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# Building Young People's Capacity for Critical and Transcendent Engagement: Examining the Institution, the Community, and the Individual as Protagonists of a School Setting

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Building Young People's Capacity for Critical and Transcendent Engagement: Examining the  
Institution, the Community, and the Individual as Protagonists of a School Setting

by

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BAH Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2010

DISSERTATION

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## Abstract

As a powerful socializing force in Western society, schools have significant influence on young people's development into adulthood. As powerful agents of societal maintenance and change, adolescents have significant influence on communities and institutions such as schools. In this embedded case study, I use structuration theory, German Critical Psychology, and systems thinking to examine the dynamic relationship between institutional structures and student agency in a school setting. I specifically examine the influence of this relationship on young people's capacity for critical and transcendent engagement, constructs described further in this work. In the setting of Nancy Campbell Academy (NCA), an international school in Stratford, Ontario, I use mixed qualitative methods to examine three questions: 1. What characteristics of NCA impact students' patterns of thought and action conducive to critical and transcendent engagement? 2. By what mechanisms do school structures and their underlying vision become represented in students' patterns of thought and action? 3. What qualities of the NCA environment impact the strength of the relationship between school structures and students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement? My ethnographic approach includes observations of daily life at the school, in-depth interviews with the principal, life history interviews with students, and focus groups with teachers and students. This research identifies characteristics of a case in which structures are mindfully utilized to translate core values and high expectations of youth into practice. As students engage in these structures, they encounter a safe environment for taking developmental risks, in which they can bring their own values and goals into play to reciprocally shape school structures to meet personal and relational needs. In this analysis, I identify a tripartite matrix of protagonists in the school setting: the institution, the individual, and the community. Through their interplay, students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement is raised through the constructs of wisdom, spiritual development, and a world embracing vision. Relationships among the three protagonists transcend categorization as either "top down" or "bottom up", characterized instead by reciprocity, interconnectedness, and convergence. I identify several principles that ground this

matrix in the case-study setting and discuss their implications for school reform and further research. I describe key processes involved in building young people's capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. In so doing, I also discuss the implications of this case for a constructive approach to generating school environments that are conducive to the wellbeing of students, teachers, and society.

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

In the wake of the debate between nature versus nurture, the question of how and what young people learn has become largely centred on the role of schools (The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Initiative, 2014). Considering the amount of time children and youth spend in these institutions, their influence on development is concerning to those who see the reach of capitalist values and influences into schools, including the assumption that schools exist primarily to prepare students to enter the workforce (Boyles, 2000), an emphasis on standardized measures of performance for school funding and student success (Olssen & Peters, 2005), and widening achievement gaps commensurate with widening wealth gaps within and between neighbourhoods and regions (Bratlinger, 2003). Such influences can be conceptualized as a vertical relationship from society to school to students, in which schools “configure people’s options and inform their normative beliefs” (Flanagan & Campbell, 2003, p. 711) and “mediate the relationship between individuals and the state... [and] can empower some youth while marginalizing or even oppressing others” (Watts & Flanagan, 2007, p. 781). Although I do not deny the operation of these social forces in schools, I suggest that this vertical conception captures only part of the story. The power of schools and students to identify social forces, understand their influence, and act to generate alternative modes of being and doing contribute to bottom-up dynamics that influence the school environment and thereby alter young people’s arena for action and development.

Cultural views of the role of young people in society influence the vertical model of schooling. Prevailing views of youth as being “at risk” rather than as “at promise” (Swadener, 1995), for example, contribute to a relationship with society that forces an exchange of discipline and resistance:

Youth is no longer considered the world’s future, but as a threat to its present. Vis-à-vis youth, there is no longer any political discourse except for a disciplinary one. Youth reacts in consequence. In the whole world, college and high school student mobilizations, such as festive or sport-related demonstrations, are turning into ever

more violent confrontations with the authorities. The same gestures and the same rage are present on every continent. (Bertho, 2009, para. 5)

These cultural narratives of threat and rage contribute to what Altheide (2009) calls a “discourse of fear” about young people and their impact on society.

This discourse also colours perception of youth at the interpersonal level. Fear of and for young people manifest in the areas of crime (e.g., Pain, 2003), sexual activity (e.g., Elliott, 2010; Schalet, 2004), and violence (e.g., Altheide, 2009), among others. In Western cultures of individualism and neoliberalism, the developmental drama unfolding for adolescents is often perceived as dangerously volatile, unnecessarily dramatic, or unworthy of attention – sometimes all three. Today, young people

symbolize trouble rather than promise and... acutely feel the repercussions of adult neglect, if not scorn, especially those youth for whom race and class loom large in their lives. This is a generation of young people who have been betrayed by the irresponsibility of their elders and relegated to the margins of society, often in ways that suggest that they are an excess, a population who, in the age of rampant greed and rabid individualism, appear to be expendable and disposable. (Giroux, 2009, p. x-xi)

Much is lost when these messages are institutionalized through school systems and lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is true that the changes of adolescence are profound. This critical period of development includes structural changes in the brain that have tumultuous and far-reaching effects: brain mass increases dramatically, along with neural sensitivity and conductivity (Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008; Giedd et al., 1999), which result in patterns of thought and behaviour often perceived as irrational, reckless, or rebellious. At the species level, these changes are adaptive because they balance our early years of striving to please our parents with adolescent years of challenging the culture and customs of familiar communities (Abbott, 2005; Miller, 2015); this avoids children becoming “clones” of their parents by predisposing them to curiosity, creativity, and experimentation (Abbott, 2005). Viewed in this biological and

evolutionary framing, adolescence is tumultuous, but need not be traumatic. “In part,” Miller (2015) argues, “teen pain exists because it isn’t understood properly by our culture. We see the behaviours but we don’t understand what the teen needs from us to navigate this fraught passage” (p. 207). Overcome by the maturation of powers they are ill-equipped to harness, untrained youth become their slaves rather than their masters. Structures and systems around them – their families, peer groups, communities, and institutions – provide both the arena in which children and youth develop, and the target of their growing capacities to shape and transform the world in which they want to live. This latter pattern indicates the bottom-up dynamics at work in how students act in and on their school environments. Thus, the issue at stake is twofold: the wellbeing of young people as they progress through this tumultuous stage of development, and their meaningful participation in the wellbeing of society. In this document, I refer to these two dimensions as the twofold purpose of youth engagement.

Evans and Prilleltensky (2007) critique a tendency in youth engagement to concentrate exclusively on personal wellbeing and development – on a purely bottom-up conception of the relationship between individual and institution. In effect, they say, efforts that target only the individual or psychological level “undermine well-being because they do not support the infrastructure that enhances well-being itself... Youth cannot significantly alter their level of well-being in the absence of concordant environmental changes” (p. 684). Working toward community wellbeing and social change is reciprocally related to individual wellbeing and empowerment (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007). Alexander (2001) describes the types of change that can result from young people’s sociopolitical action, ranging from ameliorative supports for immediate needs, to substantive changes that contribute to transformation of systems; in all such efforts, “effective youth development and concrete social change go on the same timeline” (participant quote in Alexander, 2001, p. 17). The spaces in which young people spend their time are a natural focal point for understanding both their personal development and their capacity for sociopolitical action. Research on families (e.g., Fulkerson et al., 2006, Grotevant, 1998; Laursen & Collins, 2009; Steinberg & Morris, 2001), neighbourhoods (e.g., Brooks-Gunn,

Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Elliott et al., 1996), schools (e.g., Entwisle, 1990; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Garbarino, 1980; Goodenow, 1993), and the interactions among these settings (e.g., Cook, Herman, Phillips, & Settersten, 2002) form a substantial body of literature interested in the wellbeing and progress of young people and, to differing extents, the communities, groups, and societies in which they participate. All too often, however, research excludes the intimate and reciprocal connections between individual development and institutional structure and change – between top-down and bottom-up influence. In this dissertation, I focus on schools as sites in which students and structures exist in intimate relationship: conditions in the setting impact individual development while student agency impacts the school environment. In this relationship, I suggest, capacity to engage in a twofold purpose can be nurtured.

The power of schools to manage conformity to the status quo is substantial. In contrast to the twofold purpose of youth engagement I have described, “the antipublic social formation that has emerged with neoliberalism” Giroux (2014) argues, “has no interest in fostering the formative cultures and social relationships necessary for young people to imagine themselves as critically engaged and socially responsible citizens” (p. 193). This social force shapes dominant models of schooling. As a result, for those intent on transformative change, it is tempting to turn away from schools, seeking other spaces in which to empower youth and change social structures. But their influence cannot be ignored: “Because social power operates through formative institutions such as schools, enhancing the well-being of young people must engage that power” (Watts & Flanagan, 2007, p. 780). Indeed, as I argue in this dissertation, young people *themselves* must engage that power and work in partnership with schools to promote the twofold purpose of personal and collective wellbeing and progress. Such partnerships require specific capacities among youth, along with specific institutional structures in schools; neither alone is sufficient.

Through this case study, I aim to describe such capacities and structures and to identify how they interact in a school setting. In these interactions lie latent potentialities: that schools

and students become co-creators of environments in which young people can thrive and learn to contribute to personal and collective wellbeing. My objective in this work is to examine an exemplary case of schooling for youth engagement, from which I can describe key characteristics and processes in sufficient depth as to glean guiding principles for schooling that seeks to unleash the constructive powers of youth.

