned research sessions, we decided to continue meeting informally to complete the video and to analyze the survey results. Throughout this phase, I continued to meet with the group and assist in the compilation and development of the video depicting the community survey results and recommendations for the
adolescents within Midvale to assist with promoting change. At the time of this thesis, this video is still in process and has not yet been fully completed.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

During all sessions, I conducted participant observations and recorded field notes at the completion of each session. These notes included information regarding attendance, participation, discussion topics, participant interactions, observations and my interpretations. These field notes served as the primary data source for this study.

In addition to field notes, all group sessions were audio recorded in order to collect specific comments from participants during discussion. These tapes were used primarily as a backup to my field notes and to identify specific quotes for any final publications or reports. The audio recordings were not shared with anyone outside the core research group.

As the group determined the research question and methods, I worked with participants to identify appropriate means for them to collect data as they proceeded in their research and project. Once we moved in the direction of the video and community survey, the survey served as the primary data source for my participants. These surveys provided additional data for the research group to analyze in relation to the perceptions the core research group participants stated in the first three sessions. My observations and field notes provided the framework for understanding the group’s priorities and perceptions related to their community, and through coding I identified themes in the discussion and actions of the group over the course of the study.

**Validity**

As I analyzed the data I collected during group meetings and that the participants collected during their project, I endeavored to represent the material as accurately as possible. To ensure that I appropriately represented the findings that emerged through this study, I utilized
qualitative research validation techniques as described by Creswell and Miller (2000) and Lather (1986).

**Triangulation**

As I conducted this study, I utilized multiple data sources to increase the credibility of my data as recommended by Lather (1986). This data included specific statements and body language collected from session recordings, my field notes, and participant data collection during the group project. In addition to multiple data sources, I also used the framework of two theories, critical race theory and critical social theory, as I investigated the data and aimed to understand how the participants’ perceptions and behavior supported or contradicted conventional research in these areas.

**Member Checking & Face Validity**

Due to the nature of participatory action research, participants were closely involved in final analysis and evaluation of the data collected during this study. As a result, participants were a key part of ensuring the validity of this study. By doing this, I funneled my results back through the participants of the study in order to verify that my representation of the experience and sessions coincided with what they experienced. This member checking was a key part of checking the validity of this study.

**Catalytic Validity**

Through the course of this study, I endeavored to provide youth with an opportunity that would inspire them to be active members of their community and to impact change. I believe that, to some extent, this goal was accomplished. Through this impact, this study represents Lather’s (1986) concept of catalytic validity. As a result, by demonstrating that the experience
of participating in this study impacted the participants’ actions and level of engagement in their community, this study will gained additional validity.

**Collaboration & Peer Debriefing**

Throughout this study, I worked closely with peers who provided recommendations and guidance through periodic evaluation and assessment of the study for validity. Through this review, I was provided an perspective from outside of the core research group that assisted in considering the findings from novel viewpoints. This peer review provided an external evaluation of the research and offered actionable suggestions that improved the study, thus adding to the credibility of this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

**Issues that Arose During the Study**

Due to the emergent nature of PAR and the flexibility required in this research method, I was prepared for a variety of issues that could have arisen. Fortunately, due to the active participation of core research group members, the issues that arose were fairly minor. As a result of the importance of communication and group dynamics in this study, it is not surprising that many of the issues were related to promoting a respectful, safe, and productive environment.

**Attendance and Active Participation**

A key aspect of this study involved the active participation and engagement of core research group participants. When participants were not actively involved in the study, it became difficult to complete the research and resulted in minor delays to our schedule. One way that I worked to mitigate this concern was to engage participants in nearly all aspects of the study, from the initial research question development through analysis and reflection. By
allowing participants to take ownership over the project, I was able to maintain their excitement about participating ultimately limiting their absences from sessions.

**New Insights into Their Community**

As a part of this study, participants were exposed to aspects of their community that they were previously unaware of or had not spent time considering. These realizations were an important part of personal and civic growth, but it was important to ensure that these realizations did not become overwhelming for participants (Leonardo, 2004). To do this, I ensured that during each session, we allocated time to discuss new insights and observations garnered from working on our project. By discussing these with peers and working together to understand how to overcome the challenges we faced, this process became a positive and empowering experience.

**Ethical Issues and Implications**

Due to the complexity and flexibility inherent in the early stages of PAR, there were numerous ethical concerns to consider. As Swauger (2011) highlights, in PAR it is imperative to maintain participant risk as the epicenter of ethical concerns and as various ethical situations arise, consider appropriate responses to mitigate participant risk. Below is a discussion of the ethical concerns that arose during the tenure of this study.

**Informed Consent/Assent**

All core research group participants in this study were required to sign assent forms and their parents signed consent forms agreeing to let their child participate. Each consent and assent form included detailed information about the study and the potential associated risks of participating, which had been identified as being quite minimal. Additionally, all participants, including survey respondents were provided with a description of the study and their role in it, in
order to provide additional information and to answer any questions they had about their participation. Any participant or parent who wanted to withdraw from the study could do so.

**Balancing the Relationship**

From the beginning of this study, I endeavored to foster a democratic, inclusive environment. During the first session, I was explicit with participants about the biases, interests, goals, values and positionality from which I was approaching this research and asked the participants to do the same in order to foster open communication (Swauger, 2011). I also emphasized the democratic decision-making that would take place in the group to deemphasize the control that any one member had over the group (Nygreen, 2009).

As a result of the flexibility and uncertainty surrounding the ultimate direction of this study and the issues that could have arisen in regards to group dynamics, I investigated numerous theories related to the issues of youth empowerment, civic engagement as well as best practices related to youth organizing. As facilitator, I utilized these theories and practices to promote a positive, fruitful environment for all participants (Boog, 2003; Berg, 2004; Berg, 2009).

In addition to concerns surrounding balance in group relationships, many PAR researchers note the risk of researchers ignoring important concerns or thoughts presented by youth due to the age-based hierarchy inherent in our society (Dold & Chapman, 2012). To avoid this, in addition to my awareness of this potential discrimination, youth participants were involved in group discussions in order to promote active participation by all group members.

**Representation of Participants**

As Cahill (2007) discusses, it is important to develop trusting relationships with members of the research team and be cognizant of concerns they may have stemming from their personal and community backgrounds. It is important to consider how particular representations of
participants will be interpreted by the community as well as how this representation will affect the participant (Cahill, 2007; Swauger, 2011). In order to mitigate this, I previewed my thesis and results with the participants in a “safe space” as Cahill (2007) recommends. After sharing these findings with participants and receiving their revisions and consent, I solicited feedback from trusted peers and colleagues regarding their perceptions of external interpretations.

As participants in this study, youth were engaged in deep conversations regarding their concerns related to their communities as well as their aspirations for their personal futures. However, as Fine, Tuck and Zeller-Berkman (2007) discuss, the process of “research, interviewing, story telling [sic] often requires those of us with less power to give up more than we planned” (p. 22). As group members discussed their personal experiences, it was important to ensure that participants did not feel pressured to share experiences or details that they were uncomfortable discussing. As these stories were shared within the group, Fine, Tuck and Zeller-Berkman (2007) argue that it was imperative to respect each other’s secrets in order to respect individual’s sovereignty and to promote democracy within the group. Through respect for each other, recognition of individual boundaries and experience with the group, I began to identify the areas of discussion held sacred by the community and omitted or reframed these discussions for my final thesis.

Confidentiality

In my final thesis, and when data was shared outside of the participating group participant names and identities were excluded. No distinguishing characteristics of participants are shared in my final thesis and any participant who is uncomfortable with having information collected from them used in this thesis had the right to recuse themselves from the study. In
order to protect the identities of the participants in this study, all consent and assent forms were kept in a locked cabinet in my office.

**Emotional Ramifications**

The PAR process is a very personal one that directly relates to the lives of all participants. Through the research conducted by the PAR group, the group gained insights into each other’s private concerns and experiences and in some cases this was an emotional experience. As participants shared their personal stories, the PAR process provided an outlet for participants to release their pain and to even come to terms with it as they identified their individual experiences as being shared by other members of the group (Cahill, 2007).

As difficult realities or realizations materialized in the group, we critically discussed these and worked together as a group to better understand the context of these problems and identified potential activities to overcome them. As Fine, Tuck and Zeller-Berkman (2007) address, youth often have different responses to and desires to share particular experiences, especially if these experience cause pain, vulnerability or damage for the individual. The complexity of individual and group reactions and responses to particular topics and experiences was respected and no participants were required to share their personal experiences.
Chapter 4 – Findings

Self-identification and role development are crucial parts of adolescence and growing up. However, as Chinman and Linney (1998) discuss, role identification can be a complex process for youth because the very definition of what it is to be an adolescent. Rather than describing what an adolescent is, the definition highlights what an adolescent is not, namely an adult or a child. Without a clear depiction of how adolescents fit into societal structures, adolescents are left in a transitional place, lacking guidance for how to be contributing members of the community. Further exacerbating this for underserved minority youth is their collective history of exclusion in society that influences their predilections related to civic engagement (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002). These influences impact not only how adolescents identify themselves but also how they perceive their peers in a community. Given these influences, it is not surprising that through this study, there was a significant amount of discussion and evaluation of participant roles in their community and perspectives on their peers’ roles and success, or lack thereof, in fulfilling their role identification.

