

## Overwhelmed and Immobilized: Raising the Consciousness of Privileged Young Adults about World Hunger and Poverty

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In this study, I compared the shifts in worldview of affluent young adults participating in a course on social justice issues to a control group of similar young adults. In this course, participating students learned about the size, scope, causes, and impact of world hunger and global poverty. However, an analysis of pre- and postsurvey data revealed that the young adults participating in the social justice course experienced a decline over the course of the semester in their support for humanitarian aid in comparison to the control group. Interviews with these young adults, and analyses of their student work, revealed that the manner in which they learned about world hunger and poverty led them to become overwhelmed by the size and scope of these global problems and convinced of their intractability.

**Keywords:** activism, civic engagement, world hunger, poverty, emerging adults, social justice

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Perhaps the greatest human rights crises in the world today are the devastating effects of poverty and hunger in developing countries. According to Sachs (2005), more than 10 million children in the developing world die each year from diseases stemming from simple malnutrition. One in 10 children from these countries will die before reaching the age of five. This year the United States will spend approximately \$16 billion a year fighting global poverty and 30 times that amount—\$450 billion—on its defense budget (Earth Institute 2007). The \$16 billion allocated to humanitarian aid represents 0.15% of the United States' Gross National Product (GNP), a level of contribution that falls far short of the 0.7% target set by the United Nations and places the United States last among the world's wealthiest nations (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2007). In short, many would argue—and have argued—that the United States is failing to play a leading role in aiding the world's poorest countries.

One reason for this failure is likely ignorance on the part of the American people about the size and scope of the suffering faced by individuals in developing countries. In a report to the World Bank on global inequality, Milanovic (1999) argued that “such a high inequality is sustainable precisely because the world is not unified, and rich people do not meet, mingle, or even know the existence of the poor other than in the most abstract way” (51). Krain and

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Shadle (2006) concur that issues of world hunger and poverty can be hard to imagine for affluent young Americans surrounded by “an endless array of fast-food delivery services” (52).

In this study, I investigated the response of privileged young adults to learning about issues of world hunger and poverty. The young adults in this study were 17- and 18-year-old high school seniors—in other words, individuals poised on the borderline between adolescence and emerging adulthood. As a result, the findings described in this paper can offer insights to both secondary and university-level educators about the processes by which privileged young adults develop (or fail to develop) a sense of social responsibility for populations suffering from hunger, malnutrition, and preventable disease.

### Research Context

In his Presidential Address to the International Studies Association in 2000, Craig Murphy called upon university educators to traverse with their students “those naturalized boundaries that keep us from knowing or caring about people in other lands” (354). Specifically, Murphy (2001) called for all college students to learn that “the bimodal distribution of income across the globe is becoming even more distinct” and that this increasing inequity “will place ethical and political demands upon them” (347, 354). As if heeding Murphy’s call, over the past decade, a number of scholars have offered their perspectives on the most effective means of educating young adults about global inequity, world hunger and social responsibility. Hall (2001) reported on the importance of teaching students about “how the privileged can be allies of the poor in their struggle” (349). Salem and Freeman (2002) described the impact of a curriculum in which students learn about the challenges facing developing countries by analyzing the United Nations’ annual *Human Development Report*. Krain and Shadle (2006) reported on the ability of simulations such as a “hunger banquet” to highlight for students the nutritional disparities that exist across the world. Finally, Scott (2001) described a number of pedagogical techniques including the use of problem themes, believing and doubting games, and evidence-finding assignments that can support students in developing a genuine understanding of world hunger and global poverty.

There is also scholarship from the field of education that focuses on the pedagogy of teaching for social justice more generally. Goodman (2000a) has cited the importance of providing students with “a range of information including statistics, historical perspectives, and data about institutional and cultural oppression” (45). Hoehn (1983) has emphasized the impact of personal accounts, explaining that “the voice of the other person has to become as loud as possible to drown out the blaring noises of a self-centered consciousness” (158–159).

There is some debate about the tone that should be adopted by educators teaching for social justice. Gutmann (1987) and Simon (2001) have emphasized the importance of instructors assuming a position of “pedagogical neutrality” when leading discussion of social justice issues. Specifically, Gutmann (1987) warned that social justice educators must not “restrict competing conceptions of the good life and the good society” (44). In contrast, Haste (2004) and Rahn and Hirshorn (1999) have reported on the role that emotions such as anger and hopefulness can play in strengthening students’ commitment to social justice.

Other scholars have focused on efficacy as a key factor in the development of social responsibility. Bandura (1977, 1982) found that the stronger an individual’s perceived self-efficacy, the more willing he or she was to take on and expend effort to overcome a particular obstacle. Echoing Bandura’s findings are studies of college student activists, civil rights activists, and Holocaust rescuers that have found these people to be highly efficacious individuals (Keniston 1968; McAdam

1988; Oliner and Oliner 1992). As a result of such findings, Goodman (2000a) has asserted that effective lessons on social justice provide students with “specific ideas of how to act that they feel will make a difference” (1071).