### **Definitions**

Abbott (2005) provides some useful definitions for key terms in adolescent development and schooling that I adopt for this work. First, he defines adolescence as “the period of transition between childhood and adulthood; a stressful and turbulent period of sexual, physical and psychological change; the development of a mature set of values and responsible self-direction, and the breaking of close emotional ties to parents” (p. 2). This can be contrasted with his definition for teenager, “a term first used in America between 1935-1940 to describe someone who was no longer a child but not yet employed in serious adult activity. First recorded in the Oxford Dictionary in 1954” (p. 3). I intentionally use the terms “adolescent,” “youth,” and “young people” throughout this dissertation, rather than “teen” or “teenager”, except when referring to socio-cultural phenomena identified in the data (e.g., “teen culture”) or when quoting other authors who use those terms.

It is also important to consider distinctions between learning, education, and schooling (Abbott, 2005). Learning is “the process by which an individual uses new information to improve on its earlier understanding, so as to make ever wiser judgments and so improve its chances of survival” (p. 2). Note the assumption here that learning naturally yields wisdom; although I examine wisdom in more depth through this work, which calls this simplistic relationship into some question, wisdom used in the sense of making choices on the basis of the best available information is coherent with my discussion. Education is the “conscious provision of opportunities and means of encouragement to transmit knowledge, and the lessons gained from experience, from an older to a younger generation” (p. 2). Education, then, can be formal or informal, institutionalized or not. In contrast, schooling is “a system of recent

origin designed to formally transmit knowledge, expertise and skills to a group of young people under the institutional control of a teacher acting on behalf of the greater community” (p. 2). My focus in this work is on schooling, which includes dimensions of learning and education, but is not the only site in which such practices occur. I particularly appreciate Abbott’s definition of schooling because of its emphasis on the nested nature of schools in communities. A drawback of this view, however, is its conception of this nestedness as a unidirectional relationship wherein transmission is purely top-down; in the following section I examine relevant literature regarding the reciprocal relationships among students, schools, and society. On the basis of structuration theory, systems theory, and these definitions of adolescents and society, I analyze these reciprocal relationships as a basis for examining the potential of schools to contribute to the twofold purpose of youth engagement.

In addition to these specific definitions, it is worth considering my use of themes and terms related to social change, progress, and transformation. Gokani and Walsh (2017) analyze the uncritical use of these and related terms in community psychology, drawing attention to their conceptual ambiguity and the field’s reformist history, which limit the political scope available to those marching under the banner of social change from within the institutions of academia (see also Walsh & Gokani, 2014). I do not take on the lack of consensus about the meaning of these terms in this work. The case I make in this dissertation depends little on the content or direction of societal change; as such, I use these terms loosely and avoid emphasizing teleological concepts of progress based on a pre-determined ideal end state toward which social change should strive, other than a broad focus on wellbeing. Instead, I use the concepts of critical and transcendent engagement – described in Chapter 2 – to identify key capacities required for individuals to become aware of the status quo, to relate their own lives to the lives of others, and to pursue valued goals through engagement and agency. In so doing, I critique approaches that would orient these capacities toward self-serving ends that would reinforce dimensions of the status quo that undermine individual, relational, and collective wellbeing. At the same time, I highlight the reciprocal relationships between institutions and

individuals based on the conviction that transformation occurs not on one level at a time, but through dynamic and intimate relationship across levels. As such, I assume that social change is inherent to societies, found in the intersections of destructive forces and constructive forces, and seek to examine conditions conducive to individuals' and institutions' critical engagement in this process. Although many of these themes are beyond the scope of this work, I mention them here to indicate my ongoing intellectual engagement with them.

### **Overview of Chapters**

In the following chapter, I describe the conceptual context for this inquiry. Looking more closely at the traditional conception of a vertical, unidirectional relationship between schools and students, I highlight horizontal and bottom-up dimensions of individual development and social change. These are revealed in light of structuration theory and systems thinking – two conceptual frameworks that guide my research. Through this discussion I identify three opportunities to empower youth that schools are well positioned to advance: building young people's capacity to engage in society with skills of critique, openness, and vision; establishing structures and institutions in which diverse young people's substantive participation is an organizing principle; and fostering caring communities in which mutual support and collective purpose can be nurtured and galvanized in action. I then analyze the concept of engagement more deeply and describe two forms of engagement that are especially pertinent to a twofold purpose of personal and societal transformation: critical engagement and transcendent engagement. These constructs inform the case study I conducted with Nancy Campbell Academy (NCA), which I introduce as the research site at the end of Chapter 2.

In Chapter 3, I describe my research methods. My inquiry is guided by an overarching object of learning, derived from the previous chapter's discussion: How does capacity for critical and transcendent engagement emerge from the interplay of structure and agency at NCA? In order to respond, three research questions guide my methods and analysis: (a) What characteristics of NCA impact students' patterns of thought and action conducive to critical and transcendent engagement? (b) By what mechanisms do school structures and their underlying



vision become represented in students' patterns of thought and action? and (c) What qualities of the NCA environment impact the strength of the relationship between school structures and students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement? In this chapter I situate myself in this research with a personal positioning statement, describe my methods for planning and conducting data collection and analysis, and highlight related ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 presents my analysis of the data collected through these methods. This chapter is organized according to three key findings, each primarily responding to one research question. First, I identify wisdom, a world-embracing vision, and spiritual development as the core capacities targeted by NCA, which students encounter within the context of their own histories, experiences, and goals. It is clear from this finding that the relationship between students and NCA is situated in a broad socio-cultural context that impacts the ability of the school to impact engrained patterns, and the ability of students to overcome negative habits of "teen culture." As they work to transcend these trends, students learn to think critically and openly, to make decisions based on an evolving belief system, and to translate intentions into action coherent with beliefs. Likewise, they come to reject an "us and them" orientation, become aware of their privilege, and develop a sense of responsibility to take up a share of the collective work that transcends their immediate life situations. Second, I highlight the convergence between the vision NCA has for its students and aims to promote through school structures, and the goals students hold for their own personal development and thriving. This convergence is key to students' active co-creation of school structures. Third, I describe how relational qualities of day-to-day living at NCA interact with students' development, providing a protective environment – a "greenhouse" – for students to grapple with challenges and weather the changes of adolescence while pursuing valued goals. The quality of the relational environment – among students and between students and teachers – interacts with the ability of the school to be a protective space for development.

Based on these findings, in Chapter 5 I present my synthesis of the data in response to the research questions. My research questions emphasize the structure and social climate of

NCA in relation to student agency and development, which are therefore the focus of my interpretation. First, I examine characteristics of NCA in light of Maton's (2008) analysis of empowering community settings to consider the impacts of this school on students' capacity for wisdom, a world-embracing vision, and spiritual development. This discussion clarifies the continual interactions between setting-level structures and student agency in day-to-day life at NCA, identifying their mediation through the relational environment. Building on this discussion, I then consider the dynamics of these interactions to determine mechanisms through which the structures and values of NCA become represented in students' thought-action patterns. I examine three interpretations provided by behaviour setting theory (Barker, 1968; Schoggen, 1989), social processes (Tseng & Seidman, 2007), and Critical Psychology (Holzkamp, 2013; Tolman, 1995), respectively. Based on this discussion, I describe the process through which students enter into relationship with NCA structures and come to be influenced by its precepts, highlighting the complementary roles of the institution, the students, and the school community in this process. Third, I consider the influence of alienation on the students in their life histories and qualities of the NCA setting that address and prevent patterns of alienation. Mann's (2001) analysis of alienation and her five responses to it provide a helpful framework for this discussion, highlighting how qualities of NCA's relational space determine the strength of the relationship between school structures and students' capacity for wisdom, a world-embracing vision, and spiritual development. Appendixes C to E provide an overview of my interpretive process, leading from findings to conclusions. I conclude with Chapter 6, which identifies the principle findings of this work, discusses its limitations and transferability, and considers its implications for NCA, for other schools with similar aims, and for future research.

## Chapter 2 – Conceptual Context

In order to understand the relationship between schools and students' engagement in the twofold purpose, it is vital to examine the elements and interactions inherent in this relationship. Current discourses in education emphasize various crises in schools, including excessive standardization, unsafe spaces for teachers and students alike, and devastating bullying (e.g., Brown, 1990; Entwistle, 1990; Matthews, Kilgour, Christian, Mori, & Hill, 2015; Saarento, Garandean, & Salmivalli, 2015; Sutton & Smith, 1999). In this light, the societal-historical context and relational environment of schools emerge as essential elements around which analysis can be organized to consider young people's capacity to engage in personal and societal wellbeing. Likewise, the role of students as agents in the school setting is another essential element of this conversation. In a transformative approach, students are seen as more than passive recipients of knowledge and become potential partners with schools as sites of transformation, engaged together in a pedagogy of empowerment (Freire, 2005). Transformative pedagogy, according to Giroux (2012a) is a "moral and political practice... central to proclaiming the power and necessity of ideas, knowledge, and culture... and the goal of living in a just world with others" (p. 197). Such empowerment is characterized by participation in both personal and societal transformation: the twofold purpose of youth engagement I introduced in the previous chapter.

What is at stake in this work, therefore, is the question of how building individuals' capacity for engagement proceeds alongside – indeed, in intimate relationship with – the operation of school structures that promote individual and collective wellbeing. "There must exist a paradigm," bell hooks (1996) asserts, "a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures" (p. 193). My goal in this work is to contribute to this understanding.