This findings section will highlight the three themes that emerged related to youth role identification and the influences surrounding this identification. The first theme highlights youth identification with roles predetermined by adults or society. The second theme discusses youth who identify with roles outside of auspices of group membership and have unrealistic evaluation factors for themselves related to these roles. The third theme shares the most problematic of these findings and relates to adolescent senses of rolelessness. Through the discussion of each of these themes, I will provide specific examples that illustrate the core research group discussions and survey responses falling into these themes. I will also investigate how these themes relate to
youth empowerment and will include suggestions for improving empowerment in these instances.

An interesting aspect to note in this research is that, as Hogg, Terry, and White (2005) suggest in their discussion of identity theory and social identity theory, role identification is a dynamic process that is heavily dependent on the environment and players in any given situation. In addition to the quotes from core group discussions and survey responses that are included in this chapter, I will also highlight core group’s collective evolution through each of these three themes and I will depict the factors that I believe influenced the group’s identification with these themes.

**Identification with Roles that are Predetermined by Adults or Society**

A large number of the youth participants identified with roles that were predetermined for them by adults or societal structures. These roles tended to be student, volunteer, and role model. Through discussions and explanations requested in the surveys, youth highlighted the importance of participating in groups such as clubs, and showcased the perceived importance of adult guidance to assist them with fulfilling particular roles.

**Membership in a Group**

The primary way that participants identified with roles was through membership in a particular group or group environment. Through the social interaction and guidance provided through this membership, participants seemed to feel a greater sense of belonging and responsibility to their roles in the chosen group. This coincides with McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) argument that participating in groups promotes a strong sense of community and a sense of belonging that engenders civic identities for youth. Martinek and Hellison (1998) expand on
this argument and suggest that through participation in a club-like environment, youth gain a sense of belonging that provides a greater sense of identity.

Some of the participants recognized that school and associations with formal organizations play an important role in their lives and provide them opportunities to actively participate in the community. Alana, one of the core research group participants explained that “usually when you’re doing community service you’re doing it because you got arrested…or when you’re in Keystone [Leadership Club]”. Although this is a bit of a cynical view, she recognized that within her community, youth tend to engage only through mandates from institutional structures or through membership in a particular club or organization. This was supported by another survey respondent who answered, “I volunteer a lot. I am VP of Key Club and I am a 4.0 student”. This respondent, in particular, emphasized the level of his/her success in the roles of volunteer and student, respectively, and evaluated him/herself through the framework of these organizational structures.

These perspectives are not particularly surprising. As described by Flanagan and Levine (2010), research by the Independent Sector shows that 71 percent of volunteers and 61 percent of charitable contributors engage in these ways due to someone else’s request or participation in institutional settings such as school or work. These statistics highlight the impact that participation in a group has on individuals’ proclivity to be civically engaged or connected to their community. From this perspective, organizations serve as incubators for civic engagement and promote characteristics and skills inherent in leaders. This is particularly promising when considering the engagement of youth in organizations because as Youniss, McLellan and Yates (1997) discuss, participation in organized groups “helps youth incorporate civic involvement into their identity during an opportune moment in its formative stages” (p. 624). In order words, the
development of civic identity in adolescents can have positive implications for the rest of the adolescent’s life and promotes greater engagement and positive civic identification later in life.

Edna, one of the oldest members of the core research group, recognized this connection during Session 3 when she shared that she felt that there needed to be more interaction with the community from the community members. She said that she believed increased engagement from community members would help a lot of the issues that were highlighted in their responses. She believed that responsibility for the community falls to community members and that if these members, including adolescents, have wishes for the future of their community that they should take action to promote these changes. Her discussion of this continued in Session 8 when she stated, “I feel like I got something out of participating in this research because I wanted to help the community in some way. I thought it was fun to get together and work on something related to the community.” Through membership in the core research group, Edna gained what she viewed as a rewarding experience to impact her community. A survey respondent shared this perspective, stating, “We have to put in our part to make community better. School gives me opportunities to volunteer.” Both of these participants showcased their perception of the responsibility of community members to improve their community and the survey respondent states an avenue by which adolescents can gain access to opportunities to improve their community. Through interaction with organizations or groups in the community, youth gain the framework by which to take action and develop role identities related to civic engagement and community responsibility.

These sentiments are proselytized within social identity theory. This theory provides a method by which individuals are able to evaluate their roles and identity in comparison to group members and in contrast to people outside of their respective group (Hogg, Terry, & White,
2005). Through social interaction and opportunities that group membership affords, youth gain a sense of themselves in relational and reflexive terms which assist youth in “developing a sense of self-meaning and self-definition” (Hogg, Terry, & White, 2005, p. 257). Although group membership may not be the key to civic engagement for all adolescents, it certainly seems to be (and is recognized by many of the participants in this study to be) a positive avenue to promote civic engagement and identities in youth.

Although there are many positive aspects of youth role identities emerging from group membership, there are pitfalls that must be addressed as well. Participating in groups with structured and well-known expectations may not empower participants to develop their own sense of identity. As one participant noted, “I know I have to be a student but as for volunteer and role model, I’ve been brainwashed into thinking that is what we all should be.” This sentiment is problematic in regards to empowering youth and signifies that the adolescent feels that he/she does not have control or power over his/her decisions related to volunteering and serving as a role model. Additionally, identity theory research shows that youth may identify with a specific role and may even feel as though they succeed in this role separate from a particular organization. However, when this role is tied to a group (or social category) the individual will compare themselves to other group members and may have more critical perspectives on their level or success of engagement (in-group). This can be challenging for youth who identity with a role due to group membership and may provide harsher self-evaluation and self-criticism as opposed to youth who identify with roles separate from intergroup relations (Stets & Burke, 2000). A final concern for youth role identification related to group membership stems from the fact that:
The lives of young adults are unsettled and in flux as they move into and out of institutional settings…although they are more likely to take a part in civic life when they are in such settings, their involvement tends to be episodic. (Flanagan & Levine, 2010, p. 161)

In other words, although group membership may be a positive entry-point for youth civic engagement and role identity development, it may not be a sustainable means for youth engagement or self-identification.

This unsustainability is precisely what I observed during many portions of core group engagement during this PAR study. Although many core group members were heavily engaged in sessions and maintained strong participation from session to session, there was a subset of participants that seemed to frame their participation in the study in relation to their membership in the Keystone Leadership Club or even the larger Boys & Girls Club. These participants were much more likely to be disengaged during group discussions and only provided their personal insight or opinions when directly asked by adult facilitators or peers in the group. In short, the role identification of these participants was grounded in their club and group membership and was not particularly tied to this research. I believe that this may have resulted in lower levels of participation and critical engagement throughout the research.

**Role of Adults in Youth Empowerment**

Since the majority of groups are developed or facilitated by adults, it is imperative to consider the impact that adults have on youth engagement, role identification and empowerment. Youth who seek out involvement in groups often have high expectations of their adult leaders, and as one survey respondent noted, “Education is essential…People need to volunteer to improve our community. Adults and teens need to encourage the next generation to have these
values”. In leading youth groups, adults and older teens must be cognizant of these expectations and promote a balanced approach to group engagement, encouraging but not stifling identity development. As Zeldin, O’Connor, and Camino (2006) note:

> Youth may lack the experience, clout, and access to resources necessary to successfully carry out a [research and evaluation] project without adult guidance. On the other hand, an overbearing adult leader may not truly engage youth researchers and evaluators who sense that their input is not being taken seriously. (p. 2)

This responsibility is vitally important for adult leaders and facilitators to consider as they work closely with adolescents. As Stoneman (2002) describes, “youth civic engagement does not happen by itself...adults must take initiative both to change the institutions and to activate and train the young people” (p. 224). Adults must be aware of their role within the group and work with youth to promote positive identity development and critical engagement with their surroundings, their peers, and topics of interest. Through this training, youth will become more empowered and begin to think outside of the parameters of the group when considering their roles in and contributions to society (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002).

Unfortunately, during Session 4, the core research group received first-hand experience with one of the potential pitfalls of adult facilitation and involvement. During this session, a Boys and Girls Club staff member who had not previously been involved in the group wanted to sit in on the session to learn about our research. Similar to previous sessions, I asked open-ended questions of the group to promote engagement and to facilitate conversations. Rather than allowing there to be periods of silence and giving participants time to consider their responses, this new adult staff member continually jumped into the conversation giving her thoughts and recommending answers to the adolescent participants. Each time this occurred, the participants
would quietly agree with the adult’s suggestion and then return to silence. The addition of this new, opinionated staff member caused a major shift in the group dynamic and resulted in significantly lower engagement from the participants.

During the core group sessions in this study, I placed particular emphasis on promoting youth member authority and inclusion and pushed all decision-making to the adolescent group members. A particularly poignant depiction of the struggles that adolescents have in feeling a sense of authority came during our final core research group session. Through the course of this study, the group as a whole had a fairly difficult time making decisions together and often tried to have me make the decision or break ties that had formed. Although this dynamic was readily apparent to me, as we discussed our reflections on the experience during our final session, it was interesting to hear from core group members that although they felt they had ownership over the group and their decision-making, they still believed that I was the group leader. When I asked the group why they believed this, they responded that it was because I had made all of the decisions. I again pushed the group on this perception and asked them what decisions I had made, to which they were unable to identity a single decision that they had not made themselves. This realization was surprising to the group and made a few of the members reconsider their roles and what they had been able to accomplish together. I believe that this moment was particularly eye-opening and empowering for the group. A further discussion of the participants’ agency and adults/youth engagement in this research is included in Appendix L.