With this study, I have sought to add to the existing scholarship on effective (and ineffective) pedagogical practices for deepening young adults’ understanding and investment in international issues. As I describe in detail below, I investigated the impact upon students’ beliefs and attitudes of an academic course that draws upon a number of the pedagogical techniques described in this literature review. Rare for applied research in education, this study utilized an experimental design with random assignment to a treatment and control group and drew upon both quantitative and qualitative methods. As a result, I believe the findings outlined in this paper offer useful insights for helping students traverse those boundaries that can inhibit their knowledge of and respect for people in other lands (Murphy 2001).

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Here, I provide detailed descriptions of the site and participants involved in this study as well as the data collection and data analytic methods employed.

#### *Site*

Glennview, Massachusetts,<sup>1</sup> is an upper-middle-class, suburban community located approximately 15 miles southwest of Boston with a population of just under 14,000 people. The median family income in Glennview is \$98,600; the median home value is \$670,800; and the public school system spends more than \$9,000 per student per year. In terms of racial demographics, Glennview is 96% White, 3% Asian, and 0.5% Black. In 2005, a national magazine ranked Glennview 13th on a list of the “100 Best Places to Live in America.”<sup>2</sup>

Glennview High School enrolls approximately 750 students. More than 90% of these students will go on to enroll in four year colleges. Glennview’s MCAS scores—the state mandated standardized tests given to all 10th-grade students—routinely place Glennview among the top 20 communities in the state.

Seniors at Glennview High School fulfill their English/Language Arts requirement by choosing two semester-long courses from among the English department’s five course offerings: Creative Writing, Humanities, Youth in Contemporary Literature, African-American Literature, and Literature and Justice. Students are randomly assigned to take one of their selected courses during the fall semester and the other during the spring semester. Each of these courses contains 20–30 students and is taught by a member of the Glennview High English department.

#### *Literature and Justice*

The Glennview High School course catalog offers the following description of the Literature and Justice course:

In this course students will examine the question, “How do we determine what is just and unjust in the world in which we live?” Topics will include prison policy, juvenile justice, issues of poverty such as homelessness and hunger, and

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<sup>1</sup>A pseudonym. All data presented here on this city in Massachusetts are from <http://www.city-data.com>. (Accessed June 9, 2007)

<sup>2</sup>Name of publication withheld to protect identity of Glennview.

illegal immigration...Books read and discussed may include *Nickel and Dimed*, *Living at the Edge of the World*, *New Jack*, *There Are No Children Here*, and *Coyotes*.

As is evident in the course description above, Literature and Justice includes units on criminal justice, homelessness, immigration, domestic poverty, and global poverty. The Literature and Justice instructor, Nancy Allington,<sup>3</sup> explains that, in addition to her academic goals for her students, she aspires to motivate her students “to take action in their lives, whether it’s some service or donating time or donating money or standing up for injustice, whether it’s personal injustice or a collective injustice.” A syllabus for the Literature and Justice course can be found online as Appendix C at <http://people.bu.edu/seider>.

This paper focuses on students’ shifts in attitude towards issues of global poverty and humanitarian aid; as a result, the primary unit of the Literature and Justice course upon which this paper focuses is the unit on World Hunger and Global Poverty. However, it is important to acknowledge that the Glennview seniors described in this study were learning about issues of international hunger and poverty in the context of a course in which they *also* learned about significant domestic challenges such as homelessness and illegal immigration. Such a context is potentially quite different—and could lead to students experiencing different shifts in attitude—than an academic course focused *exclusively* on international social issues.<sup>4</sup>

#### *World Hunger and Global Poverty Unit*

As noted above, one unit of Literature and Justice focuses on issues of world hunger and global poverty. Participating students took part in several activities through which they learned more about the size and scope of global poverty as well as steps currently being taken to address these challenges. Specifically, Glennview seniors in Literature and Justice participated in two activities designed by *World Hunger Year* in which they compared the infant mortality rates of various countries around the world and then studied the “hunger profiles” of several different nations contending with hunger problems. Students also watched and discussed a documentary entitled “40,000 A Day” in which *60 Minutes* correspondent Mike Wallace visits Tanzania and reports on the tremendous poverty he encounters there. Through both the documentary film and “hunger profiles,” students learned about different factors that contribute to global hunger and poverty. Students also learned about efforts to combat world hunger through a guided exploration of the website of an innovative hunger relief organization called Heifer International. Finally, students read and discussed several ethical dilemmas developed by philosopher Peter Unger (1996) that pushed them to articulate their beliefs about the responsibility of affluent citizens for those struggling with hunger and poverty abroad.

In addition to participating in these in-class activities, students also completed the following readings over the course of the World Hunger and Global Poverty unit:

“The Aid Debate: Helping Hand or Hardly Helping” by Michael Weinstein (2002)

“Harvard Economist Urges Aid for Poor” by Jenna Russell (2002)

<sup>3</sup>A pseudonym.

<sup>4</sup>Many thanks to an anonymous ISP referee for emphasizing this important point about curricular context.