Considering the entrenchment of the dominant school system in society, however, the transformation of schools can be considered what Rittel and Weber (1973) call a "wicked problem". The current model of schooling and resulting modes of operation are so integrally

woven into the fabric of society that transformation appears impossible. Much has been learned, however, about grappling with complex societal transformation and the contributions young people make to the advancement of social change. Karlberg (2004), for example, presents a mode of social change that proceeds through the construction of alternatives to dominant models, attraction to these alternatives, and resulting attrition from those models that have been exposed as relatively deficient. My research aims to document one case of an alternative school setting that stands in contrast to dominant models in a variety of ways, not least in its use of a lofty vision of individual and collective human potential as an organizing principle. I have researched the interactions between school structures and students' development in this setting, seeking an understanding of their complex relationships and what capacities emerge thereby. In this chapter, I introduce the guiding frameworks of my research; examine relevant literature on the nature of the relationships among schools, society, and students; and describe key dimensions of student development conducive to their engagement in the twofold purpose of individual and societal progress. These themes are examined more deeply throughout this dissertation.

### **Guiding Frameworks**

Foundational to questions of complexity in social settings is the relationship between structure and agency, mostly broadly definable as being the relationship between constructed meanings, roles, activities, values, rules, and conventions in the world and individuals' patterns of perception, experience, expression, choice, and action in relation to the world (Shilling, 1992; Stones, 2005). Understanding the interactions of structure and agency reveals hidden dynamics that underlie readily-apparent outcomes. Examining the relationship between structure and agency requires an encompassing framework to create space for dynamism and some degree of ambiguity, without sacrificing clarity of approach, especially when considering a school setting, which is complexified by the presence of several groups of actors (e.g., students, teachers, staff, principal, etc.) and by the layers of structure, power, and intention that influence these actors.

In the initial phases of this work, structuration theory (e.g., Giddens, 1984; Stones, 2005) oriented my initial understanding of the mutual relationship between structure and agency as I collected data and began my analysis. The dynamics of structure and relationship in the research setting are central to my approach to understanding students' capacity for engagement in the twofold purpose of personal and societal wellbeing. Figure 2.1 illustrates this relationship as my starting point. However, I found this theory insufficient to adequately examine the question of what elements of the environment generated through the interactions

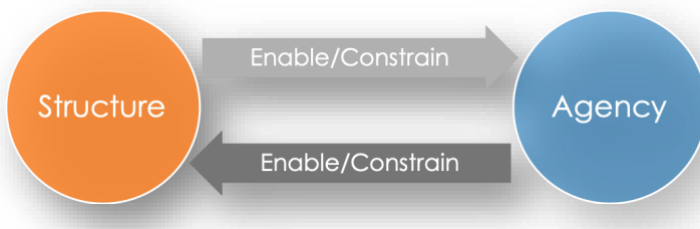


Figure 2.1. Overarching theoretical framing: The relationship between structure and agency

of structure and agency impact what elements of individual and institutional capacity. My focus on engagement indicated the

importance of cognition and emotion, alongside action, as vital dimensions of

capacity-building (as I discuss further below). In addition, I found myself in need of a deeper historical-societal framework to consider the emergence of these dimensions in students' conscious and unconscious relationship with school and society. As a result, I began to draw more heavily on Klaus Holzkamp's German Critical Psychology<sup>1</sup> (2013; Tolman, 1994), without abandoning or rejecting the orienting tenets of structuration theory regarding structure and agency. Figure 2.2 illustrates how I elaborated the basic framing provided by structuration to account for the varied elements of structuration theory and Critical Psychology, to be explained in the following pages.

In addition to this orientation toward that which can be known about the relationship between structure and agency, in later stages of this work I sought an analytical framework for theory-building. For this purpose, systems theory heavily informed my approach and aided me

<sup>1</sup> The capitalization of this term differentiates the school of thought generated by Holzkamp in West Berlin in the late 1960s and early 1970s from similarly named modes of thought in Germany at the time (Teo, 2000).

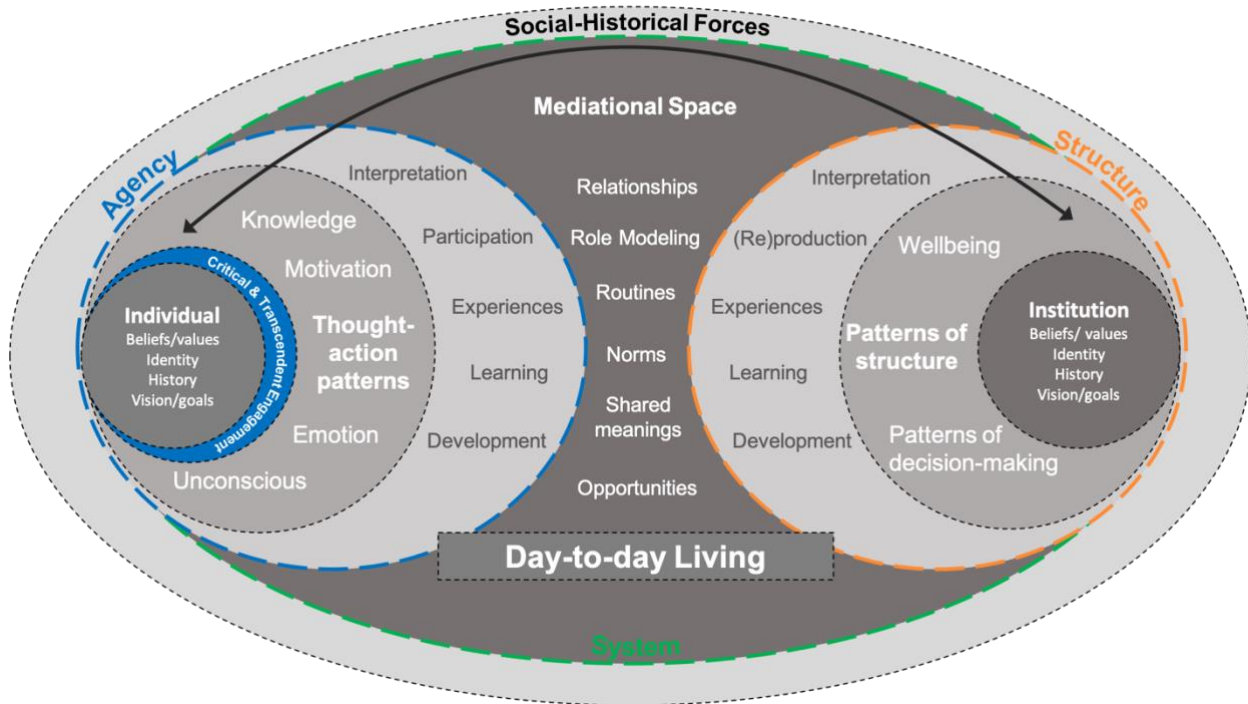


Figure 2.2. Theoretical Framework

to delve deeply into the complexity involved in this research. In this section, therefore, I first explain structuration theory and key tenets of Critical Psychology, as they pertain to this research, before describing key elements of systems thinking and how it operationalizes dimensions of both structuration theory and Critical Psychology for the purposes of this work.

**Structuration theory.** Giddens proposes structuration theory (e.g., 1979, 1984, 1989, 1991, 1993), to link structure and agency ontologically such that neither is the pure determinant of the other. In this view, structures are a prerequisite for agency, which in turn draws on social structures in daily life, thereby affirming and reproducing them across space and time (Giddens, 1984). In Giddens's theory, structure is both constraining and enabling and agency is both active and reactive. As such, social structures are neither a fixed externality, nor are they purely subjective; they are neither solely predetermined, nor wholly emergent. Likewise, individual agency is neither a deterministic outcome of structural influence, nor is it truly independent of this influence. At the same time that it can restrict individual agency, structure is also interpreted creatively by individuals to suit their plans and interests.

This view raises the issue of power, which broadly frames the theory of structuration. Giddens considers individuals to be skillful, knowledgeable, and purposive in the ways they draw on structure but argues that, in daily life, agency is derived from individuals' capabilities and social competence rather than from calculative motives of self-interest (Giddens, 1984). Even in rule-bound situations, individuals have choices allowing them, at the very least, to act or to refrain from acting. Through the means of choice, therefore, and in keeping with their level of competence, individuals have the ability to resist the constraints of structure and, potentially, to thereby transform them. For Giddens, the seeds of social transformation and individual empowerment are to be found in this relationship between structure and agency – the structuration relationship. It is a relationship of control in which all social actors take part, for the most part living their day-to-day lives in a pattern of routine and reproduction of existing conditions. It is also, in potential, a relationship of liberation, which affords individuals at least the power of resistance and at best the power of social transformation (Giddens, 1984).

Stones (2005) elaborates and clarifies aspects of structuration theory to more systematically relate its components to methodology and empirical inquiry. His model of structuration consists of three “separate but inter-linked” (p. 84) aspects: external structures, internal structures, and agency. Stones distinguishes between external structures (e.g., roles and their relationships, laws, procedures, social hierarchies, available rewards and sanctions) and internal structures (e.g., knowledge, tendencies, language, skills). External and internal structures both enable and constrain human agency. Individuals act in response to interactions between external structures and emerging interpretive frames born of internal structures. The resulting actions feed back to reconstitute, reproduce, or alter originating structural conditions. This relationship between structure and agency is a central construct of structuration theory and provides a useful tool for guiding meaningful inquiry in complex settings like schools to ensure all elements and their relationships are methodologically accounted for.

In the context of this research, my epistemological stance holds that students' experiences and perceptions of their schooling develop in a complex context of layered



interactions between school structures, day-to-day living, their own histories, and the actions of other setting members (e.g., other students, teachers, staff, the principal, etc.). Although this framework provides a theoretical foundation, its strength is also its weakness for the purposes of this research: in its effort to prevent relative emphasis on either structure or agency, structuration theory can occlude impacts of the structuration relationship on individual development and institutional change. The historical dimensions of structuration and their unconscious influence on individuals' perceived opportunities for agency are elaborated through Holzkamp's Critical Psychology.