**Promoting Youth Empowerment and Positive Role Identification**

As has already been discussed, group membership can be a positive means for role identification for youth. As Chinman and Linney (1998) suggest, “participating in volunteer experience can be empowering by enhancing self-acceptance, self-confidence, social and
political understanding, and the ability to play an assertive role in controlling one’s resources in the community” (p. 394). The development of these positive characteristics is important for adolescents and membership in groups can promote this type of engagement and personal growth. Additionally, adolescent self-identities that emerge through group membership and adolescents’ consideration of themselves in relation to a structured society promotes the “reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles” (Stets & Burke, 2000, 225-226). However, Riley and Burke (1995) argue that when this process and membership in the group neglects to confirm the identity that adolescents have acknowledged for themselves, adolescents are more likely to remove themselves from the group (as cited in Stets & Burke, 2000).

Within the framework of this study, this may have impacted the participation of a few of the core group members. In particular, Diaria removed herself from the group after the second session because she did not believe that she was an active member in comparison to the other participants. When she returned during the sixth session, this perception continued and although she continued to attend group sessions, her engagement was much lower than her peers and when she was directly asked her opinion she was uncomfortable sharing her thoughts with the larger group. Although I endeavored to actively engage all core research group participants during all sessions, the disconnect between Diaria’s perception of her identity and the manifestation of her role in the group may have negatively impacted her participation. Had I recognized this disconnect earlier, I may have been able to more actively engage Diaria in a way that was meaningful for her and could have potentially improved her experience within this study. This example highlights the importance of adult awareness and consideration of youth identity development in promoting sustained engagement and growth within the group.
Low Confidence Perceptions by Adolescents in Fulfilling Identified Roles

For other adolescents in this study, there was a distinction between their perceptions of what their role is in the community and their success in fulfilling this role. As Martinek and Hellison (1998) explain, a major step in building identity is making choices and setting goals related to attainment of the role or identity and this process “requires evaluation and commitment” (p. 49). Adolescents identify roles that they relate to, and the process of setting goals and benchmarks can be a difficult and intimidating step that may stand in the way of a sense of ultimate role attainment for underserved adolescents.

During the first few research sessions of this PAR study, the core group members struggled with the problems facing their community and were periodically paralyzed by the magnitude of these problems, not knowing where to begin or feeling ill-equipped to address them. When Veronica described the themes in community concerns that emerged as she talked to five of her peers between the second and third sessions, she highlighted that “all of the problems seem really large.” She shared that she was overwhelmed and had a difficult time identifying actions that she could take to address these issues. Although she had a desire to help, and felt that one of her roles in the community was to help, at that point, she was unable to determine actions that she could take that would have a positive impact to address these concerns.

Feelings of Inadequacy

Many of the adolescents participating in this study identified with the roles of volunteer and role model, but when asked if they successfully fulfill this role several responded that they do not. A few responses showcasing this sense of inadequacy were, “I feel like I could do more,” “I need to volunteer more,” and “I don’t think I can really call myself a role model.”
Through these comments, respondents highlighted their senses of inadequate role fulfillment. From a social identity theory perspective, Hogg, Terry, and White (2005) describe that “social identities are not only descriptive and prescriptive; they are also evaluative” (p. 260). Considering this view, as the participants called themselves role models or volunteers they expounded their expectations for themselves and at once suggested that they were unsuccessful in meeting these self-imposed qualifications. This critical self-evaluation is problematic because if youth see themselves as unsuccessful at filling the roles they think they should fill, they may ultimately stop identifying with positive roles that they find too difficult to attain.

Another area highlighted by participant responses was a sense of responsibility to younger members of the community that they do not believe that are successfully satisfying. Rather than identifying with roles based on personal interests, these adolescents suggested that their roles in the community were directly related to their responsibilities in relation to younger generations. As one survey respondent poignantly stated:

As an older teen, I feel that providing a good influence and volunteering and treating everyone equally [is important]. I honestly think that if people our age aren't good on ethics, then the younger generation will be raised to be disrespectful to the community… Sometimes, I feel like I am not good enough. But, I give my effort and time whenever I can. I never let people feel alone, and I try really hard to help kids realize right from wrong.

Although this response described the way the respondent fills the role of role model, this description was followed by a personal judgment call explicitly stating that sometimes “I am not good enough.” Through a combination of both identity theory and social identity theory, Stets and Burke (2000) argue that “the self both exists within society, and is influenced by society,
because socially defined shared meanings are incorporated into one’s prototype or identity standard” (p. 232). This perspective suggests that youth identity evaluation occurs at two levels, the first being in relation to the individual’s values and perspective and the second being in relation to social norms and expectations. For youth this can be a particularly troubling evaluation as a result of their generally limited access to opportunities to engage in the community that assist in providing a broader outlook on society (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

This sense of inadequacy emerged at two points during the core research group sessions: during Session 3 and during Session 8. In Session 3, the discussion was focused on critically evaluating the community of Midvale and identifying a concern that we wanted to address through our action project. Although the group had no difficulty identifying areas of concern within the community, when we began discussions related to how we could address the concerns, the group became very quiet and voiced concerns about the problems being “too big for us to do anything about.” I emphasized that we only needed to be concerned with a small part of the problem and that great things can be accomplished by starting out small and even used the saying of “the only way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time.” This comment resulted in amusement within the group and seemed to alleviate some of the pressure that had been building in the room. By the end of this session, we had identified a mural project to complete within the Boys and Girls Club as well as a second related mural to share with the community through a larger project on a wall or underpass in Midvale. Through the assistance of adult facilitators, we were able to progress in our discussion and action plan; however, the group’s high expectations for what they wanted to accomplish resulted in concerns related to whether the group could actually make a difference. This concern was a reoccurring theme through the study and although we were able to progress past these concerns repeatedly, it generally required the reassurance of adult
facilitators to suppress these. It is important to note that during Sessions 4 and 5 there was a major change in our action plan. This will be discussed further in the discussion of the third theme discussion.

The second time that the group was disappointed by their inability to meet their high expectations was during Session 8 as we discussed our accomplishments within the study. The general sentiment during this session was that we did not accomplish very much and that coming into this group they expected to accomplish much more than we did. There was frustration at the amount of time it took to build consensus among the group and a belief that in two months we should have been able to do more. In contrast to this, the adults involved in this study I felt pleased with the progress and were impressed with the group’s ability to readjust quickly when we moved away from the mural concept. Due to the high expectations the group set for themselves, rather than being excited about what they had accomplished, the people they had reached with their surveys, and the results they were compiling into a video, they were disappointed in themselves and the process.

To assist in understanding why this sense of inadequacy was common within this study and particularly within the core research group, I believe that it is important to investigate the role that socio-economic status and race have in adolescent perceptions of themselves in relation to their peers and their personal expectations. Although socio-economic data was not collected during this study, 80% of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club members come from families who live at an income level below the poverty line, whereas 16% of the entire population of Midvale lives below the poverty line. In particular, two of the six core group members shared that they experienced homelessness in their lives and this experience seemed to have a big impact on both of these participants’ perspectives on their communities. Homelessness and poverty are
oppressive forces and the social inequality resulting from these are persistent and subversive (Leonardo, 2004). The identity that is forged for underserved adolescents through these inequities arguably fosters a sense of inadequacy and potential helplessness that negates positive roles that adolescents recognize for themselves. As Martinek and Hellison (1998) highlight, “once this mindset is firmly in place, a youngster will look for or produce evidence to confirm it” (p. 50). The failure of succeeding in these identities then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and a cyclical self-disappointment that is difficult for the adolescent to emerge from.

Similar to socioeconomic status, race and minority status can have implications for role identification and achievement. Although survey respondents were not asked to identify their race or ethnicity, five of the six core research group members came from minority backgrounds with four identifying as Latina and one identifying as American Indian. The perspectives and perceptions shared by these members were important in the consideration of role identification. As C.R. Lawrence III (1987) highlights in his discussion of unconscious racism:

Americans share a common historical and cultural heritage in which racism has played and still plays a dominant role. Because of this shared experience, we also inevitably share many ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that attach significance to an individual’s race and induce negative feelings and opinions about nonwhites. To the extent that this cultural belief system has influenced all of us, we are all racists. At the same time, most of us are unaware of our racism. (p. 322)

The permeation of this unconscious racism sneaks into all aspects of our lives and based on interactions with minority participants, I would argue that this racism has a self-reflexive component as well. Due to societally influenced perspectives and stereotypes related to race, minority adolescents are forced to navigate an even more complex maze of identity development
that critiques and applies their own identity as a minority. As W.E.B. Du Bois discusses in his depiction of double-consciousness, minorities often see themselves through the lens of the majority (Du Bois, 1903). Through the evaluation of oneself from the perspective of an oppressor, minorities struggle between their dual identity as an American and also as a member of a minority race. These identities, and the valuations that come along with them, are often in contradiction to one another and pose an additional challenge for minority adolescents. Although critical race theory is grounded in an individual’s ability to name their own reality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), when minority youth view themselves through the eyes of someone else, identity development becomes significantly more complicated for them.

Role of Adults in Promoting Youth Empowerment and Attainable Expectations

Similar to the discussion of group membership and adolescent identity development, there is an important role for adults in youth development of healthy self-expectations. As adolescents struggle to identify their place in society, adults can provide the guidance and positive reinforcement to assist in enhancing adolescent self-esteem and self-efficacy (Chinman & Linney, 1998). Adolescents, particularly those who are underserved, may need additional adult assistance in developing attainable goals and breaking down the “social and psychological ‘barriers’ between at-risk youth and those who work with them” (Martinek & Hellison, 1998, p. 47). Adults also play an important role in assisting youth as they gain greater awareness of themselves and their communities, making “challenges more of a reality in their lives” (Nicotero, 2008, p. 240). This increased awareness of inequities can be overwhelming for youth. Without the support of adults it is possible for youth to feel a greater sense of inadequacy and helplessness leading to the development of “perceptions of poor role performance [engendering]
doubts about one’s self-worth, and may even produce symptoms of psychological stress” (Hogg, Terry, & White, 2005, p. 257).