“World Needs to Pay More Attention to Poor Nations” by Muhammad Ali (2001)

“The Singer Solution to World Poverty” by Peter Singer (1999)

“Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor” by Garrett Hardin (1974)

*The Virtue of Selfishness* by Ayn Rand (1961)

As is evident from the list above, the readings that accompanied the World Hunger and Global Poverty unit represented a diverse set of viewpoints penned by philosophers, economists, journalists and even a champion athlete. Singer, Ali, and Russell argue for increased humanitarian aid to combat world hunger and poverty while Hardin, Rand, and Weinstein argue that such aid can be counterproductive.

#### *Sample/Participants*

This study’s sample consisted of 83 Glennview High seniors: 40 in the treatment group and 43 in the control group. The 40 students in the treatment group were the Glennview High seniors enrolled in Literature and Justice for the fall semester of the 2006–07 school year. The 43 students in the control group were the Glennview High seniors who also elected to participate in Literature and Justice but were randomly assigned to take the course during the spring semester of the 2006–07 school year. During the fall semester, these 43 members of the control group were enrolled in three other senior English courses: Humanities, African-American Literature, and Creative Writing.

The students in the treatment and control groups were highly similar in terms of gender, race, religion, class status and academic performance. Specifically, the treatment group was composed of 21 males and 19 females while the control group was composed of 23 males and 20 females. All 40 members of the treatment group identified as white while the control group included one student who identified as African-American and two students who identified as Lebanese-American. In both the treatment and control groups, there were two students who identified as “upper class” while the rest identified as either “middle class” or “upper middle class.” Finally, 25 members of the treatment group and 26 members of the control group identified as Catholic, with the rest of the students in each group identifying as Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and unaffiliated in similar proportions. All of these demographics are representative of Glennview High School as well as the larger community of Glennview.

All 83 students in the study filled out initial and follow-up surveys. Additionally, I selected a “purposeful” subset of 21 students—10 from the treatment group and 11 from the control group—to participate in interviews at the beginning and conclusion of the fall semester (Maxwell 1996). In selecting these 21 students, I strove to construct an interview pool in which the two groups were highly similar to one another as well as representative of the larger sample in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation and class status (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). More detailed information about this study’s sample can be found on-line as Appendix D at <http://people.bu.edu/seider>.

#### *Data Collection*

I surveyed all 83 Glennview High School seniors participating in this study at the start of the fall semester in mid-September and again at the conclusion of the

fall semester in late January. The survey consisted of demographic questions as well as questions intended to ascertain students' attitudes on the various social issues covered in the Literature and Justice curriculum: criminal justice, homelessness, domestic poverty, humanitarian aid, and immigration. Each of these topics constituted one section of the survey. The survey also included sections on environmental and educational issues in order to consider the ability of Literature and Justice to influence students' beliefs about issues not explicitly covered in the course. Finally, the survey tool included an eighth section in which students responded to more general prompts about their personal values. Each of the survey items utilized Likert scales in which a "1" represents strong disagreement with the given statement and a "7" represents strong agreement with the given statement. The survey items themselves were adapted from items on more than 15 existing surveys including the American Values Survey (Center for American Values, 2006); World Values Survey Questionnaire (Institute for Social Research 2002); Americans on Foreign Aid and Hunger [Program on International and Policy Attitudes (PIPA) 2001]; and International IEA Civic Education Study (IEA 1999). A copy of the survey is available online at <http://people.bu.edu/seider> as Appendix E.

This paper focuses on students' shifts in attitude about humanitarian aid. (c.f. see Seider 2008a,b for analyses of Glennview seniors' shifts in attitude on the issues of homelessness and education, the other two social issues for which significant findings emerged). The "Humanitarian Aid" section of the survey consisted of six survey items adapted from items on three earlier surveys developed by the PIPA (2001, 2005) and the Institute for Social Research (1999) that focus on issues of global poverty and humanitarian aid. To consider the core underlying construct tapped by these items, I conducted a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) on this study's pretreatment survey data regarding humanitarian aid. The PCA indicated that one key construct appeared to be measured by these items, the first component accounting for 62% of the standardized units of variance (eigenvalue = 3.08). Because the loadings for each factor were nearly identical across items, I determined composite scores for this study's participants by summing their responses on the "Humanitarian Aid" items included in the PCA and dividing this total by the number of items. The composite showed good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

I also selected a diverse group of 21 students from the treatment and control groups to participate in in-depth interviews. I interviewed each student twice in order to allow for "prolonged engagement" with each subject (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). The first interview took place at the start of the fall semester in mid-September, and the second interview took place at the conclusion of the Fall semester in late January. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. For both interviews, the protocol was sufficiently structured to ensure that questions posed to the students in the sample were open-ended, clear, and not overly complex (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). However, the protocol also allowed the flexibility to pose what Patton (1990) refers to as probes or follow-up questions. A copy of the interview protocol can be found online as Appendix F at <http://people.bu.edu/seider>.