**Critical Psychology.** Situated in Germany during the Cold War, Klaus Holzkamp (2013; Tolman, 1994) wrote extensively about critical-theoretical and emancipatory issues in psychology (Teo, 2000). Although there is a rich body of literature, particularly in community psychology, regarding critical psychologies (e.g., Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Sloan, 2009), German Critical Psychology differs from these critiques by virtue that it represents a redevelopment of basic psychological constructs with a critical stance at its core, rather than a critique or refinement of traditional psychology to adopt a critical stance. Both approaches are vital; I employ Critical Psychology here particularly for its view of the individual in relation to the world, which resonates with and elaborates the framing of the reciprocal relationship between structure and agency provided by structuration theory.

In his "psychology from the standpoint of the subject" (Holzkamp, 2013), he weaves together and elaborates upon historical-structural dimensions of Marxism alongside individual-agentic dimensions of psychotherapy and phenomenology (Teo, 1998). Briefly, the relationship between structure and agency in Critical Psychology is mediated by the collective meaning-making inherent in human societal living, through which the immediate life world – its structures and forces – is interpreted and acted upon in the ongoing conduct of everyday life. In this life-world relationship, action is taken on the basis of subjective and intersubjective grounds for action, the content of potential goals for personal and collective wellbeing, and perceived opportunities for action made available by conscious and unconscious dimensions of



the status quo (Holzkamp, 2013; Tolman, 1994). In this subsection, I describe key elements of this theory that have influenced my research, to be elaborated more substantively later in this chapter and in my discussion.

Mainstream psychology, Holzkamp (2013) argues, suffers from “structure blindness” in that it “denies the difference between individual operations of thinking and the societal-historical formation of structures as well as their discrete form of existence” (p. 263). As a result, individual thinking about structure can be conflated with structure itself, in a failure to differentiate between *individual-historical* and *societal-historical* processes of development. At the same time that these two processes should not be conflated, Holzkamp (2013) emphasizes, neither should they be divorced; human beings “integrate the historically developed structures of the world into their experiences and actions” (p. 264) at the same time that individuals act on these structures in the conduct of everyday life.

In the context of this research, I build on structuration theory with Critical Psychology to emphasize the influence of societal-historical forces on schools and students. At the student level, Critical Psychology highlights the ways in which these forces impact both the immediate life-world experience of students as well as key capacities to critically engage with the ongoing conduct of everyday life (discussed below). At the school level, Critical Psychology highlights the societal-historical forces acting on the administration and daily life of the school environment, and the capacities of the administration to respond and resist as needed to construct the desired environment. This framework facilitates examination of the transactions between students and school to consider dynamic characteristics of the environment and of student participation in the setting that continually construct and reconstruct school structures and perceived opportunities for agency. The structuration relationship, therefore, is still present in my approach, but delves more deeply through Critical Psychology into (a) the societal-historical forces at work in this relationship and (b) the subject standpoint of agents, in which conscious and unconscious dimensions of the life-world relationship influence engagement. Based primarily on Critical Psychology and secondarily on structuration theory,

therefore, the conceptual framework I apply in this research make useful distinctions between structure and agency, while also emphasizing their reciprocally enabling and constraining relationship in which neither exists without the other, either in the ongoing conduct of everyday life or in an historical sense of how societal forces shape the life-world relationship.

Given the dynamic nature of the structure-agency relationship, it is a challenge to account for the processes of maintenance and change that underlie the life world. For this work, therefore, I also employ systems thinking as an analytical framework to examine the impacts of the relationship between structure and agency on institutional and individual action and change over time. In short, I use systems thinking to operationalize my conceptual framework to examine the dynamics of structure and agency in the historically- and societally-situated research site. In the following subsection, I review key tenets of systems thinking.

**Systems thinking.** Systems theory provides a conceptual framework to analyze the impacts of the relationship between structure and agency. Donella Meadows (2008) describes a system as “a set of things – people, cells, molecules, or whatever – interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behaviour over time” (p. 2). A human body is a system; a family is a system; a country is a system; and, most importantly for this research, a school is a system – one that includes multiple actors, rules, conventions, and flows of time and information. Although discrete, systems are not islands: “The system may be buffeted, constricted, triggered, or driven by outside forces. But the system’s response to these forces is characteristic of itself, and that response is seldom simple in the real world” (p. 2). Systems are related to each other in complex, nested ways. In this research, I focus primarily on the relationships among elements in one school and, peripherally, on the relationship of the school to related systems such as the Ontario Ministry of Education, the local community, and students’ families.

There are multiple ways of modelling a system, but common among them are three components: variables, relationships, and a function or purpose (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007; Meadows, 2008). Elements include the components or variables in a system (e.g.,

animals on a farm, children in a playgroup, happiness in a family, motivation in a classroom) and relationships entail the connections among them that constrain and enable their roles (e.g., rules of a game, agreements and disagreements among peers, patterns of communication in a family, opportunities for autonomy in a classroom). A system is guided by one or more purposes or functions; a school, for example, might aim to increase its standardized test scores, reduce its drop-out rate, maximize the happiness of its students, or ensure every student has a healthy breakfast before school, among a multitude of other goals. The explicit and implicit purposes of a school or any other system are not necessarily coherent and are greatly impacted from within (e.g., the goals of specific teachers or the principal) and without (e.g., requirements set by the Ministry). Harmony among dominant and sub-purposes is essential for successful functioning of a system (Meadows, 2008). The true purpose of a system might have little to do with its rhetorical goals or transitory action and is best identified on the basis of long-term action and investments of resources (Meadows, 2008).

Tying the three components of system thinking to the relationship between structure and agency, in a societal system such as a school, structures are both elements of a system (e.g., activities, documented policies, resources) and relationships (e.g., roles, norms, conventions, language patterns). Likewise, agency exists in potential at the level of actors as elements (e.g., students, teachers, principal), is manifested in various elements of individual experience (e.g., happiness, motivation, intention, development, learning), and is expressed in relationship to system structures (e.g., degrees of participation in activities, obedience to rules, adherence to norms, acceptance of patterns of language and expression).

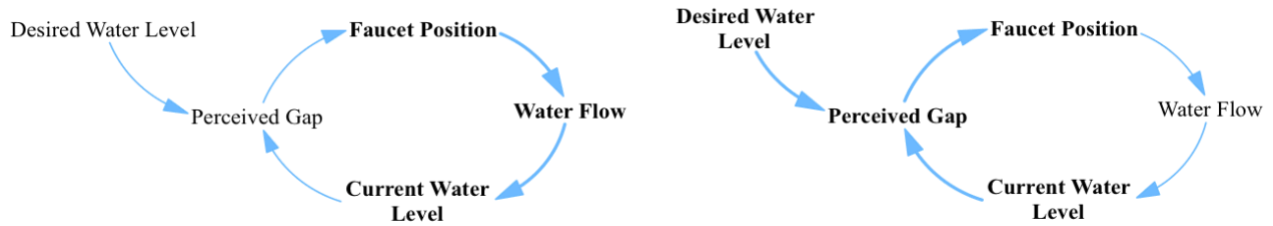
Although the underlying rules or properties of a system are largely independent of its specific elements (e.g., a body generates and loses cells but maintains its homeostasis; a school enrolls and graduates its students but, overall, maintains its culture and mode of operations), systems are by no means static. The motions of agency and structure continually shape the operations of human and societal systems. These operations form a complement of interconnected dynamics that underlie day-to-day living in society. Peter Senge (2006)

describes these underlying interrelationships as “feedback loops” that create processes of movement and change. “Reality is made up of circles,” Senge (2006) explains, “but we see straight lines” (p. 73). Instead, “in systems thinking it is an axiom that every influence is both *cause* and *effect*. Nothing is ever influenced in just one direction” (p. 75). The concept of feedback “shows how actions can reinforce or counteract (balance) each other” (p. 73), avoiding focus on illusory cause-effect chains and snapshots of transitory states or events. The resulting “circles of causality” tell us stories about the relationships among structures and patterns of behaviour, stories that might challenge our perceptions of a system.

As an example of the effects of system thinking, Senge uses the example of filling a glass with water from a tap:

Though simple in concept, the feedback loop overturns deeply ingrained ideas – such as causality. In everyday English when we say, “I am filling the glass of water” we imply, without thinking very much about it, a one-way causality – “I am causing the water level to rise.” More precisely, “My hand on the faucet is controlling the rate of flow of water into the glass.” ...But it would be just as true to describe only the other half of the process: “The level of water in the glass is controlling my hand.” Both statements are equally incomplete. The more complete statement of causality is that my intent to fill a glass of water creates a system that causes water to flow in when the level is low, then shuts the flow off when the glass is full. (p. 77; see Figure 1.1 for illustration of the relative emphasis on each half of the same process)

The relationship between structure and agency in this example emphasizes the relationship between structure and agency: “In other words, the structure causes the behaviour and the structure is brought into play by my intention and action” (p. 77).



*Figure 2.3.* Illustration of Senge's (2006) description of perceived dynamics of reciprocal relationships in the system of filling a glass with water.

The process of filling a glass with water illustrates system thinking's first type of feedback: balancing or stabilizing loops. Such loops "operate whenever there is a goal-oriented behaviour" (Senge, 2006, p. 79) and attempt to reach and maintain the state of a system within an acceptable range (Meadows, 2008). In the example of filling a glass with water, when the perceived gap between the current water level and the desired level is low, action to change the faucet position (i.e., slowing and then stopping water flow) is triggered. The desired water level is the goal that stabilizes this system, preventing either under-filling or overflowing the glass.