From a youth empowerment perspective, I believe that adolescents who set unattainable expectations for themselves demonstrate weaknesses in current civic engagement and youth empowerment methods. As Leonardo (2004) argues, critical social theory emphasizes education for youth to critically engage with the world as well as to imagine a better world. Adolescents who suffer from unattainable role identities are missing the tools Leonardo mentions to imagine and effectively take an active role in their vision for a better world. Adults working to promote youth empowerment hold a responsibility to recognize the challenges facing each individual adolescent. There is no “one size fits all” solution for youth empowerment. It is imperative for adult facilitators to be aware of the cultural, social, economic, and racial factors at play in youths’ lives and to be cognizant of how these factors impact adolescent expectations and beliefs about their roles in their community.

**Difficulty Identifying Roles or a Sense of Rolelessness**

The final theme related to role identification emerged as a lack of identifiable role in the community or an outright sense of rolelessness. These adolescents were so disillusioned by their community or their lack of ability to impact change that they had withdrawn from identities related to civic engagement. This disillusionment was illustrated by two subthemes: disenfranchisement and alienation; and rolelessness.

**Disenfranchisement & Alienation**

Many of the participants in this study held strong opinions related to their community using loaded words such as “ghetto” and “gang bangers” to describe Midvale and some of its inhabitants. Unfortunately, due to a variety of reasons, these adolescents did not feel like they
had a role or voice in their community that could impact change. One such response came from Alana who shared:

I don’t know what I can do because I feel like if I try I’m going to come off as rude. Because I have opinions on things that people may not understand like on homeless stuff…cause I’ve been homeless but my mom always did everything she could to get a job and for us to have a better life, but some of them they just don’t want to. I think it’s cause they think they’re getting all these benefits and welfare so why would they go get a job.

Alana’s experience being homeless provided her a unique perspective in this area of the community but due to fears related to how she would be perceived by others, she felt powerless to share her thoughts and recommendations. As Sánchez-Jankowski, (2002) discusses, individuals from less privileged backgrounds are often influenced by a collective group history of being ignored and rejected by those in power. Building on this perspective, Bobo and Johnson (2000) argue that “becoming an adult is a difficult process under the best of circumstances…at the heart of such despair, for many youngsters, is their belief that they have been abandoned by society” (as cited in Martinek & Hellison, 1998, p. 47).

Although Alana had first-hand experience living in extreme poverty she echoed a meritocratic view of her community, pathologizing poverty and those who are homeless. Contradicting her family’s own experience and suggesting that her mother was an exception within those in Midvale who struggle with homelessness, Alana devalued her experience and the unique perspective she has as a result of this experience. From a social reproduction theory perspective, Alana’s perception that she cannot share her personal perspective because of how others will perceive her further perpetuates the belief that her contribution is worth less than
someone with a more affluent background (MacLeod, 2008). This is problematic for Alana’s, and other underserved youths’, role identification. Through her identification as someone who is less-worthy, she views her role in her community as being less important which negatively impacts the modes and rate of her civic engagement.

Similar to Alana’s plight, Harry shared “you don’t know what it’s like to be me. I get picked on every single day of my life.” This perspective paired with Harry’s quiet participation in the core research group highlighted his sense of alienation from his peers. As Martinek and Hellison (1998) argue, youth in situations similar to Harry suffer from a fear of making choices “because they see little need, or they perceive themselves as incapable of making appropriate choices” (p. 50). Because Harry was made to feel like an outsider on a daily basis, he found it easier to withdraw from traditional role identification and isolated himself. During Session 8, when I asked what participation in this study meant to core research group members, Harry responded that he came into the first session to see what was going on with the research and to learn how he could be involved. I believe that it was due to this ostracization that Harry was excited about participating in this study.

**Rolelessness**

Perhaps the most troubling response to questions related to adolescent roles in their community was the response stating that the participant did not identify with any role. Within this section, I will use the term “rolelessness” to depict adolescent identification with no role. One such answer noted that a survey respondent did not have a role in the community (listed on the survey as “no role”) but stated that a role could be fulfilled “by just giving my opinion.” Although this participant recognized that he/she could have a role in the community, the respondent did not feel that there was a role that he/she actively filled. This lack of engagement
and identity is concerning for a few reasons. One key concern related to youth rolelessness is that “it seems likely that those who do not find a positive role in which to participate (i.e. rolelessness) are less likely to become bonded to positive institutions” (Chinman & Linney, 1998, p. 398). Additionally, this sense of rolelessness and lack of meaningful connection to the community has also been tied to social and behavioral problems associated with adolescence (Chinman & Linney, 1998). In other words, rolelessness is a dangerous gateway to greater disengagement from the community and can lead to negative actions, associations, and ramifications for adolescents and can perpetuate as they mature into adulthood.

A key example of this disengagement emerged with Diaria, one of the youngest, Latina participants. When I asked the core research group about their experience in the study and what was accomplished, Diaria stated “this is only my third [session], I don’t really remember the beginning” and even after additional probing she was uncomfortable or unwilling to share her thoughts. Although Diaria had participated in half of the research sessions, she never felt like a contributing member of the group and highlighted in one of our final conversations that she was “not really involved in the process.” Although we explicitly invited Diaria to return to the core research group during Session 6 and her peers tried to engage her in discussion, she continued to feel a sense of rolelessness and non-belonging within the core research group. Regardless of the efforts of the group, Diaria’s sense of rolelessness became a self-fulfilling prophecy that perpetuated her feelings of not belonging or contributing.

This perpetuation of how adolescents feel about their roles in their community can be particularly troubling for communities. Specifically, within the community of Midvale, many adolescents highlighted major concerns they had related to their community. If adolescents recognize these issues but feel like they have no role in improving the community, then these
concerns will continue to persist. The persistence of such issues will only enhance the adolescent’s negative perceptions of their community. As these adolescents mature into adults, this sense of rolelessness will likely continue and without active community members willing to work on improving their community, Midvale will continue to decline in safety, cleanliness, and the respect that community that participants highlighted as Midvale’s largest concerns.

The core research group experienced rolelessness for themselves as a collective unit during the fourth session in our study. During this session we began work on the mural project and incorporated a few additional Boys & Girls Club members who had been identified by the group as good artists who could help with the design of the mural. Unfortunately, due to the inclusion of these peers and an outspoken staff member who was not familiar with the intricacies of our plan, the group dynamic changed instantly and none of the group members were comfortable sharing their opinions on the project. In reflecting on this experience Veronica shared her perspective:

There was a lack of unity. One person says something and then someone else never says anything or they just agree. And if you're just going to agree on everything then we don't really need you if you're not going to speak up or if you don't have ideas.

Veronica believed that this sense of rolelessness came from individuals in the group not feeling comfortable sharing their own opinions and either passively sitting in the group or just blindly agreeing with the thoughts of other members in the group.

This halt in group engagement required attention during Session 5 and also promoted the group’s decision to limit participation in the group to the six participants identified during the second session. Together, we were able to regroup and move forward with a new action plan, however, this interruption in our sense of direction was an important speed bump in our journey
in community leadership. Fortunately, we were able to move past this sense of rolelessness and in her reflection Gretel shared that:

> I thought [the experience] was worth my time. I think I got something out of it because I wanted to help the community in some way. I just thought it was fun to get together and work on this and I learned a little about my community and what other people think about it.

This reflection, which was echoed by many of the other participants in the group, demonstrates the evolution and path that the group took to ultimately complete this study and their associated action project. Although there were times when the group was not in agreement or felt a sense of rolelessness, by working together we were able overcome these feelings and successfully move forward with our study.

**Promoting Youth Empowerment and Positive Self-Awareness**

Youth engagement and meaningful participation can mitigate the concerns that come with rolelessness in youth. Although the group never explicitly discussed how adults impact the participants’ youth identification or attainment, there were numerous times when the core research group participants deferred to adult facilitators’ opinions or suggestions or looked to adults for guidance in their decisions. In order to promote youth ownership of the research and ultimately to empower the participants to take an active role in their community and this study, it was important for adults to be cognizant of how our facilitation promoted or inhibited engagement within the sessions. As Stoneman (2002) argues:

> Real decision-making responsibility can heal two very deep wounds of young people of all backgrounds: (a) low self-esteem due to consistent invalidation of their intelligence; (b) feelings of powerlessness, and its companion anger, due to being raised in a
thoroughly adult-dominated world that has not listened to the ideas of young people. (p. 222)

This sense of belonging and contribution unites youth to their respective communities. By promoting adolescent engagement in this research and asking adolescents to take an active role in session discussions and decision-making, participants were empowered to take responsibility for the study. Although core research group members reflected in Session 8 that this endeavor was more difficult than they expected and that they did not accomplish as much as they had hoped to, all participants ultimately responded that this was a rewarding experience that they generally enjoyed. In regards to long-term impacts of this engagement, Jennings et al. (2006) suggest that authentic engagement, such as participants experienced in this study can promote “self-identity increased sense of self-worth and enhanced self-efficacy” (p. 43).