I also collected copies of all written assignments completed by students participating in the fall semester Literature and Justice course and conducted observations of three of the four senior English courses offered at Glennview High School during the fall semester. I conducted five observations of the Creative Writing class, seven observations of the Humanities class, and 13 observations of the Literature and Justice class. I was unable to conduct observations of the African-American Literature course because the course's instructor declined my request to observe the class in session.

*Quantitative Data Analysis*

I began my quantitative analysis by fitting a taxonomy of multiple regression models to consider the impact of the treatment (Literature and Justice) upon Glennview seniors' beliefs about global poverty and humanitarian aid. Specifically, I first specified a baseline covariate model to control for any confounding effects of students' gender (GENDER), religiosity (RELIGIOUS), class status (CLASS), academic achievement (GRADES), participation in community service as a high school student (HICOMSER), and parents' participation in community service (PARCOMSER). Given the statistically null findings for my control variables on the outcome, I removed them for parsimony in subsequent models. I then specified a "residual change" model by adding pretreatment scores (PREATTITUDE) as a predictor, along with the treatment variable (LITANDJUS). It is a model of "change" in that the treatment variable (LITANDJUS) is predicting only outcome variance not accounted for by the pre-test (PREATTITUDE). I determined the effect size of the treatment variable (LITANDJUS) using Cohen's  $d$ .<sup>5</sup> The taxonomies of fitted models for the humanitarian aid composite and two of the humanitarian aid survey items can be found in Appendix B and are discussed in detail in this paper's results.

*Qualitative Data Analysis*

The transcripts from all 21 interviews with Glennview High seniors were coded using etic and emic codes drawn from the scholarship on adolescent development, emerging adulthood, civic engagement and social justice education. The codebook for this study can also be found online as Appendix G <http://people.bu.edu/seider>. I checked the reliability of my codebook and coding process by enlisting a colleague from the Harvard Graduate School of Education trained in qualitative methods to code 20% of the student interviews. In comparing our inter-rater reliability, we achieved a Cohen's kappa (unweighted) of 0.85, which is considered to be a "very good" strength of agreement (Fleiss 1981).

Upon completing the coding and categorizing of the transcribed interviews, I constructed matrices that juxtaposed the themes and patterns emerging from the data with the relevant scholarship (Miles and Huberman 1994). I also developed narrative profiles for all 21 students who participated in qualitative interviews, in which I sought to consider the experiences of each student in the context of the study's quantitative findings (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Similar to the analysis of student interviews, relevant pieces of student work and field notes from classroom observations were coded using etic and emic codes and then grouped into categories in order to allow patterns, themes, and analytic questions to emerge (Maxwell 1996). I then constructed matrices that juxtaposed the themes and patterns emerging from the student work and field notes to prior research on identity development and social justice education.

**Results**

An analysis of the Glennview seniors' posttreatment attitudes towards humanitarian aid revealed that the students enrolled in Literature and Justice experienced statistically significant *declines* over the course of the semester in their support for humanitarian aid. I report below on the two survey items about humanitarian aid which revealed statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) relationships between the

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<sup>5</sup>Cohen's  $d = (\text{Mean}_{\text{treatment}} - \text{Mean}_{\text{control}}) / \text{Std Dev}_{\text{control}}$ .

treatment (Literature and Justice) and students' postsemester attitudes. I also report below on students' shifts in attitude on the composite of the humanitarian aid survey items. The summary statistics for these survey items and composite can be found in Appendix A. The taxonomies of fitted models for all three items can be found in Appendix B. Following my presentation of the findings for these three items, I draw upon this study's qualitative data—student interviews, classroom observations, and student work—to interpret these quantitative findings.

#### *Focus of U.S. Aid*

One “Humanitarian Aid” survey item offered students the following prompt: “We should only send aid to the parts of the world where the United States has military or economic interests.” As can be seen in the summary statistics reported in Appendix A, the control group described little change over the course of the semester in their beliefs about the appropriate recipients of U.S. foreign aid. Specifically, the students in the control group began and concluded the semester with a mean attitude on this survey item that fell in between “Somewhat Disagree” and “Neutral.” In contrast, the students enrolled in Literature and Justice became more convinced over the course of the semester that the United States should limit its foreign aid to economic and military allies. Specifically, the Literature and Justice students began the semester with a mean attitude on this survey item that fell between “Somewhat Disagree” and “Neutral” and concluded the semester with a mean attitude that fell between “Neutral” and “Somewhat Agree.”

Conducting Ordinary Least Squares Regression on the outcome variable (POST-ATTITUDE) against participation in Literature and Justice (and controlling for PREATTITUDE) revealed a statistically significant difference between the treatment and control groups on this survey item ( $\beta_{\text{treatment}} = 0.81$ ,  $p = .021$ ). Using Cohen's  $d$ , I then determined a small-to-medium effect size of 0.47 (Cohen 1988). Since this study involved random assignment, it is highly likely that these differences between the treatment and control groups can be attributed to the effects of the treatment. In short then, over the course of the fall semester, the students in Literature and Justice strengthened their belief that the United States should focus its foreign aid efforts on military and economic allies rather than countries in need of humanitarian support.