The second type of feedback loop at work in systems is the reinforcing cycle. These loops are "the engines of growth" in a system (Senge, 2006, p. 79). Such loops amplify whatever direction of change is initiated, perpetuating a spiral of increase or decrease (Meadows, 2008). Senge (2006) provides an example from a school setting:

An example occurs in schools, where a teacher's opinion of a student influences the behaviour of that student. Jane is shy and does particularly poorly in her first semester at a new school (because her parents are fighting constantly). This leads her teacher to form an opinion that she is unmotivated. Next semester, the teacher pays less attention to Jane and she does poorly again, withdrawing further. Over time, Jane gets caught in an ever-worsening spiral of withdrawal, poor performance, labeling by her teachers, inattention, and further withdrawing. (p. 80)

It is evident, as this example illustrates, that such vicious spirals are important to check before they get out of hand; similarly, it is important to promote virtuous spirals (e.g., positive teacher

perceptions becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy). Systems thinking helps us identify the limits – the balancing cycles – that can slow, stop, reverse, or divert reinforcing cycles. Systems are made up of *both* reinforcing and balancing cycles. Properly identifying and understanding these cycles and their relationships is the core of systems thinking.

When considering the question of how schools become sites of individual and social transformation, therefore, systems thinking provides a helpful framework to analyze the various elements, relationships, and purposes of school practices and student engagement. In the “wicked problem” of school transformation to unleash the powers of youth, systems thinking exposes the importance of considering the nestedness of schools, society, and students; this is my focus in the next section.

### **Schools, Society, and Students**

Seymour Sarason (1996) calls attention to the cognitive challenge of conceptualizing schools as systems in relation to other systems. Instead, he argues, thinking about schools often conjures simplifying images of “buildings that have a distinctive internal physical structure and [are] populated by distinctive groups having distinctly different functions” (p. 2). Such images, “have the unfortunate practical consequence of overlooking the myriad important ways that those bounded buildings are integrally a part of a larger picture” (p. 2). Although such an approach, in which schools and society are seen as “interdependent but interacting” (p. 10), can be fruitful for certain efforts, “if your aim is to understand why schools do or do not change, the usual concept of a school system can be an effective barrier because it restricts the scope of what you will look at and consider” (p. 10). Instead, considering the “transactional relationship” (p. 2) between schools and society, through which schools are affected by communities and are, in turn, affecting them, expands the scope of inquiry.

The function of schools as an instrument of social and political control dominates perception when one emphasizes a top-down relationship from society to schools to students; in this view, the transmission of the social order might meet resistance, but is generally successful in socializing young generations to participate in the status quo (Watts & Flanagan,

2007). In this relationship, passive individuals receive and learn “fixed schemata, models or prototypes (‘frames’ and ‘scripts’) that are not individual, but are social and ‘given’” (Jäger, 1992, quoted in Holzkamp, 2013, p. 160).

A systems perspective challenges this linear causality, however; as Meadows (2008) asks, “If A causes B, is it possible that B also causes A?” (p. 34). Although, as discussed in Chapter 1, schools are a mediating tool between the individual and the state, through which social power can be exerted to reproduce norms and values, schools also hold potential to act as sites of sociopolitical empowerment and transformation (Flanagan & Campbell, 2003; Carnoy & Levin, 1985). What power on the part of youth and schools is exposed if we also consider a bottom-up generation of knowledge through experience? What horizontal, relational dynamics influence young people’s sociopolitical development and social engagement? Considering these questions exposes the limitations of a purely top-down conception of socialization, and offers several opportunities for integrating bottom-up and horizontal dimensions of sociopolitical development and change. Watts and Flanagan (2007) identify three limitations of the top-down conceptualization; for each one I suggest an opportunity for empowerment and change.

**Limitations of a vertical model.** Watts and Flanagan (2007) highlight several problems with a top-down, vertical model of political socialization. First is its exclusion of contestation of views as a dimension of political participation. Although Karlberg (2004) strongly cautions against the “culture of contest” that emerges from framing political spaces as adversarial arenas, Watts and Flanagan (2007) relate the politics of contention to natural political change that evolves through ongoing “engagement of younger generations and replacement of their elders in the political process” (p. 781; see also Delli Carpini, 1989). This intergenerational process of political change suggests one opportunity for young people’s empowerment to shape society: to build and unleash young people’s capacity to engage as thoughtful and action-oriented citizens who are able to think critically and creatively about the array of potential futures toward which society can strive. In such wise, natural

intergenerational progress can become an opportunity for transformation rather than blind adherence to tradition.

The second problem Watts and Flanagan (2007) identify in the vertical model of political socialization is that its emphasis on societal replication obscures exclusion of diversity in spaces for political participation. Camino and Zeldin (2002) argue that youth as a group are systematically marginalized in meaningful political participation and that this effect is exacerbated for youth who are further excluded on the basis of membership in other marginalized groups. Jessica Bynoe (2008) describes a “glass ceiling of engagement” for young people. Agencies and decision-makers that invite young people to participate in civic and institutional systems often enjoy positive public perception as a result, in addition to “belie[ving] they are doing right and being helpful to idealistic young people” (p. 10). However, these invitations frequently have strings attached and limits to participation become evident if youth reach beyond the scope of action envisioned by adults: “The glass ceiling appears when young people begin to ask for more change and push harder on the current operation, policies, or culture of the targeted institution” (p. 10). Experiences of this glass ceiling are unevenly distributed:

Not all young people who are invited to participate in an institution will reach a glass ceiling. Some may not want or know how to push for policy or structural change that has a competing point of view than the status quo. (p. 10)

For those activist young people who do have an agenda for change, Bynoe (2008) argues, “their motivation and approach are inherently different from those young people who are involved solely to ‘help out’ in ways deemed useful by adults” (p. 10). Activist youth, she says,

are often more likely to come from communities experiencing injustice related to economic disparity, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, ability, etc.

When these young people are offered a chance to create change, the adults they are working with may not share the same justice-oriented goals as the youth... [W]hen the actions and requests of young people become more substantial than the adult champion



is comfortable with, the adult reaction is frequently to erect a glass ceiling. (p. 10)

From this discussion, we see that youth face a cascading series of barriers to civic engagement: they are frequently denied access to opportunities for participation; if they are able to access opportunities for participation, they are expected to operate with prescribed avenues of thought and action; if they begin to stretch beyond these avenues, they encounter a glass ceiling that limits substantive power. At each step, youth from marginalized groups are systematically excluded to greater degrees.

This exposure of the barriers to participation faced by youth suggests a second opportunity for young people's empowerment to shape society: to promote both diversity and criticality in what Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, and Calvert (2000) call "youth-infused organizations" where diverse young people's participation is not only sought out, but becomes an organizing force in the planning and action of the organization, with an emphasis on social justice. Proliferation of youth-infused organizations has potential to contribute to new societal norms about youth engagement and participation (Zeldin et al., 2000); a paucity of such organizations is both symptomatic and reinforcing of norms that limit youth engagement in the very opportunities that would build their capacity for participation. This negative spiral of exclusion underlines the importance of structural dimensions of youth engagement; it is not up to the youth alone to engage, but also to structures and institutions to enable their engagement.

The third problem Watts and Flanagan (2007) identify in the vertical model of political socialization is that it ignores the horizontal dimension of young people's sociopolitical development:

The vertical (intergenerational) model of political socialization gives scant attention to the role of peers in political development and the significance of collective voice in politics. It fails to acknowledge that political change occurs when people see their shared interests and work together on common goals. (p. 781)

"Collective efficacy," as these authors describe it, "implies a belief in the capacity of the group to pull together and realize shared aspirations or address shared problems... it reflects a faith in

others, a belief that they share a commitment to a common purpose” (p. 786; see also Bandura, 2001; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan, and Hsieh (2006) identify peers, family, and community members as key social actors in young people’s sociopolitical development and critical consciousness raising. They emphasize the importance of these relational influences for young people’s opportunities to reflect on and respond to issues of injustice. In addition to the natural exposure youth might have to these relationships in a variety of informal (e.g., in day-to-day family and community living) and formal (e.g., school) social settings, some youth become involved in formal spaces for collective civic engagement. Camino and Zeldin (2002) identify five pathways of civic engagement relevant to youth: public policy/consultation, community coalition involvement, youth in organizational decision making, youth organizing and activism, and school-based service learning. All of these pathways provide conditions and opportunities through which young people come to “see their shared interests and work together on common goals” (Watts & Flanagan, 2007, p. 781). The impacts of relational and collective dimensions of structure and experience are vital for young people’s sociopolitical development and suggest a third opportunity for young people’s engagement: to make available environments in which young people work together to reach shared goals in the context of safe and nurturing relationships of mutual support.

I agree with Watts and Flanagan’s (2007) critique of a purely vertical conception of political socialization in terms of its obfuscation of three important dimensions of sociopolitical development among young people: the natural political change that can occur generation-after-generation through creative and critical discourses, the systematic exclusion of diversity and criticality from institutional opportunities for youth engagement, and the importance of peer-support and collective action in young people’s sociopolitical participation. In response to these limitations, I have identified three opportunities to engage young people in social change: to build their capacity to engage in society with skills of critique, openness, and vision; to promote structures and institutions in which diverse young people’s substantive participation is an organizing principle; and to foster caring communities in which mutual support and collective

purpose can be nurtured and galvanized in action. As local settings in which students engage with each other, with broader communities, and with societal issues for significant portions of their formative years, schools are positioned to advance each of these opportunities.