Final Thoughts

Although the themes highlighted above may seem to emphasize some of the weaknesses and pitfalls inherent in adolescent role identification and civic engagement, there are a multitude of ways to promote positive role identification and self-awareness in youth. To share an example of this positive role identification and self-awareness, I will describe the final epiphany that ultimately left the group with positive sense of accomplishment and empowered core group participants. The action project, including the development and administration of the community survey as well as the associated video sharing the results of this survey with the broader community, echoed many of the sentiments of the core research participants. In particular, survey respondents and core research group participants agreed that the largest areas of concern in the community were related to respect for the community and that this could be addressed through various methods of community engagement. As Veronica shared during our final
session “They just confirmed what we said the first time. At least now I know it’s not just what I think, it’s what most people in the community think. I guess in a way it makes me feel more certain about what I though [about my community].”

Through their individual conversations with survey respondents, the group came to the realization that their peers share many of their concerns for their community. Although the core group went into the survey administration phase of our research assuming that their peers were disinterested in the state of the community, they learned that their peers care deeply for the community and, in many cases, have specific ideas for how to address their concerns. This realization was a pivotal moment in this study and provided the group members with a new perspective on what they could accomplish in their community and promoted their expectations that systems could be revised to benefit themselves and their peers (Wagaman, 2011). Chinman and Linney (1998) suggest that active engagement such as this is a pivotal part of empowerment development and allows adolescents to build on the strengths and perceptions of others in their community. This collective approach to community investigations and action is a key aspect of PAR, and through their engagement in this study, participants gained experiences and perspectives that would otherwise likely have been out of their reach.

In order to share the survey results with the broader community, the group will compile the survey results and teen perceptions from Midvale into a short video. Once completed, the group aims to share this video with peers through the internet, social media, and school news channels, as well as with community leaders through a viewing or potential meeting with city officials. The team hopes that this research will inform the community that there is significant agreement in perceptions about the community and show that together they can work to make Midvale a better place to live. As one survey respondent shared, the “community needs to come
“together” to address the issues facing the community. Through this action project and recognition within the research group, these adolescents have taken a step closer to becoming indigenous leaders within their community, and promoting positive development and awareness. As Rapaport (1981) discusses, empowerment “means that our aim should be to enhance the possibilities for people to control their own lives” (p. 15). I believe that this PAR study was an important step in promoting the empowerment of the adolescents who participated.
Chapter 5 – Reflection

Walking into the Midvale Boys and Girls Club for the first time, I held a cautious optimism about what the next few months had in store in regards to this research and my engagement with my adolescent participants. I understood the complexity of the participatory action research methodology and the emergent nature of a study like the one I was embarking on and I did my best to convey this to my core group participants as well. After completing this study, I believe that even with extensive planning ahead of time, it is impossible to prepare yourself or your participants completely for what you will discover, the roadblocks you will run into, and the ultimate results of your study. However, with appropriate planning and forethought, a participatory action research approach can be an incredibly valuable tool, as it was in this study, to investigate phenomena and perceptions from participant perspectives.

Using PAR to Address the Research Question

The ultimate goal of this study was to engage underserved adolescents in discussions and an action project oriented around civic engagement and their roles in their community. Through this process, the adolescent participants became my co-researchers and had the opportunity to critically investigate their perceptions of their community. During this process, participants learned about themselves, their peers, and their community. By engaging participants in this endeavor, I garnered novel and often personal insights about the participants and their community. Many of these insights, I believe, would not have emerged had I undertaken an interview-based approach. Although the insights gained through the community survey illustrated important adolescent perceptions about themselves and their community, I believe that the findings are much richer than they would have been using another method due to the active adolescent engagement in this study. Seeing the community of Midvale
through the participants’ perspectives and analyzing these findings in partnership with these participants provided novel insights and awareness about adolescent perceptions on their roles in their community.

In addition to the findings related to this study, using a PAR methodology provided core research group participants with a safe space to transform their wishes for their community into action and reality. Rather than asking participants questions and simply soliciting their perspectives, this study gave participants the opportunity to address their concerns and take an active role in their community. Through this methodology, core group participants were empowered to consider, develop a plan of action, and take action to address concerns they identified in their community. This process not only promoted inquiry related to the research questions but also encouraged the active civic engagement that was being investigated throughout the study.

Using PAR to Address the Root Causes

In addition to being an effective means to address this study’s research questions, PAR also proved to be a useful tool to investigate and loosely address the root causes identified in chapter one. These root causes included poverty or lack of resources and disenfranchisement. Through adolescent ownership and co-research status within this study, I believe that this study had benefits for core research participants as well as other adolescents within the community.

Although this study did not provide tangible materials to improve participants’ lack of resources, through participation in this study, core group participants acquired new skills that may assist them in the future. In particular, through participation in this qualitative study, participants were introduced to research methods and modes of inquiry that may prove beneficial in their future endeavors and will be a positive addition to their resumes and college applications.
These skills have the potential to set them apart from their peers as they pursue jobs or acceptance to colleges. Through the addition of these skills for participants, this study may have a small part in improving the resources they have access to in the future.

This study also addressed participants’ feelings of disenfranchisement. Over the course of the three months we worked together, participants evolved through many different role identifications and rationalizations for participation in the study. However, at the end of the process, there was a general sense of ownership related to what we had accomplished. This sense of ownership helped to combat the disenfranchisement many of the adolescents felt in their lives and in their communities. Through barriers constructed by society as a result of their minority statuses and their youth, prior to this, most participants never had access to opportunities to investigate their community and to improve it. Compounding the disenfranchisement resulting from this lack of access, in the cases where the adolescents did have access to opportunities, those opportunities were generally very heavily influenced and moderated by adults. As a result, even for the participants who had access to such opportunities, they never truly had decision-making authority or ownership within these projects.

In addition to the personal benefits and consideration of these root causes within the core participants’ personal lives, this study also addressed these concerns on a larger scale within the community of Midvale. By incorporating a larger number of adolescents from the community in this study through the survey, additional participants were introduced to the work we were aiming to do in the study and had the opportunity to consider their hopes for their community. For many of the participants, this was the first time they had critically considered their community and ways that they could work to improve it. This newfound insight and
consideration may help to address disenfranchisement and may promote active engagement for adolescents within the community as a whole.

**Implications for this Study**

This study was significant on many levels within the community of Midvale. During this study, participants highlighted a number of concerns and possible actions to address concerns within Midvale. The awareness and critical thought required to come to these determinations provided adolescents with an opportunity to consider their community in terms they may never have before and also brought awareness to the similar perspectives held by many adolescents in the community.

As was stated in the discussion of Midvale’s demographic information in chapter three, approximately 25% of the population in Midvale is below the age of 18. This is a fairly significant portion of the population of the community that, until this point, has been generally disengaged and excluded from efforts to improve the community. Through this study, important data expressing the sentiments and perceptions of this population was collected and will be shared with leaders within the community. It is possible that through the increased awareness of beliefs among this important portion of the community, new efforts may be made to involve adolescents in civic engagement throughout Midvale.

The Boys and Girls Club has poised itself in many communities around the country as a refuge and site for personal growth in adolescents. Through a variety of engaging programs, these clubs aim to empower youth to take an active role in their own progression. In particular, the Keystone Leadership Club, of which all of my core participants were members at the Midvale Boys and Girls Club, aims to promote leadership skills in adolescents. Although this group undertakes a variety of projects throughout the year to hone adolescents’ leadership skills,
this study was the first time that members took full ownership over a project and led a study in their community. The adult leadership of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club was so intrigued by this process and the experience afforded to the club’s members that there is a possibility that they will expand on the research started in this study and initiate projects to address the specific concerns highlighted by adolescents in the community.

**Limitations**

Although I endeavored to investigate many of the contributing factors for youth role identification and civic engagement in this study, due to the time constraints of this study there were numerous limitations. First, although the gender and race of the six core research group participants was known and considered within this study, the survey administered to the core participants’ peers did not include questions related to gender or race. As a result, except for when findings could be tied to the core research group participants, I was limited in my ability to hypothesize on or fully analyze the impact of race or gender on the larger participant base’s perceptions of their roles and civic engagement. Furthermore, since only one of the core participants was male, I did not attempt to investigate the role of gender in this study even within the auspices of the core research group.

**Future Research**

Although this research shed light on important perceptions of underserved adolescents in Midvale about their roles in their community, there are a number of directions that were highlighted through this study that would be beneficial to pursue further. As discussed in this study’s limitations, I believe that it would be interesting to investigate the impact of race and gender on role identification and civic engagement. This study started this investigation on a small scale but further research is certainly needed to expand on these results. In particular,
engaging youth from diverse backgrounds within a PAR study investigating civic engagement and role identification could highlight interesting group interactions and may provide insight on how gender and race identifications impact adolescents’ participation.

Another area of further research stemming from this study is the need for a longitudinal study to investigate how participation in a PAR study such as this impacts participants during and after their transition to adulthood. Interesting results were garnered from this short-term study. Further investigating how core research group participants evolve in their role identification and perceptions of civic engagement over the years in comparison to their peers would provide further insight into the impact of studies such as this. I am unaware of any similar studies that have taken a longitudinal approach and believe that this would provide important data related to how youth engagement in PAR affects civic engagement.

**Recommendations**

Although there are numerous journal articles and handbooks for researchers interested in embarking on a participatory action research study, there are gaps in the current literature focused on utilizing this methodology to promote youth empowerment, civic engagement and adult-youth interaction. In order to bolster this literature using my experience in this study, I have identified a few recommendations for researchers interested in working with youth through a PAR framework. Due to the emergent nature of any PAR study, I caution that these are only recommendations based on my experience in this study and may not be appropriate in all situations.