#### *Reducing World Hunger and Poverty*

A second “Humanitarian Aid” survey item asked students to state their level of agreement or disagreement with the following prompt: “Some people say it is unrealistic to try to significantly reduce world hunger.” Again, as made evident by the summary statistics in Appendix A, the control group demonstrated little change over the course of the semester in their beliefs about the feasibility of combating world hunger. Specifically, the students in the control group both began and concluded the semester with a mean attitude on this survey item that fell in between “Somewhat Disagree” and “Neutral.” The Glennview seniors enrolled in Literature and Justice, however, became more doubtful over the course of the semester about the feasibility of reducing world hunger. Specifically, the mean attitude of Literature and Justice participants shifted from in between “Somewhat Disagree” and “Neutral” to one that was in between “Neutral” and “Somewhat Agree.”

Conducting OLS regression on the outcome variable (POSTATTITUDE) against participation in Literature and Justice (and controlling for PREATTITUDE) revealed there to be a statistically significant difference between the



Literature and Justice students and control group students on this survey item ( $\beta_{\text{treatment}} = 0.90$ ,  $p = .01$ ) as well as a medium effect size of 0.54 (Cohen 1988). In short, then, the Literature and Justice students demonstrated a heightened belief at the end of the semester that combating world hunger is an unrealistic aspiration while the control group students demonstrated a small shift in the opposite direction.

*The Humanitarian Aid Composite*

The shifts in attitude of Glennview seniors on the Humanitarian Aid composite also revealed a statistically significant *negative* relationship between the treatment (LITANDJUS) and students' postsemester attitudes about humanitarian aid (POSTATTITUDE). However, fitting multiple regression models to the Humanitarian Aid composite additionally revealed an interaction between the treatment (LITANDJUS) and Glennview seniors' pretreatment attitudes towards humanitarian aid (PREATTITUDE).

As noted in the summary statistics in Appendix A, the Glennview seniors in this study's control group described a small decrease of 0.14 units on the Humanitarian Aid composite while the Glennview seniors in Literature and Justice described a more substantial decrease of 0.4 units. In other words, the decrease in support for humanitarian aid demonstrated by Literature and Justice participants was almost four times that of the students in the control group.

Conducting Ordinary Least Squares regression on the outcome variable (POSTATTITUDE) against participation in Literature and Justice (and controlling for PREATTITUDE) revealed there to be a statistically significant difference between the Literature and Justice students and control group students ( $\beta_{\text{treatment}} = -1.85$ ,  $p = .03$ ). In other words, Literature and Justice students described a significant decline in their support for humanitarian aid over the course of the semester in comparison to their peers in the control group. However, the presence of an interaction variable (LITANDJUS  $\times$  PREATTITUDE) in the final fitted model for the Humanitarian Aid composite provided additional insight into the impact of the treatment (Literature and Justice) upon Glennview seniors' attitudes towards humanitarian aid.

An analysis of this interaction variable revealed that Glennview seniors who entered Literature and Justice with high levels of support for humanitarian aid were impacted differently by the course than participants who entered with low levels of support for humanitarian aid. Specifically, the beliefs of Literature and Justice participants who began the semester highly supportive of humanitarian aid (mean attitude = 5.6 units, 75th percentile for the sample) did not seem to be impacted by the Literature and Justice course. These students demonstrated the same shifts in attitude towards humanitarian aid over the course of the semester as their classmates in the control group who expressed strong initial support for humanitarian aid. Both groups showed a mean decrease of 0.55 units over the course of the semester in their support for humanitarian aid. In contrast, the Glennview seniors who began Literature and Justice with a low level of support for humanitarian aid (mean attitude = 4.0 units, 25th percentile for the sample) demonstrated a deeper decline in their support for humanitarian aid than did their counterparts in the control group. Specifically, the Glennview seniors in Literature and Justice who expressed low initial support for humanitarian aid demonstrated a mean decrease of 1.38 units in their support for humanitarian aid while their counterparts in the control group demonstrated a mean decrease of only 0.85 units.

In short, an analysis of the fitted model for the Humanitarian Aid composite suggests that Literature and Justice had a stronger (negative) impact upon

Glennview seniors who began the course with low levels of support for humanitarian aid than upon the Glennview seniors who began with high levels of support for humanitarian aid. This additional insight into the impact of Literature and Justice will be raised in the Discussion section that follows.

*An Eye Opening Experience*

Recall that a sub-set of 21 students—10 from Literature and Justice and 11 from the control group—participated in in-depth interviews during the opening week of the school year and then again at the conclusion of the fall semester. In their follow-up interviews, two Literature and Justice students explicitly referenced issues of hunger and poverty. Kathryn explained that she came away from the course “just knowing how much hunger and poverty is out there.” Likewise, Michelle explained that Literature and Justice impacted her conception of “maybe like poverty in Africa, and I guess I just didn’t realize the statistics...I guess I always knew, but I didn’t realize it was so bad.”

Five other Literature and Justice students credited the course with opening their eyes to previously unconsidered issues as well. For example, Dan offered the following explanation of the course’s impact upon him:

Now I realize that things are different outside of America...There’s people living different ways and in different situations who don’t have these opportunities that we have. I don’t know. It just opened my eyes...Maybe the other seniors, they don’t realize like what’s going on in these other countries and in America. I think they’re like missing out on that.