Returning to the question of whether schools can be sites of transformative social change, based on this discussion I propose a resolution to this apparent paradox: defining schools purely as site of social control becomes untenable when one sees the bottom-up and horizontal dimensions of sociopolitical engagement that these settings can foster. When viewed with a systems lens, the relationship between society, schools, and students is reciprocal and dynamic. Flanagan and Campbell (2003) describe how “the principles of a social order are not simply reproduced but are reconstructed and sometimes challenged by new generations, with schools playing a key role in this dynamic process” (p. 712). Rather than a unidirectional transmission of values from on-high to below, the ongoing actions of schools as institutions and youth as students, neighbours, and citizens influence communities and society in very real ways. As such, schools can become sites of transformation for individuals – coming to see the world and their place in it through a critical lens – and for society, which can return to seeing youth as “at promise” rather than as “at risk” (Swadener, 1995). These premises form the basis of this dissertation.

To examine the role of schools in building young people’s capacity to contribute to the wellbeing and progress of both themselves and society, I focus on a recurring concept in the above discussion: engagement. The three opportunities I just described all centre on youth engagement. In the following section, I review relevant literature regarding engagement, first providing a broad scope of the body of work and then focusing on Holzkampian critical social theory. To complement critical engagement, I then highlight the importance of transcendence for a form of engagement that connects individuals to the broad scope of humanity’s progress. Finally, I examine the potential role of schools in advancing these dimensions of engagement.

## **Engagement**

Engagement theory in formal education has, for the most part, focused on the

psychological characteristics that underlie academic success and failure (Eccles & Wang, 2012), particularly in institutional contexts such as schools and universities (Zyngier, 2008). On the whole, the literature on engagement in schools tends to assume a causal link between engagement in school structures and academic achievement (e.g., Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003; Finn, 1993; Marks, 2000). Other research, however, has challenged the validity of this relationship. Axelson and Flick (2011), for example, question the causal impact on achievement attributed to engagement, suggesting that the directionality, or even existence, of this relationship is often assumed but is as yet unproved. Others (e.g., Willms, 2003; Zyngier, 2008) argue that this assumption of a causal relationship between engagement and achievement promotes a deficit perspective, reflecting and reinforcing the broader deficit discourse about youth, wherein “if a student is engaged then the teacher is responsible, but if the student is disengaged then the problem is with the student” (Zyngier, 2008, p. 1771). As an alternative to this exclusive emphasis on engagement as a tool for achieving better grades, Zyngier (2008) suggests a broader purpose: that engagement in school structures “forms the basis for social, cultural, political, and intellectual participation in life within and beyond school” (p. 1771). In this view, the structures in which students are engaged are directed toward more than academic success. This conception is most in-line with my present effort to conceptualize engagement in school as a means of promoting capacity to engage in the twofold purpose.

**Theories of engagement.** Much of the existing literature prioritizes a behavioural perspective of engagement, emphasizing students’ actions in reaction to institutions’ practices, and relying primarily on survey data to assess levels of engagement and the resulting impacts on student achievement (Kahu, 2013). These data are limited, however, by the questionable quality of the measures used to tap into engagement (e.g., the USA’s National Survey of Student Engagement – see critiques from Gordon, Ludlum, & Hoey, 2008; Korzekwa, 2007; Payne, Kleine, Purcell, & Carter, 2005). Kahu (2013) suggests that the complexity and dynamism of engagement are not well understood using a survey method, instead suggesting that “longitudinal, qualitative measures may be more effective tools” (p. 760).

Beyond behaviourism, other approaches to defining and measuring engagement include the psychological and psycho-cultural perspectives. The psychological approach defines engagement as a multifaceted meta-construct, consisting of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004) and distinguishes between antecedents, consequences, and experiences of engagement (Kahu, 2013). The socio-cultural perspective adds contextual dimensions, placing school-level features (e.g., culture, policies, curriculum, assessment, discipline, etc.) and broader socio-political forces (e.g., neoliberalism, market-driven priorities, standardized test-based decision making) at the centre of its approach to understanding student engagement (Kahu, 2013). This view contrasts student engagement with alienation (Mann, 2001) and highlights institutional biases that systematically favour dominant social groups, leading to the systemic exclusion or poor retention of some students (Thomas, 2002). These three perspectives – behavioural, psychological, and socio-cultural – illustrate the complex nature of engagement and the challenges that have emerged over its more than 50 years of use for those attempting to identify one coherent definition.

Across these perspectives of engagement, however, there are several common threads. Kahu's (2013) model, which aims to integrate all three perspectives, highlights cognition, emotion, and behaviour as key phenomena of interest at the individual level without ignoring their relationships with context. The literature on engagement in schooling suggests that each of these individual-level dimensions is multifaceted.

First, in the domain of emotion, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on attachment and sense of belonging (e.g., Finn, 1989; Libbey, 2004) and their role in promoting an emotional connection to learning. More immediate emotional experiences are also relevant to engagement, including enjoyment, enthusiasm, and interest (Furlong et al., 2003). There is reason to include negative emotions in this dimension as well (Fredricks et al., 2004), such as annoyance with other students that disrupt the learning environment or disappointment with an unexpectedly low grade.

In the cognitive domain, engagement in schooling involves the use of deep-learning strategies (versus surface-level), which require mental effort, build connections between ideas, and result in greater conceptual understanding (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). Self-regulation is another dimension of cognitive engagement, involving metacognitive strategies of planning, monitoring, and evaluating cognitive processes in the process of completing tasks (Fredricks et al., 2004) and use of supplemental learning strategies such as rehearsal, summarization, and elaboration to remember, organize, and understand material (Corno & Mandinach, 1983; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) suggest that cognitive investment is another important facet of this domain; although parallel to the time and effort facet of behavioural engagement, described below, cognitive investment can be distinguished by its emphasis on “psychological control processes that protect concentration and directed efforts in the face of personal and/or environmental distractions, and so aid learning and performance” (Corno, 1993, p. 16).

Behavioural engagement in schooling includes three key facets (Kahu, 2013). The first – time and effort – refers to the personal resources spent on persistence-, concentration-, and attention-related behaviours, such as asking questions, contributing to class discussions, actively suppressing distractions, and taking initiative (Kahu, 2013). Behavioural engagement also includes students’ interactions with each other and with teachers, and their participation in classroom activities and curricular content (Kahu, 2013). Participation also includes involvement in clubs, athletics, community service, and other extracurricular activities in addition to, or sometimes instead of, academic activities (Finn & Voelkl, 1993).

Although emotion, cognition, and behaviour provide helpful insights into engagement, Kahu’s (2013) psycho-cultural perspective of engagement argues that exclusive focus on these individual-level factors, sanitized from context, yields an incomplete picture of the true nature of engagement. Critical Psychology contributes to the examination and inclusion of societal-historical impacts on cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of engagement.

**Critical engagement.** Although his translated texts do not use the term “engagement,”

Holzkamp (2013; Tolman, 1994) discusses at length its three key dimensions: cognition, emotion, and behaviour. He defines these, along with the unconscious, as the key psychological constructs of the individual as a subject in the world. As described earlier in this chapter, individuals derive and exercise their subjective sense of potential for action from the conventions and shared meanings present in their life-world relationship. For example, in a traditional classroom, teachers' role as dispensers of knowledge and students' role as recipients of knowledge contribute to a sphere of activity wherein each member perceives opportunities to act within their role; the type and content of opportunities perceived depends on both the capacity of the individuals and the structures and culture of the classroom and school. Perceived action possibilities can be expanded through consciousness-raising, capacity building, and structural supports – all areas to attend to in transformative education.

The subject-hood of the individual is relevant to a discussion of engagement because of its emphasis on the potential agency of individuals in the life-world relationship. From a Critical Psychology perspective, the individual, the institution, and the relational environment are all potential co-contributors to engagement. In a school, for instance, a motivated student elicits reactions from teachers, who – to the extent that they are willing to nurture engagement – can draw on available school structures to encourage initiative. If the teacher, classroom environment, and/or school rejects the student's initiative, it is likely to wither, finding no channel through which to flow. However, even a small crack can provide sufficient space for engagement to spring, widening as individual agency coalesces with facilitating structures. As engagement begins to stream, day-to-day life is reshaped, exposing patterns of life that beckon other students to higher levels of engagement as well. Wherever it originates, such a pattern enhances both individual and institutional capacities to advance engagement.

Holzkamp's discussion of cognition, emotion, and behaviour from a Critical Psychology perspective links each of these powers to the life-world relationship – the relationship between structure and agency. Each of these engagement-related powers is likewise closely related in Holzkamp's theory. In the following pages, I explain his conception of thought-action patterns

and the relationship between emotion and motivation. Based on these concepts, I then explain the construct of critical engagement, as I use it in this work.

***Thought-action patterns.*** “Cognition or thinking,” says Holzkamp, “begins in our life situation, in the world that we grow up in and into, and in which we must negotiate our way from day to day” (Tolman, 1994, p. 118). Dominance is central to society, he argues, which has significant implications for the psyche:

We must not lose sight of the fact that this is a world characterized by fundamental contradictions of interests that reflect imbalances in dominance and power. It is also the case that we must, to some degree or another, accept our world as it is, both physically and ideologically, in order to meet our basic needs. (p. 118)

In response to the “felt contradictions” between individual interests and the dominant interests that “are put forward as the interests of all” (p. 117), Holzkamp describes two “thought-action patterns” (p. 119): the interpretive-restrictive mode and the comprehensive-generalized mode.