First, in order to promote youth empowerment through PAR, I believe that it is important to afford participants high levels of inclusion and authority. Without buy-in from participants, it is difficult to maintain focus or to impact change in the community. It is imperative that
participants join the research team on their own volition and are not pushed into it by peers or adults. Because adolescents are often heavily influenced by others, this can be difficult to ensure, but through continued engagement it will become apparent if participant members of the research team are disinterested or disengaged from the mission of the research. Without this engagement and buy-in from youth participants, there will be little to no empowerment and the PAR process will simply perpetuate the power structures youth experience in their daily lives.

Another important aspect of a PAR study with the goal of promoting youth empowerment is organizational support for the research. As in any study, there will be ebbs and flows in participation but it is important that even with these fluctuations that there be consistent support and resources afforded to the study. Particularly during times of conflict or difficulty, this organizational component can lend the stability needed for participants to maintain confidence in the work they are doing. Showing participants that you will continue with the study even in challenging times promotes their desire to do the same and by working through these difficulties, youth may gain a sense of satisfaction and feel empowered by their accomplishments.

Organizational support from the Boys and Girls Club was key to the ultimate success and completion of this study. Particularly when we ran into difficulties during sessions four and five, participants were confident in the steadfastness of the organization and continued to engage in the research. Had I not had the support and backing of this organization, I may have experienced very different results and lost all participation during this period of the research. In a short research study such as this, having organizational support also promotes trust and rapport within the group, particularly when participants are already familiar and involved with the organization.
Because rapport is such a key component of successful PAR studies, this organizational engagement can facilitate trust-building with participants as well.

Similar to the discussion on youth authority and inclusion, in order to promote civic engagement through PAR, I believe that researchers should strive for youth-led, rather than youth-based studies. When youth lead the study, they learn firsthand the skills incumbent in civic engagement and are better equipped to apply these to their own lives outside of the study. In contrast, if the study is youth-based, participants will primarily fill the role of passive observers and will not gain the same level of experience and comfort with leading groups and being civically engaged. This is an area that I wish I had addressed earlier in this particular study. Although there were portions of this study that were youth-led, such as the action project, I was disappointed to discover during our last session that the participants felt that this was my study and they just helped with it. Due to this sentiment and the reality that they only felt true ownership over the action component of this research, it is not surprising that the action portion of the study resulted in the most engaged conversations about the participants’ community and their plans improve it.

Building on the consideration of youth leadership of the study, I believe that it is absolutely imperative for adult researchers to promote positive interactions and working relationships with youth participants. Without this trust and rapport, youth will likely never feel ownership of the study and may defer to adult facilitators and researchers on decisions. In order to foster positive and cooperative relationships, I believe that it is important to engage youth participants in the definition of roles, responsibilities and measures for accountability during the initial planning stages of the study. This engagement at the outset of the study will set the groundwork for open dialogue and will facilitate the understanding of all researchers and
participants that each individual, regardless of their age, is a key member of the team. Through this level of openness with participants, it is much more likely for youth participants to start seeing themselves as co-researchers and to take ownership and personal interest in the work that the group is doing.

**Conclusion**

Participatory action research provides researchers with opportunities to not only learn about communities but also to promote leadership and active engagement that will benefit the community long after the researcher leaves. Although a PAR study is often a difficult undertaking, the results that stem from this research, as well as the increased awareness and skills attained by participants who embark on this journey are worth the challenges. Rather than being a snapshot in time or simply a depiction of the perceptions of community members, this research provides communities with the skills needed to advocate for themselves and to take an active role in the advancement of their own lives. As such, the results of this research were twofold: highlighting and investigating underserved, minority perceptions of their roles in their community as well as providing these adolescents with the skills and confidence to impact their community.
References


(Chapter 7, Action Research)


Appendix A

Participatory Research Group Protocol & Group Guide

1) General:
All group sessions will be held at the Midvale Boys and Girls Club facility after school (generally from 3:30pm-5:00pm) on a pre-determined day of the week. Prior to participating in the group, all participants will be provided with a consent form (for their parents) and an assent form (for them) as well as a verbal explanation of the research project that they are being invited to participate in.

   a) Pre-Participation:
   “I am doing a study to understand how minority youth think about community engagement and what they think their role in their community is. In order to do this, I am forming a group of students to help me think about this and to provide their experiences and thoughts with me. In addition to this personal feedback, I am interested in working with this group of students to learn about their community and the changes they would like to see in their communities. After deciding as a group what issue we are interested in investigating and how we want to investigate it, we will work together on a project that will address this concern.

This group will meet every week over the next few months and if you decide that you would like to participate, your consistent engagement will be important to the group. This group will be very interactive and will operate as a democracy. We will make decisions together as a collective group rather than by one person making a decision.

   “If you agree to participate, you will be an important part of this study and the associated project that we decide to do in the community. Before this group starts, if you decide you want to participate, you will need to review and sign the participant assent form and your parent/guardian will need to sign a consent form indicating that you and your parent/guardian understand that I will be meeting with you and a group of your peers on a weekly basis for the next few months and that I will be recording each of these meetings. At any point, if you decide for any reason that you would no longer like to participate in this study, you will be able to immediately stop attending the meetings and assisting with the project. If this is all okay with you, please have your parent/guardian review the consent form, contact me for any questions he/she has and then sign it if he/she agrees to your participation. As your parent/guardian does this, you can review the assent form and ask me any questions you have and then sign it.

2) Rapport Building:
   a) Session 1:
   “To start out our group, since we’re going to be working together for the next few months, I think we should all get to know each other. Some pretty basic things we can all share are:

      1. What is your name and do you have a nickname that you want the group to refer to you by?
      2. Where do you live?
      3. Where do you go to school?
      4. How old are you and what grade are you in?
4. What is your favorite thing to do outside of school?
5. Why did you want to participate in this group? Is there something you are hoping to learn or accomplish through your participation?

(Following this session, each session will build on the discussions that occurred during previous sessions. As a result, the questions below are a basic framework for conversation and are recommended more as prompts for discussion.)

3) Research Question Development
   a) Session 2:
   “Last week we got to know each other a little better. This week, I think we should focus on talking a little more about what we want to do as part of this group. As we talk this afternoon, let’s think about some of the following questions:
   1. How would you explain your community to someone who isn’t a part of it?
   2. What is your favorite thing about your community?
   3. What is your least favorite thing about your community?
   4. What is one way you would like to see your community change for the better?
   5. What do you think we can do to make that change happen?

   As we talk about these questions and our perspectives, think about what everyone is saying. Are there overlaps or major differences? After everyone has a chance to share, we’ll start thinking about what we would like to do as a group to impact change in the community.”

4) Methodology Discussion & Planning
   a) Session 3:
   “Now that we have decided that we are interested in investigating/doing __________, we need to think about how we want to approach this. Let’s brainstorm ideas that we have related to the question and then we’ll discuss as a group what we want to do. Here are a few questions that we can think about as we decide exactly what we want to do:
   1. Do we want to do something here in the club or do we want to do something somewhere else in the community?
   2. Is there a specific group of people that we want to work with as we do this?
   3. Do we want to build a project that will last after this two month period or do we want to do a one-time project?
   4. Do we want to do a project and develop something (a club, a website, a mural, a handout) or do we want to develop recommendations to share with the community (ex. a proposal for community leaders)?
   5. What are some skills that we have as individuals that we can contribute to this project and the group?

5) Execution:
   a) Sessions 4-7:
   These sessions will all be very action-oriented. Although we will likely have short discussions during each of the sessions, these four meetings will generally be focused on doing whatever we decide during session 3. A few questions to guide short discussions during these sessions are:
   1. Have we run into any barriers? What are they? What are some ideas for how to overcome
these?
2. Do you have any concerns about how the project/research is going? What are they?
3. Has anything happened that have made you excited? Tell us about it.

6) Evaluation/Assessment:
   a) Session 8:
This session will include a discussion of the project we have been working on for the last four weeks. This focus of the session will be to critically engage with what the group has done, who they have worked with and what the results were.

1. How did the project we conducted make you feel?
2. What kind of difference is it going to make in the community?
4. What did you learn about yourself through this process?
5. What did you learn about your peers through this process?
6. How would you describe your interactions with adults that we worked with?
Appendix B

Parent/Guardian Permission Form
Research Involving Minors (under age 18)

Before agreeing to participate in this study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the proposed procedures. This explanation describes the purpose, procedures, benefits and risks of the study. It also describes the right to withdraw from the study at any time. It is important to understand that no guarantee or assurance can be made as to the results. It is also important that you understand that refusing to participate will not result in negative consequences for you or your child.

Your child is being invited to participate in a participatory action research study, the purpose of which is to learn about minority youth perceptions on civic engagement and their roles in their communities. As a participant, your child will have the opportunity to work with their peers to develop a research question that they are interested in learning more about and will then work with the group to execute a project related to that research question. Unlike many research projects, as a participant your child will be a part of the research team for this study and will be directly involved in deciding the direction of the project.

This study is expected last five months, from January-April 2012. You will be notified of any significant variance from the stated duration of the study.

Possible benefits that your child might realize from participation in this study have been identified as a greater awareness of their community and satisfaction of impacting change in their community. However, along with this increase awareness of their community, it is likely that your child will be exposed to aspects of their community that they were previously unaware of. To ensure that these realizations do not become overwhelming for your child, every time that we meet, the full group will discuss new insights and observations we have gained from our work. As concerns arise, we will address these as a group and discuss ways that we may be able to overcome challenges we face.

Your child's participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and he/she may withdraw from the study any time he/she wishes.

If your child should wish to withdraw from the study or should you or your child have questions about the study, please contact Lindsey Groark at 571-334-1982.