In these words, Dan described the way in which the Literature and Justice course heightened his awareness of the challenges facing people in countries less affluent than the United States. Other students echoed Dan’s perspective as well. Jonny explained that “the class itself has just opened my eyes to like how the world is different than what I maybe previously thought.” Andrew added that the class “kind of put things on the radar that like I never even thought about.” Finally, Annie explained that “there are some kids who live in the bubble of Glennview and have no idea what’s going on in the world. And if they took Lit and Justice, it would have taught them a lot.”

In their follow-up interviews, Literature and Justice participants also described specific lessons the course had taught them about world hunger and global poverty. Richie explained that “we read about Tanzania, and we watched a video about Tanzania. And they have a problem over there with their hospitals. I didn’t know that.” Referencing this same documentary, Brendan recalled that “the kids were so skinny because they don’t have anything to eat,” and Dan added that “they showed these graphics with these kids like starving on the streets. I don’t know. The class just showed that.” In describing another of the activities from the World Hunger and Global Poverty unit, Annie explained, “We looked at causes of world hunger—like countries that are entirely in poverty and stuff. Like each country had its own story, kind of. We looked at little profiles of different places, and I thought it was really interesting.” Finally, Frank added, “We were talking about child mortality rates...It’s like one in five children die somewhere in Haiti or Angola, I think it was, versus like something like one or two, three, maybe seven out of a thousand that die here.” In these words, one can see that Literature and Justice served as an eye-opening experience for the majority of its participants. To borrow phrases from two of the Literature and Justice students, the course put some harsh realities “on the radar screen” that most of the young adults living “in the Glennview bubble” had never previously considered.

*Knowledge can be Overwhelming*

In their follow-up interviews, five Literature and Justice participants described themselves as feeling overwhelmed by the size and scope of global poverty. For example, Brendan explained that “those hungry people [we learned about]—you feel bad for them, but there’s not a whole lot you can do. You can donate your money. But it’s going to go on.” Here, Brendan expresses empathy for the plight of the individuals about whom he has learned but also describes their suffering as inevitable.

Four other Literature and Justice participants expressed similar viewpoints. In his follow-up interview, Dan offered the following perspective on global inequities: “It’s just the way life is, I guess. Like some people are just more fortunate than others. But I don’t know. Sometimes there’s something you can do; sometimes there isn’t.” In these words, Dan expressed his belief that some people in the world face misfortune about which nothing can be done. Another student, Frank, offered a nearly identical perspective with his explanation that “a lot of times the way things are is unjust. And people sort of have to come to terms with things that some people will be better off than others. And that’s sort of the way it’s always been.” In their comments, neither Dan nor Frank sought to defend the inequity that exists in the world nor to blame those less fortunate countries for their challenges. However, both expressed the viewpoint that little can be done in the face of such enormous challenges.

Two other students—Liza and Kathryn—expressed similar sentiments in their interviews. Liza described the problem of world hunger as “a huge issue” but also classified world hunger as “something that’s uncontrollable.” She explained that “I think we can do as much as we can to try to donate money and give money, but I think there never will be enough money to give to all these people.” Likewise, Kathryn declared that the United States “should be helping other countries” but also expressed her belief that such efforts “could [only] help a little bit.” In other words, these students, too, described themselves as overwhelmed by the size and scope of the challenges in the world to which they have been exposed.

### **Discussion**

This study’s primary finding was that Literature and Justice had the effect of decreasing its participants’ support for directing humanitarian aid to the developing world. Such an outcome was unexpected for a course that details the challenges faced by individuals and populations in developing countries and whose instructor describes one of her primary objectives for the course as encouraging students “to take action in their lives...[by] standing up for injustice.” However, I would argue that a number of this study’s key findings shed light upon the surprising impact of Literature and Justice. In this discussion, I offer what amounts to a three-part argument based upon this study’s quantitative and qualitative results: 1) that Literature and Justice raised Glennview students’ awareness of previously unconsidered (or little considered) issues of world hunger and poverty; 2) that many of the Glennview students participating in Literature and Justice became overwhelmed by the size and scope of these social problems; and 3) that Glennview students reacted to feeling overwhelmed by deciding that such problems are intractable and unsolvable. In the paragraphs that follow, I develop each of these points in greater detail and draw upon scholarship from political science, sociology, and psychology that speak directly to these contentions.

First, this study’s qualitative interviews suggest that the majority of Glennview seniors in Literature and Justice had not previously encountered the daunting

statistics about world hunger and global poverty raised by the course's curriculum. As a result, seven of the 10 Literature and Justice students who participated in qualitative interviews described the course as an eye-opening experience. This finding is underscored by Kenny's (2000) characterization of an affluent suburb such as Glennview as "an insular community that doesn't see too far beyond its present conditions and boundaries" (5). Putnam (2000) concurs that suburban life reinforces a culture of "atomized isolation" (210). Likewise, Lasch (1995) has described affluent suburban communities as encouraging their inhabitants to limit "their acknowledgement of civic obligations... [to] their own immediate neighborhood" (47). For most of the Glennview seniors in Literature and Justice, then, the challenges faced by populations in the developing world were simply not on their radar screens when they stepped into Literature and Justice on the first day of school.