The first cognitive pattern identified by Holzkamp (as translated and described by Tolman, 1994) is interpretive thinking (*Deuten*). This lens takes things at face value and focuses on the individual level: “The world – or, more strictly speaking, the life situation – is understood as being as it ought to be and the felt contradictions are treated as personal problems to be resolved within the sphere of one’s own experience” (p. 118). A teacher trained in the methods of high stakes testing, for example, might observe its negative effects on some students’ learning and wellbeing, but preserves a sense of order and reasonableness by judging those students as poor test-takers or as prone to anxiety in general. The structural causes of the problem are downplayed. Repression is adaptive in this mode because it provides “the most efficient means of handling the inevitable contradictions between one’s own and the dominant interests” (p. 118). The problem with the interpretive mode, says Holzkamp, is “not [that] it is ‘wrong’ in the sense of being an untrue representation of reality” but that “it treats its limited understanding of the world as a complete, or completely representative, understanding of the world... It fails to see that things might be otherwise than they are.” Furthermore, it fails to



“grasp the historical and societal interconnectedness of the whole, and thus also to grasp the self as an instance of the generalized other. It therefore also lacks a sense of subjectivity as intersubjectivity. It leads to the instrumentalization of others” (p. 118). A policy maker, for example, might turn a deaf ear to the protest of parents, teachers, and students against high stakes testing, guided by the mantra of passivity: “that is how things are.”

When this pattern of thought persists, it necessarily leads to a pattern of action that Holzkamp calls “restrictive action potency” (Tolman, 1994, p. 113). In this pattern, action is confined by the boundaries of the existing life situation, which, as mentioned, “is understood as being as it ought to be” (p. 118). Because, Holzkamp argues, the existing structure of society is based on a fundamental contradiction – that “the interests of a dominant few are put forward as the interests of all... when they, in fact, are not” (p. 117) – power in restrictive action potency “is gained through participation in the power of the dominant forces in society” (p. 116). As such, although restrictive action potency is “subjectively functional” (p. 116) because it is not demanding and entails little risk, “on the other hand, to one degree or another, it constitutes a denial of the true societal interest, and to that degree... puts us in a position of hostility towards ourselves” (p. 116). Tolman (1994) provides the example of “the young Central American peasant who finds that he can improve the quality of his own existence by joining the army, thus moving rapidly from the status of the oppressed to that of oppressor” (p. 116). In this mode, “the subjective identification of one’s own interests with those of the dominant, and the interests of the dominant with those of society” is “made so pervasively,” argues Holzkamp, “as to appear to represent natural law itself” in which “taking advantage of other people, instrumentalizing all social relationships, [and] ‘looking out for number one,’ are taken to be expressions of unalterable ‘human nature’” (p. 116-117). As such, restrictive action potency “confines its benefits to particular individuals, though not without costs to them, and always at a cost to others and society as a whole” (p. 116). A system in which wealthy communities benefit from high quality teaching and poor communities are left with insufficient resources and fall victim to the school-to-prison pipeline is an example of how restrictive action potency

is driven by and serves dominant societal forces. So long as those who could potentially change this system remain in a restrictive mode, the status quo is enabled and reinforced.

An alternative pattern of thinking leading to a different mode of action is available. Comprehensive thinking (*Begreifen*) “sees that things are often different than they appear to be, that conditions have been different in the past and can be different in the future from what they are in the present” (p. 119). This mode of thought entails the complementarity of critical thinking, in order to identify the discrepancies between existing and potential states, and openness, in order to realize the subject-hood of others, counteracting any tendency to instrumentalize or objectify them. Comprehensive thinking is “the kind of thinking required... for effective collective action aimed at the improvement of the general quality of life” (p. 199). The comprehensive mode involves “thinking with reference to *real* contradictions,” which accentuates “the subject standpoint of thinking” (p. 22). “The issue here,” according to Holzkamp, “is that we ourselves are part of the society which we have to reproduce in thinking” (p. 22). In critiquing the effects of high stakes testing, for example, a teacher encounters contradictions between the expectations of her employer and her intuitive and educated sense of what students need to be able to learn. In this difficult position, a teacher might experiment with various ways to satisfy testing objectives while nurturing the individual capacities of each student; she might even become involved in discourses and movements that publicly critique excessive standardization in schools. Comprehensive, out-of-the-box thinking leads to opportunities to alter conditions of living. This is generalized action potency.

Generalized action potency is not a trait of specific individuals, nor of particular social groups; it is generalized because “it exists for one as for all” (Tolman, 1994, p. 116). It is a characteristic of instances in which circumstances and perceived possibilities for action make it subjectively functional for the individual to extend their possibilities, gain control over conditions of their life-world relationship, and thereby improve their quality of life. Societies rely to some degree on innovation, growth, and self-improvement to advance – all of which depend on generalized action potency. At the same time, however, powerful forces restrict high

levels of action potency in the generality of the population in order to sustain the status quo with as little deviation as possible (Tolman, 1994). For the teacher just described, for example, limits on her engagement in issues of standardization would quickly arise from employers and perhaps parents, who could put the teacher's job in jeopardy. Individual limits, such as willingness to flout authority and fears of sanction, could also arise. A current example of these forces at work is the ongoing debate over sexual education curriculum in Ontario, which has heated proponents on each side, forcing many teachers to weigh the limits and opportunities they face in adopting or resisting the changes. The visible possibilities that result from the interactions of these external and internal limits become the teacher's arena for viable action.

Because of these restrictions, the comprehensive-generalized pattern of thought and action involves inherent risk. Cognitively situating oneself in the social reality one critiques and then acting to change this reality is a dangerous proposition. Generalized action potency "always includes the giving up on an existing state of relative action potency (however inadequate it is experienced to be) together with its proven means of coping with life" (p. 115). In other words, because I am embedded in the social structure I am attempting to understand, when I realize the harmful contradictions at work in society, I bring my own implicit sense of security into jeopardy. As such, aligning my action with my new level of thought is not a simple endeavour; doing so holds potential rewards in the form of expanded opportunities for being and doing along with reduced alienation from myself, but also holds potential for failure:

An attempted improvement in the quality of life through a higher level of relative action potency is always linked (more or less) to an existential insecurity over whether or not the higher level can actually be achieved, and, if not, whether the present lower state of action potency will itself be lost in the process. (Holzkamp, 1983, p. 371; quoted in Tolman, 1994, p. 115)

Although the risks entailed by generalized action potency are a matter of degree – the hazards of raising your hand in class for the first time are less than the hazards of taking to the streets to protest unjust tuition fees for post-secondary education, for example – in any case,

judgments of risks versus rewards determine whether one will take the leap to reach for higher levels of action potency.

The “central moment” of this leap is “achieving a counter-force through cooperative combination with others that is of such size that the danger to the existence of each individual is neutralized” (Holzkamp, 1983, p. 373; quoted in Tolman, 1994, p. 115). The existential risks of extending possibilities for action “can be minimized or even eliminated in an ideally functioning society through cooperative support” (p. 115). Divisive ideologies can effectively isolate individuals in reciprocally instrumentalizing social relations of competition, compromise, and compensation to reduce any sense of the collective interest (Karlberg, 2004; Tolman, 1994). In the context of a school that seeks to be a site of individual and social transformation, one that would equip young people to participate in a twofold process of personal and societal progress, attention to the structures and experiences that promote collective action and sense of purpose would be a priority.

Extending one’s possibilities for action comes from personal and collective volition as well as structural circumstances; emotion and motivation are also addressed by Holzkamp.

***Integration of emotion.*** For Holzkamp, motivation begins in emotion, which “essentially constitutes the subjective assessment of the individual’s overall situation” (Tolman, 1994, p. 120). When working in concert with cognition and action, emotion provides feedback on the life situation that “complements comprehensive thinking in the formulation of subjective grounds for action that extend possibilities and improve the quality of life” (p. 120). A conception of emotion as “mere inner processes” is disavowed here, as is any idea of it as “interfering with a rational penetration of the problem” (Holzkamp, 2013, p. 22). Instead, emotion is considered to be “an essential prerequisite of any adequate cognitive perception of the world” because of its function in “guiding the acquisition of knowledge and action” (p. 22). Emotion, cognition, and action, therefore, are naturally united and, when allowed to function in harmony, expose dominant forces in the societal-historical context and thereby promote critical consciousness and agency in the life-world relationship.

According to Holzkamp's (2013) critique of dominant societal powers, internalization and dissociation of emotion from cognition is in their vested interest – "an aspect of the bourgeois 'private' existence in which any emotional involvement in fighting inhumane living conditions is factored out" (p. 22) thereby reducing threat to the status quo. This mode of cognitive-emotional dissociation compels identification of personal interests with dominant interests; as such, this dissociation is a defining characteristics of restrictive action potency. In the restrictive situation, emotion is distorted to preserve repression:

If I am accommodating demands in my life situation that are, in fact, contrary to my (and the general) interest, my emotions as subjective assessment of that situation will be telling me things I basically don't want to know... In such a circumstance, reading my emotions correctly can be decidedly dangerous... Emotion is treated, in short, not as an important informative factor, but as an irrational disturbing one. (Tolman, 1994, p. 120)

For example, a student whose concept of success is anchored in receiving top grades to please her parents and get into a good university, who begins to encounter feelings of stress and anxiety in the face of a heavy course load, would have to call into question her value system in regards to the purpose of education, her responsibility to her parents, and other core beliefs. Reading her emotions as important indicators of wellbeing would be existentially dangerous in this circumstance; instead, anxiety and stress might be allowed to run rampant until emergency or breakdown forces the issue to the fore.

Furthermore, if emotion is treated as an internal and irrational phenomenon, solutions to problems become directed at individuals rather than root causes in society. "This seems reasonable" in this mode "because, owing to the repression that must accompany interpretive thinking, there really is no obvious [external] cause" (p. 120). For our example student, the question of whether societal conceptions of scholastic success are harmful might never become the target, instead centring self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy in response to an individualistic narrative of failure to cope. The view of emotion as irrelevant or irrational also feeds restrictive action potency at the interpersonal level: "cast[ing] others into the role of

instruments... emotions effectively become 'bargaining chips' in our compromising, compensatory dealings with others" (p. 120-121). In this context, emotional manipulation becomes a reasonable tactic for need fulfillment: "If you give me affection, I'll give some in return; if you don't, I'll be sad and you'll feel guilty,' etc." (p. 121).

