According to Whipp (2013) one of the most appealing attitudes that a pre-service teacher can demonstrate, are those associated with a socially just and equitable view of the world in which he or she lives. As I complete my third year of a Bachelor of Education (Primary) at Australian Catholic University, I am required to participate in “Community Engagement” as part of my undertaking of the unit EDFX207 – Professional and Community Experience Program. Whilst undertaking this unit, I was required to engage with a local organisation where I would be able to work collaboratively with my chosen community group to achieve mutually agreed upon goals and build capacity, improve well-being and produce just and sustainable outcomes in the interests of the people, community and the University. The organisation that I had decided to work through was Aquinas Young Vinnies, which falls under the (perhaps more well-known) St Vincent De Paul Society. Aquinas Young Vinnies is comprised of students that are studying at the Aquinas campus of Australian Catholic University and serves to provide primary school students, aged six to twelve, with recreational opportunities that they may not be able to participate in ordinarily (for a number of different reasons). Children are selected from schools based on a recommendation from the Principals. I had decided upon this organisation as I had a previously standing relationship and a personal love for the work that we carry out, having previously held the executive position of Treasurer during the year 2012.

Over the course of my seventy hours spent volunteering though Aquinas Young Vinnies, I attended several meetings, as a general member, where the group were able to openly discuss upcoming events and camps. The usual allocated meeting time (every second Tuesday at 6:00PM) clashes with a class that I take on a weekly basis and as a result, I would take the time to read through the minutes independently.

A great deal of organisation goes into one of our Kids Days Out and the success of the Werribee Zoo Kids Day Out goes to show that it is very much worth it. On April 6th, 2014 thirty-six children and ten leaders participated in the first Kids Day Out of the year. I assisted to make the packed lunches the morning of the excursion and was a leader paired with another ACU student are we were the leaders of a group of children for the day. It is during these experiences that I truly realise the ways in which participating in such activities builds such a reciprocal relationship for all parties. Throughout the day, I was able to develop my skill around supervising children, questioning techniques and general other management skills. In this way of personal development, my time spent working through Aquinas Young Vinnies is extremely useful to me as a preservice teacher.

Alternatively, for the children that are involved on the Kids Day Out, they are able to participate in
an experience that they would not ordinarily get the chance to do so. In this way, they take something away, learning how to appropriately conduct one's self in a public place and how to engage respectfully with other students. Further, the parents or guardians of the children that are with us for the day, receive some time out where they may be dealing with other life stressors. As Young (2009) contends, teachers must be willing to get into the community and make connections. This is what I feel my community engagement has done for me.

The day ran very smoothly for the most part. We had a young boy in our group who loved to explore and would always run ahead (and sometimes forget to wait for the rest of the group), and another two boys who previously didn’t know one another who did not see eye to eye. These small hurdles that we faced allowed me and my colleague to attempt ways to settle these issues and decipher between what does and doesn’t work – a very helpful addition to our hat of tricks as teachers.

From the 23rd of May until the 25th of May, Aquinas Young Vinnies hosted a Kids Camp at Adekate Camp, just outside Creswick. During my time spent on this camp, I coordinated dance and craft activities, supervised free time and shower time, led team bonding exercises, the list goes on. During this time I wore many different hats: teacher, nurse, friend, role model, participant, surrogate parent, counsellor, interventionist, negotiator and so on. As Joe Manchin writes, “Every child should have a caring adult in their lives. And that’s not always a biological parent or family member. It may be a friend or neighbour. Often times it is a teacher”. For that weekend, we are that caring family member that students can rely on, trust and share with. The students that are recommended by the principals are students that often are dealing with difficult stressors in their lives, this opportunity has been given to them in an attempt to alleviate some of that stress. When I think about this I can’t help from welling up, I think about what an honour it is to be able to be that person that is able to help a child in a profound way. I think about the fact that parents and guardians have placed their own children in our care and trust. I think about all the little things that these children may have missed out on in their short lives. I think about what difficulties they are facing in their lives and how strong they are to still turn up to a camp, with strangers around them, and have a smile on their faces. I only need to think about this to remind myself why I participate in such a worthy cause. I grew up in an upper middle class nuclear family. The struggles that some of these children face are things that I will probably never see in my lifetime. Yet they turn up with their suitcases, pillows, sleeping bags and smiles. For that I am so very proud to be a cog in the working machine that is Aquinas Young Vinnies. I would have been participating in these event
anyway. The fact that these involvements can contribute towards my degree, make it that much more of a humbling experience.

? a flat finish - specify skills/capabilities which have been advanced.