I also contend that, in learning about world hunger and poverty, Glennview students became overwhelmed by the size and scope of these social problems and convinced of their intractability. These contentions are supported by the quantitative finding that Glennview seniors in Literature and Justice became *more* doubtful over the course of the semester (and in comparison to the control group) about the feasibility of combating world hunger. These contentions are also supported by the qualitative finding that five Literature and Justice participants described themselves in follow-up interviews as feeling like "there's not a whole lot you can do" to address these "huge issues." While such a reaction was not anticipated at the outset of this study, both White (1981) and Goodman (2000a) have reported that individuals deluged with information about human suffering can become "immobilized" by their own "feelings of powerlessness" (Goodman 2000a: 150). In other words, when individuals feel incapable of alleviating another's suffering, one response is simply to give up altogether (Bandura 1977, 1982). In Goodman (2000a) words, "People may feel it is useless to try to change things or that there is little they can do" (164). Recall that several of the Literature and Justice participants expressed precisely this sentiment in their follow-up interviews, and in fact such feelings of inefficacy may be one of the primary challenges facing educators committed to raising awareness of issues such as global poverty.

Goodman (2000a) recommends that educators reduce students' feelings of inefficacy by offering concrete actions students can take to address the injustices they are studying. She suggests providing students with the opportunity to conduct letter-writing campaigns, participate in boycotts, sign petitions, or perform volunteer work. Another suggestion involves assigning students to "read or research people from their dominant social group who have worked for social justice" (Goodman 2000b; 87). Such opportunities hold the potential to offer students a sense of success and also to combat the feelings of inefficacy described by Literature and Justice participants earlier in this paper.

Offering different *types* of ways in which students can combat injustice is crucial for accommodating the range of students within a particular class in terms of their complex thinking skills. Cognitive scientists such as Fischer and Bidell (1998) have reported that adolescents and emerging adults go through a series of steps in which they increase their ability to think abstractly and understand complex representational systems. Because young people progress through these ministages at different rates, there will be students in every instructor's course who fully understand the role that writing a letter to a congressman can play in combating global poverty as well as students for whom such an act is too abstract to feel meaningful. For the latter type of student, the experience of donating food to the developing world through an organization such as Heifer International may be far more powerful.

Finally, two studies on the role of emotionality and social responsibility seem to offer additional insight into the reaction of Literature and Justice participants. Haste (2004) reported that anger can be an important tool in developing a commitment to social justice. In other words, if an individual becomes angry about a social issue such as global poverty, he or she may be motivated to work for change on this issue. Rahn and Hirshorn (1999) corroborated this finding with a study that suggested both positive emotions such as hopefulness *and* negative emotions such as anger can strengthen an individual's commitment to social action. However, when Rahn and Hirshorn (1999) focused on the role of efficacy in their study, they discovered that positive emotions could mobilize individuals with *either* a high or low sense of political efficacy; in contrast, negative emotions such as outrage, anger or sadness only mobilized those individuals who already possessed high levels of political efficacy. For those individuals with low levels of political efficacy, experiencing negative emotions actually served to weaken their commitment to the particular issue at hand. In light of this finding, Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003) have observed that educators passionate about a particular social justice issue may be surprised to find that the same statistics, stories, and lessons that inspire them to action do not provoke a similar response in their students.

Such a scenario may well have played out in the Literature and Justice course. The course's instructor, Mrs. Allington, expected her students to respond to the course's unit on world hunger and global poverty with indignation and outrage. However, unless these students conceived of themselves as politically efficacious, Rahn and Hirshorn's (1999) work suggests that the opposite reaction was far more likely. And that, of course, is precisely what occurred. The majority of Literature and Justice participants responded to the course's content on world hunger and global poverty by becoming overwhelmed at the prospect of trying to combat such problems and convinced of their intractability.

Ideally, a construct measuring students' levels of political efficacy would have been included in the survey that Glennview seniors completed in early September and late January. Unfortunately, no such construct was included in this study's survey design, in part because the reaction of Glennview seniors to learning about world hunger and global poverty was neither expected nor anticipated at the outset of this study. Thus, additional research will be necessary to investigate the hypothesis put forth here that students' low levels of efficacy contributed to their overwhelmed reaction to learning about world hunger and global poverty. That said, this claim does seem to receive support from the finding reported earlier that Literature and Justice had a more powerful (and negative) impact upon the Glennview seniors who demonstrated low initial support for humanitarian aid than upon the Glennview seniors who demonstrated high initial support for humanitarian aid. It would seem that, similar to Rahn and Hirshorn's (1999) findings regarding efficacy, the Glennview seniors who demonstrated low levels of support for humanitarian aid at the outset of Literature and Justice were more prone to become overwhelmed by the size and scope of global poverty than were their classmates who began Literature and Justice with a more favorable attitude towards humanitarian aid. Such a claim cannot be made conclusively from this study but seems unquestionably worthy of further research.