If you have any questions regarding your child’s rights as a research participant, please contact Dean Robert Shaw at 801-832-2474

All personally identifiable study data will be kept confidential. However, the results of this study may be made available to you upon request or used in formal publications or presentations.

If the risks and benefits associated with this study have been explained to your satisfaction, as well as your child’s rights as a research participant, and you wish to allow your child to participate, please sign and date this form where indicated. You will be provided a copy of this form for your records.

__________________________  ________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian  Date

__________________________  ________________________
Signature of Witness  Date

__________________________  ________________________
Signature of Primary Investigator  Date
Appendix C

Formulario de Permiso de Padres / Guardián
Estudio con participación de menores de edad (menores de 18)

Antes de aceptar participar en este estudio, es importante que lea y comprenda la siguiente explicación de los procedimientos propuestos. Esta explicación describe el propósito, los procedimientos, los beneficios y los riesgos del estudio. También describe el derecho de retirarse del estudio en cualquier momento. Es importante entender que ninguna garantía o seguridad se pueden hacer en cuanto a los resultados. También es importante que usted entienda que tendrá consecuencias negativas para usted o su hijo si no participan.

Su hijo está invitado a participar en un estudio de investigación-acción participativa, cuyo objetivo es conocer las percepciones de los jóvenes que pertenecen a razas menores, y ver que piensan en el compromiso cívico y cual es su papel en las comunidades. Como participante, su hijo tendrá la oportunidad de trabajar con sus compañeros para desarrollar una pregunta de investigación que están interesados en aprender más sobre y luego trabajar con el grupo para llevar a cabo un proyecto relacionado con el problema de investigación. A diferencia de muchos proyectos de investigación, como participante de su hijo será parte del equipo de investigación para este estudio y participará directamente en la decisión de la dirección del proyecto.

Este estudio se espera que dure cuatro meses, de enero a abril de 2013. Se le notificará de cualquier variación significativa de la duración del periodo de estudio.

Los posibles beneficios que su niño pudiera ver es darse cuenta de la participación en este estudio se han identificado como una mayor conciencia de su comunidad y la satisfacción de impactar el cambio en su comunidad. Sin embargo, junto con esta conciencia creciente, lo más probable es que su hijo va a estar expuesto a unos aspectos de su comunidad que antes desconocían. Para asegurar que estas realizaciones no llegan a ser abrumador para su hijo, cada vez que nos reunimos, todo el grupo va a discutir nuevas ideas y observaciones que hemos ganado con nuestro trabajo. En cuanto haiga preguntas, nos ocuparemos de ellos como un grupo y discutiremos maneras para que seamos capaces de superar los desafíos que enfrentamos.

La participación de su hijo en este estudio es completamente voluntaria, donde él o ella puede retirarse del estudio en cualquier momento que él o ella desea.

Si su hijo desea retirarse del estudio o si usted o su hijo tienen preguntas sobre el estudio, por favor póngase en contacto con Lindsey Groark al 571-343-1982.

Si usted tiene alguna pregunta relacionada con los derechos de su hijo como participante en el estudio, por favor póngase en contacto con Dean Robert Shaw en 801-832-2474.

Todos los datos de los estudios de identificación personal se mantendrá confidencial. Sin embargo, los resultados de este estudio pueden estar disponibles a su solicitud o su uso en publicaciones formales o presentaciones.

Si los riesgos y beneficios asociados con este estudio han sido explicados a su satisfacción, así como los derechos de su hijo como participante de un estudio, y usted desea que su hijo participe, por favor firme y ponga la fecha esta forma. Se le proporcionará una copia de este formulario para sus registros.

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Firma de Padre o Guardián

Firma de Testigo

Firma de Investigador Principal

Fecha

Fecha

Fecha
Appendix D

**Letter to Parent/Guardian**
*(to be attached to Parent/Guardian Permission Form)*

Dear Parent,

Your child has been invited to participate in a research study investigating minority, youth perceptions on civic engagement and their role in their community. In order to study this, I will be conducting a participatory action research study with 7-10 youth members of the Midvale Boys and Girls Club. By agreeing to participate in this study your child will:

- Be a key member of the research team to investigate youth perceptions on civic engagement and their roles in their community
- Attend weekly meetings at the Midvale Boys and Girls Club with the other members of the research group
- Actively participate in discussions with their peers surrounding questions about their communities and their vision for the future
- Participate in a project designed to address an issue that the group determines they would like to investigate in their community
- Have the opportunity to review my analysis of the groups’ engagement and request that specific information related to them be removed or modified prior to this project being published
- Have the right to drop out of the study at any time and for any reason

This research project will begin in January 2013 and will continue through April 2013. If you and your child agree to participate, please sign the attached consent form and have your child sign the assent form and return these to me at the Midvale Boys and Girls Club.

If you or your child has any questions regarding participation in this study, please contact me at 571-334-1982 or Lindsey.groark@gmail.com. I will also be at the Midvale Boys and Girls Club on (DATE, TIME) if you would like to meet in person to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

Lindsey Groark
Estimados padres,

Su hijo ha sido invitado a participar en un estudio de investigación investigando las minorías, la percepción de los jóvenes sobre la participación cívica y su papel en la comunidad. Para estudiar esto, llevaremos a cabo un estudio de investigación-acción participativa con 7-10 jóvenes que son miembros de el Boys and Girls Club de Midvale. Al aceptar participar en este estudio su hijo:

- Sera un miembro clave del equipo de investigación para investigar las percepciones de los jóvenes en la participación cívica y su papel en la comunidad
- Asistir a las reuniones semanales en el Boys and Girls Club de Midvale con los demás miembros del grupo de la investigación
- Participar activamente en las discusiones con sus compañeros alrededor de preguntas sobre sus comunidades y su visión para el futuro
- Participar en un proyecto destinado a resolver un problema que el grupo determina que les gustaría investigar en su comunidad
- Tener la oportunidad de revisar mi análisis de la participación de los grupos y solicitar la información específica relacionada con este proyecto antes de ser publica.
- Tener el derecho a abandonar el estudio en cualquier momento y por cualquier razón

Este proyecto de investigación se iniciará en enero de 2013 y continuará hasta abril de 2013. Si usted y su hijo está de acuerdo en participar, por favor firme el formulario de consentimiento adjunto y haga que su hijo firme el formulario de consentimiento y devolverlos a mí en el Boys and Girls Club de Midvale.

Si usted o su hijo tiene alguna pregunta relacionada con la participación en este estudio, por favor comuníquese conmigo al 571-334-1982 o Lindsey.groark@gmail.com. También voy a estar en el Boys and Girls Club de Midvale el (Date, Time) si le gustaría conocerme y hablar más de esto en persona.

Atentamente,

Lindsey Groark
Appendix F

**Assent Form for Minors**

You have been invited to participate in a research study called: Minority Youth Perceptions on Civic Engagement and their Roles in their Community: A Participatory Action Research Study.

The study has been explained to you by: Lindsey Groark

You don’t have to participate if you don’t want to, and you can quit at any time. All of your information will be kept private.

If you want to participate, please sign your name below and write the date next to your name.

__________________________  ____________________
Signature of Participant     Date
__________________________  ____________________
Signature of Witness        Date
__________________________  ____________________
Signature of Investigator    Date
Appendix G

Formulario de Consentimiento de Menores

Usted ha sido invitado a participar en un estudio de investigación denominado: Percepciones Minorías Jóvenes en la participación cívica y su papel en la comunidad: Un Estudio de Investigación Acción Participativa

El estudio ha sido explicado por: Lindsey Groark

Usted no tiene que participar si no quiere, y usted puede salir en cualquier momento. Toda su información se mantendrá privada.

Si desea participar, por favor firme su nombre abajo y escribir la fecha al lado de su nombre.

_________________________ ________________________
Firma de Participante Fecha

_________________________ ________________________
Firma de Testigo Fecha

_________________________ ________________________
Firma de Investigador Principal Fecha
Appendix H

Script for Research Discussion with Minors

“I am doing a study to understand how minority youth think about community engagement and what they think their role in their community is. In order to do this, I am forming a group of students to help me think about this and to provide their experiences and thoughts with me. In additional to this personal feedback, I am interested in working with this group of students to learn about their community and the changes they would like to see in their communities. After deciding as a group what issue we are interested in investigating and how we want to investigate it, we will work together on a project that will address our concern.

This group will meet every week over the next few months and if you decide that you would like to participate, your consistent engagement will be important to the group. This group will be very interactive and will operate using a democratic process where we will make decisions together as a collective group rather than by one person making a decision.

If you agree to participate, you will be an important part of this study and the associated project that we decide to do in the community. Before this group starts, if you decide you want to participate, you will need to review and sign the participant assent form and your parent/guardian will need to sign a consent sign indicating that you and your parent/guardian understand that I will be meeting with you and a group of your peers on a weekly basis for the next few months and that I will be recording each of these meetings. At any point, if you decide for any reason that you would no longer like to participate in this study, you will be able to immediately stop attending the meetings and assisting with the project. If this is all okay with you, please have your parent/guardian review the consent form, contact me for any questions he/she has and then sign it if he/she agrees to your participation. As your parent/guardian does this, you can review the assent form and ask me any questions you have and then sign it.