### **Conclusion**

While additional research is necessary to confirm this study's findings, there do seem to be some important implications here for educators committed to raising

their students' consciousness about inequity and suffering across the globe. Specifically, the synthesis of this study's findings with literature from psychology, education and political science reveals the importance of designing curricula that offer students hope about the potential for alleviating world hunger and global poverty as well as opportunities to play a concrete role in addressing these issues. Such findings do not mean that students should be shielded from the harsh inequities faced by populations both in the United States and abroad. However, in courses seeking to educate young adults about social justice issues such as world hunger and global poverty, it is all too easy to deluge students with statistics, stories and sermons about all that is wrong with the current distribution of wealth, health and resources across the globe. What I argue in this paper is that it is crucial to students' development that they experience optimism, hope and inspiration in learning about world hunger and poverty as well. These young men and women need help envisioning what solutions to these problems look like as well as how they can be a part of such solutions.

Helen Keller once wrote that "the world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker" (Hubbard 2002: 10–11). I believe that deepening privileged young adults' commitment to combating world hunger and poverty across the globe must come about through the aggregate tiny pushes of many committed educators at both the secondary and university levels. With this study, I have sought to provide some important insights to these educators about how (and how not) to push.

### Appendix A: Summary Statistics for Mean Attitudes on Humanitarian Aid

TABLE A1. Summary Statistics for Mean Attitudes of Literature and Justice Students on Humanitarian Aid Composite and Survey Items ( $n = 40$ )

	<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>		
	<i>Initial M (SD)</i>	<i>Follow-up M (SD)</i>	<i>Change</i>
Focus on military or economic interests	3.23 (1.56)	4.30 (1.62)	1.07
Reducing world hunger is unrealistic	3.48 (1.48)	4.18 (1.72)	0.70
Humanitarian aid composite	4.60 (1.03)	4.20 (1.26)	-0.40

TABLE A2. Summary Statistics for Mean Attitudes of Control Group Students on Humanitarian Aid Composite and Survey Items ( $n = 43$ )

	<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>		
	<i>Initial M (SD)</i>	<i>Follow-up M (SD)</i>	<i>Change</i>
Focus on military or economic interests	3.58 (2.05)	3.63 (1.95)	0.05
Reducing world hunger is unrealistic	3.58 (1.75)	3.32 (1.74)	-0.26
Humanitarian aid composite	4.75 (1.40)	4.61 (1.27)	-0.14

### Appendix B: Taxonomy of Regression Models Regarding Issues of Humanitarian Aid

TABLE B1. Taxonomy of Regression Models Describing the Relationship between a Students' Postsemester Beliefs about Focusing American Foreign Aid on Military and Economic Allies and Participation in Literature and Justice ( $n = 83$ )

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3*	Model 4
Intercept	5.93***	2.70***	3.86***	3.83**
GENDER	-0.33	-0.43		
CLASS	-0.52			
RELIGIOUS	0.003			
GRADES	0.24			
HICOMSER	0.25			
PARCOMSER	0.43			
LITANDJUS			0.81*	0.79
PREATTTITUDE		0.37***	0.39***	0.40
LITANDJUS × PREATTTITUDE				-0.005

~ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

TABLE B2. Taxonomy of Regression Models Describing the Relationship between a Students' Postsemester Beliefs about the Challenge of Reducing World Hunger and Poverty and Participation in Literature and Justice ( $n = 83$ )

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3*	Model 4
Intercept	3.89*	2.54**	3.33***	2.94*
GENDER	-0.94*	-0.28		
CLASS	-0.28			
RELIGIOUS	0.25			
GRADES	0.10			
HICOMSER	0.06			
PARCOMSER	0.09			
LITANDJUS			0.90**	0.66
PREATTTITUDE		0.45***	0.50***	0.61~
LITANDJUS × PREATTTITUDE				-0.07

~ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

TABLE B3. Taxonomy of Regression Models Describing the Relationship between a Students' Postsemester Beliefs on the Humanitarian Aid Composite and Participation in Literature and Justice ( $n = 83$ )

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4*
Intercept	3.40**	1.37**	0.94~	2.08***
GENDER	-0.53~			
CLASS	0.13			
RELIGIOUS	0.11			
GRADES	0.10			
HICOMSER	0.02			
PARCOMSER	0.05			
LITANDJUS			-0.31	-1.85*
PREATTTITUDE		0.65***	0.64***	0.53***
LITANDJUS × PREATTTITUDE				0.33~

~ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Coding for Predictor Variables*

Variable	"0"	"1"	"2"	"3"
GENDER	Male	Female		
CLASS	Middle Class	Upper Class		
RELIGIOUS	Not Religious	Somewhat Religious	Religious	Very Religious
GRADES	D's and F's	C's	B's	A's and B's
HICOMSER	No	Yes		
PARCOMSER	No	Yes		
LITANDJUS	Control	Treatment		

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