Signature of Participant ________________________________ Date ____________

Signature of Witness ________________________________ Date ____________

Signature of Investigator ________________________________ Date ____________
Appendix I

MIDVALE BOYS & GIRLS CLUB - KEYSTONE LEADERSHIP CLUB
RESEARCH SURVEY

1. How long have you lived in or gone to school in Midvale?
   ___ Less than 1 year  ___ 3-5 years
   ___ 1-2 year(s)      ___ 6 or more years

2. Are you currently enrolled in school?
   ___ Yes (if you select yes, please answer the next question too)
   ___ No

3. What level of education are you currently in?
   ___ Elementary School (K-6th grade)  ___ High School (10th-12th grade)
   ___ Middle School (7th-9th grade)    ___ Not applicable

4. What is Midvale’s best attribute?
   Select the one response that best reflects your opinion.
   ___ Boys & Girls Club   ___ Sense of Community
   ___ Good public space (ie. parks) ___ Job Opportunities
   ___ Public Transportation ___ Education
   ___ Other: ____________________________

5. Why did you choose your response as Midvale’s best attribute?
   ________________________________________
   ________________________________________
   ________________________________________

6. What do you think needs the most improvement in Midvale?
   Select the one response that best reflects your opinion.
   ___ Public safety   ___ Education
   ___ Cleanliness    ___ Sense of Community
   ___ Public space (ie. parks) ___ Job Opportunities
   ___ Public Transportation ___ Other: ____________________________

7. Why did you choose your response as needing the most improvement?
   ________________________________________
   ________________________________________
   ________________________________________
8. What is something that you think is missing from Midvale?
   ___ Feeling of Safety  ___ Cleanliness
   ___ Sense of Community  ___ Public space (ie. parks)
   ___ Job Opportunities  ___ Public Transportation
   ___ Education  ___ Other: ______________________

9. Why did you choose this?
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

10. How would you address this issue?
   __________________________________________________________________________
    __________________________________________________________________________
    __________________________________________________________________________

11. What do you think your role should be in the community?
    (Select as many as apply. If you select other, please explain on the line next to that option)
    ___ No role  ___ Volunteer
    ___ Student  ___ Role Model
    ___ Provider  ___ Other: ____________________________

12. Why did you select that/those role(s)?
    __________________________________________________________________________
    __________________________________________________________________________
    __________________________________________________________________________

13. Do you think you fulfill this role?
    ___ Yes  ___ No

14. Why or why not? How do you think you might be able to fulfill this role?
    __________________________________________________________________________
    __________________________________________________________________________
    __________________________________________________________________________
Appendix J

Internal Review Board Approval
Appendix K

Master of Arts in Community Leadership Learning Objectives

Through this research, I addressed many of the learning objectives cited by the Master of Arts in Community Leadership (MACL) program. Below is a brief description of the primary applicable learning objectives and how these were addressed through this research.

Community Organizing and Advocacy

In order to better understand the communities that I conducted research in, I investigated the role that race and social class has in youth civic engagement. As I conducted this participatory action research study, I engaged adolescents in groups around questions related to their communities and their roles in these communities. As a facilitator and advisor in this group, I encouraged open communication and sharing between all members of the group. Through this dialogue, I endeavored to add to the current literature and incorporated youth perception and goals into discussions surrounding civic engagement and community leadership. Working with my participants through this participatory action research study required me to build my skills as a community organizer and to understand how to promote active engagement and participation within the group.

Critical, Analytical, and Integrative Thinking

Developing skills in qualitative research methods contribute significantly to the objective of critical, analytical and integrative thinking. The analysis I performed as a part of my qualitative inquiry into youth civic engagement and organizing required that I critically examine the observations I made in the field and thoughtfully and purposefully pursue alternative explanations as I develop my assertions. Building on the literature review I completed prior to initiating this field research, I continued to return to the literature surrounding civic engagement,
youth organizing, critical race theory, critical social theory and participatory action research to analyze and further investigate my experiences and observations in the field.

**Critical Reflection**

The cornerstone of this research was based in group discussions and reflection of the two month research process. Through field notes I wrote following each session and engagement with the literature surrounding participatory action research methods, I spent time before each group session critically reflecting on how my core research group was engaging and how this related to what other researcher’s described in their studies. This critical reflection enabled me to stay a step ahead of my study and to be adequately prepared to handle the different directions our sessions often went. During the last session of this study, I also asked my participants to critically reflect on what their participation in this study meant for them. The process of doing this was impactful not only for the results of this study but also for the participants themselves as this was the first time they took the time to think about what this study meant for them.

**Collaboration**

This participatory action research study was grounded in collaboration between me and the participants, as well as with the Boys and Girls Club leadership. Without strong collaboration and engagement within the core research group, this research would have never taken off and moved forward. This study methodology required that we work closely together through all stages of the research and rely on group participation and collaboration to make decisions, identify our project and successfully complete the study.
Appendix L

Critical Personal Narrative

This study was the true embarkation of an insider/outsider participatory action research study. As a 28 year old, upper-middle class, Caucasian researcher from the East Coast, I had very little in common with my participants. I have never been homeless, not even close, and actually grew up travelling between multiple family houses for much of my adolescence. My maternal grandfather struggled with extreme poverty and I grew up hearing stories of what it was like for him to wonder where his next meal would come from, but these were just stories to me. When I went to college, my tuition was paid for in cash and I never had concerns about how I (or more correctly, my parents) would make my financial ends meet. Although my parents instilled in me a sense of empathy and curiosity about how people in various socio-economic situations around the world and country live, my understanding of these lifestyles was solely intellectual.

Considering this in contrast to my core research group participants, my experience and background is just as foreign to them as theirs was to me. Two of my participants shared that they had been homeless at least one point in their lives and for those who were getting ready to graduate, one of the largest concerns was financial feasibility. When one of my participants got into two of her top choices for college, her ultimate decision hinged on which school would provide the most money in terms of financial aid and scholarships. After identifying this assistance, she was then faced with the challenge of how to afford airline tickets and travel costs to get from Utah to the East Coast. For the participants in this study, financial concerns were never far from the front of their mind.

Beyond socioeconomic differences, racially I was dissimilar from all participants except for Harry, the one male, Caucasian member of our group. As I grew up, I was surrounded by
peers who looked like me and who grew up in families similar to my own. When I considered my role in my community, I never had to struggle with how my cultural identity conflicted with that of the majority’s. My perspective on my place in the world was informed by my parents and other adults in my life, nearly all of whom had received graduate education or higher. Again, this is in extreme contrast to most of the core research group participants in this study. The adolescents I worked with struggled with their identities as minorities and often discussed how their parents did not understand their lives or their experiences. This struggle in their identity development provided the basis for many of the findings within this study.

In order to understand the perceptions of my participants and to relate these to a macro perspective of their role identifications, I grounded their discussions in relation to theories including critical social theory and critical race theory as well as social reproduction and identity theories. These theories became my framework for understanding the complex histories and experiences impacting the discussions that emerged from our research sessions. Although the group dynamics were unique to our specific group and the findings are primarily applicable within the community of Midvale, the inequities and complexities that the adolescents in this study experience on a daily basis are not unique to this community.

During the sessions where other adults were present and engaged, it was readily apparent that my participation as facilitator had an impact on the responses and perspectives that my participants shared. The Teen Director at the Midvale Boys and Girls Club remarked multiple times throughout the duration of the study about her pleasant surprise that I had been able to quickly build good rapport with most of the adolescents. However, due to our relatively short time knowing one another, it is understandable that there were periodic lulls in conversation and discomfort from some of the participants in sharing personal experiences and perspectives.
Adolescent Agency

In order to investigate adolescent engagement in this study and to understand the impact of my role as the primary adult facilitator, it is important to consider youth agency and how the background of my participants affected their personal agency. Reed Larson (2006) argues that there has been a transition since the 1960s from a deterministic approach of youth agency to a positive youth development approach emphasizing “youth as producers of their own growth” (p. 678). Although I agree that this is probably true for majority youth, for underserved, minority adolescents like the participants in this study, agency is a much more complicated concept. Building on the discussions of critical race theory, critical social theory and social reproduction theory,

It is not surprising then that throughout much of this research there was a struggle within the group to make decisions. The group was much more comfortable deferring to me or other adult facilitators because this is what they are familiar in their daily lives. These adolescents have not had the same opportunities as their more privileged peers to develop their agency and comfort taking ownership within their own lives. During the portions of this study when participants did not feel like they had ownership, although I was trying to promote this sense of ownership, the participants’ motivation and agency was adversely affected (Larson, 2006).

Within this study, I viewed one of my primary roles as facilitator being to promote participant ownership and direction of the project and research. Numerous studies show that adolescents become “motivated by challenging tasks...[and] they become personally engaged when they experience ownership” (Larson, 2006, p. 679). This motivation and engagement in turn promotes adolescent agency. Interestingly, Schwartz, Côté, and Arnett (2005) suggest that agency can counteract previous socioeconomic disadvantages that impact adolescents’ identity.
development. If this is true, then participatory action research is a great tool to use in overcoming some of the inequities experienced by underserved adolescents adversely impacting their identity development and agency.

**Adult-Adolescent Relationships within this Study**

As the previous section on adolescent agency suggests, adults have an important role in promoting agency and identity development in underserved youth. Within the structure of this research, most of the adults who participated tended toward a positive youth development approach that promoted the exercise of participants’ agency. Although this promotion was not always successful and there were many times when participants wanted to defer to adults, through the persistence of this approach, youth were ultimately the ones who made all of the decisions within the study. As was discussed in Chapter 4, the group realization of this during Session 8 was a very rewarding epiphany for the youth and caused them to look at their participation in this study in a new, more positive light.

The participatory action research methodology promotes the exercise of adolescent agency by providing a safe space for adolescents to have authority and ownership over a project of particular interest to them. This ownership promotes positive youth development including positive role identification and increased agency. Additionally, this methodology allows the researcher to work closely with participants and to better understand his or her role in the study and the implications resulting from relationships forged with participants.