Integration of emotion, cognition, and action is required to foster true motivation. Emotion-informed motivation leads to intentional action: "Motivation is the subjective emotional assessment of the life situation *extended to the guidance of action* on the basis of outcomes anticipated as meeting individual and generalized needs, that is, as serving the genuine interests of self and others" (Tolman, 1994, p. 121, emphasis added). In the restrictive situation, cognition, motivation, and emotion are distorted and divorced such that the compulsory nature of one's relationship with dominant forces remains implicit. As a result, motivation is derived from the assumed functionality of this relationship. A teacher who enjoys her job and sees her school as having positive impacts on students, for example, might consider her role in enforcing the standardized testing model as a necessary, or even natural, dimension of the system, even if she sees negative effects on some students. The compulsory character of this role would only be felt if she were to challenge the demand that schools be administered in this way.

Aversion to the danger of sanction reinforces the restrictive situation, further entrenching the individual in repression, complicity, and complacency. In these circumstances, true motivation, which is the natural accompaniment of generalized action potency and comprehensive thinking in the service of the actual interests of individuals and society at large, is replaced by internalized external compulsion. It is, therefore, not surprising that people operating predominately in the restrictive mode appear to have the constant need of being motivated through incentives, etc. (Tolman, 1994, p. 121)

Motivation, then, like emotion, is not a "mere inner process" but, rather, "cannot be dissociated from the goal's content. I can only pursue a goal in a motivated way when I can anticipate that its realization also entails an enhancement of my life possibilities and life qualities" (Holzkamp,

2013, p. 22). “Hence, it is not primarily a psychic matter whether I am motivated or not; rather, it is dependent upon the goal’s objective features” (p. 22). In the restrictive mode, perceived possibilities for action are distorted to favour dominant interests; only in the generalized thought-action pattern can the appealing features of a goal be accurately tied to desirable possibilities for wellbeing.

**Summary of critical engagement.** Based on Holzkamp’s theory, what I call critical engagement entails the harmony of comprehensive thinking, generalized action potency, and integration of emotion and motivation to guide goal-directed efforts. Such goal-directed efforts have potential to contribute to the twofold purpose of engagement in both personal development – through the ongoing integration of being and doing – and collective development – through an orientation that calls into question unjust arrangements generated by dominant social forces, motivating action for change. I wish to reiterate that, although these are psychological categories of individual experience, they each depend on the dynamics of the life-world relationship – the relationship between structure and agency – for full expression in any given instance. Opportunities for critical engagement emerge from the interactions between individual capacity and structures of meaning and practice in the immediate environment. As such, a school must attend to both of these levels, and the relationships between them, if it is to act as a site of personal and social transformation. In the context of this dissertation, therefore, I examine these themes in relation to the question of how the relationship between school structures and student agency creates an environment in which capacity for critical engagement can be fostered in pursuit of the twofold purpose.

**Transcendent engagement.** In the discussion of engagement thus far, I have focused on the individual in relation to the immediate world: how do experiences of the personal life-world relationship come to be represented in the psyche, and how does resulting action recreate or alter immediate contextual conditions? In thinking about the twofold development of individual and society, however, I suggest that a further dimension of experience is involved, one that allows the individual to transcend the personal life-world relationship to envision and

act upon the life-world relationships experienced by distant others. This requires an outward orientation that transcends immediate exigencies to see oneself as a subject among a multitude of interconnected subjects; such an orientation creates conditions that fan the flames of empathy and motivation enkindled in response to injustice, either felt or witnessed. I have chosen to call this orientation and its related patterns of thought, motivation, and action “transcendent engagement” although it could as easily be called spiritual engagement; I chose the former to emphasize the particular dimension of spirituality that involves seeing oneself as part of something larger. In this section I describe relevant literature on perceptions and definitions of spirituality in society and research, adolescents’ spiritual development, and relevant orientations toward transcendent engagement present in the existing education discourse.

***Spirituality and society.*** Sarason (2001) highlights the importance of taking a long view of human history in order to understand spirituality. Such a view, he suggests, reveals that humans have always felt (a) a need to be part of something that provides a sense of purpose and meaning, and (b) to feel part of a collective, with a shared understanding of why the world is as it is and what of its features are predictable and controllable. The spiritual aspect of humanity impacts us at the individual level, through a personal search for fulfillment of these needs, and also at the community level, given that a sense of community is often integral to spiritual wellbeing (Sarason, 2001). Similarly, Hill (2000) emphasizes shared spiritual values, drawing the conclusion that “an understanding of the role of spiritual values in community life is central to an understanding of communities” (p. 144). Such values include characteristics or qualities of being and doing, such as those described by the Dalai Lama (1999):

Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit – such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony – which bring happiness to both self and others. While ritual and prayer, along with the questions of nirvana and salvation, are directly connected to religious faith, these inner qualities need not be, however. (p. 22-23)



Experiences of spirituality often revolve around these and other qualities of being and doing.

Individual and community experiences of spirituality are impacted by several societal-historical factors that affect cultural interpretations of spiritual phenomena. Walsh-Bowers (2000) describes several forces dominant in the west, including modernism – the “ideology of progress... believed to occur through the slow but steady march of objective science” (p. 223-224); instrumental rationality – “the pervasive, internalized tendencies in modernity to rely on science and technology as if they were dogma...” which imply “that science and technology should not deal with the irrational and the subjective” (p. 224); and scientism – “the virtually religious conviction that the one and only form of true knowledge is scientific...” leading to “an obsession with objectivity and defensive blindness to the social context and human interests saturating scientific activity” (p. 224). These ideologies have resulted in the primacy of objectivism in the culturally-embedded epistemological views that dominate in the West. This epistemological view excludes emotion, intuition, and faith – what Palmer (1993) calls the “subjective faculties.” He suggests that “the modern divorce of the knower and the known,” resulting from this exclusion, “has led to the collapse of community and accountability between the knowing self and the known world” (p. 26). The resulting cultural climate creates what Dokecki, Newbrough, and O’Gorman (2001) refer to as a crisis of spirituality, which is “at the core of the contemporary fragmented community” (p. 500).

***Studying spirituality.*** In response to this crisis and its particular impacts on young people, Peter Benson raises a call for greater research attention to the role of spirituality in the development and wellbeing of children and adolescents (e.g., Benson, 2008; Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003). Calling the academy “the slowest and most reticent participant in this exploration” (2008, p. vii) and highlighting psychology as being “particularly negligent” in this regard (p. vii), Benson points to several challenges of studying spirituality. The primary barrier, he suggests, is the academy’s bias against religion, which excludes spirituality by association. Regardless of the merit of studying religion itself, Benson (2008) argues that “to be blind to the phenomena of spirit because of their frequent cohabitation with religion is naïve

and grossly unscientific” (p. viii). Spirituality, he says, “is as central to and universal in human life as any of the other streams of development (e.g., cognitive, social, moral)” (p. viii) and likewise deserves rigorous inquiry.

A second challenge in studying spirituality identified by Benson (2008) is the daunting task of defining the nature of the spirit and its development. Wright (2000) also explores this challenge, identifying three common modes of defining spirituality: concerning the spirit as opposed to matter, concerned with sacred or religious phenomena, and referring to a refined and sensitive soul. These three types of definition, he suggests, lead to a range of spiritual paths: those concerned with self-emancipation from the limitations of the material world, with a search for the sacred, and with an exploration of our inner space. Across these paths, he suggests, spirituality is universally concerned with questions of the ultimate meaning, purpose, and nature of life. Benson and colleagues (2003) emphasize that, given the early days of social inquiry and research on spirituality, “it would be premature to propose that a single, succinct definition could adequately capture the richness, complexity, and multidimensional nature of this concept” (p. 205). Provisionally, however, Benson (2008) suggests that “spirit” can be considered “an intrinsic animating force that gives energy and momentum to human life,” that “propels us to look inward to create and re-create a link between ‘my-life’ and ‘all-life’” (p. viii). In this light, he and his colleagues provisionally define spiritual development as follows:

Spiritual development is the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental “engine” that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices. (Benson et al., 2003, p. 205-206)

In relation to my previous discussion of engagement, this definition emphasizes cognitive dimensions (e.g., self-concept), emotional and motivational dimensions (i.e., an engine that propels action), and behavioural dimensions (e.g., search, contributing) of spiritual growth.

Fundamentally, Benson (2008) suggests that “love of life” is a spiritual impulse intrinsic

to human experience. This impulse can provide a “wellspring for altruism, social justice, and stewardship of the earth” or, if manipulated at individual or collective levels, can become “the trigger for our darkest side” (p. ix). This human potential for loftiness or lowliness, transcendence or abasement, speaks to the importance of cultivating healthy spirituality during adolescence, which Miller (2015) and others (e.g., Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008a) consider a critical period for spiritual development. It is to the particular nature of spiritual development during adolescence that I now turn.

***Adolescents' spiritual development.*** Lerner, Roeser, and Phelps (2008a) suggest that spirituality and religiosity are “arguably the only mental and behavioral characteristics that are distinctly associated with humans” (p. 7). It is evident, they state, that these characteristics develop over the lifespan; not fully present in a newborn, ongoing changes in neural, cognitive, emotional, personality, behavioural, and social dimensions of life hold potential for spiritual development and thriving over time. The confluence of changes in all of these areas during adolescence thrusts young people into new arenas of thought and action, fundamentally shifting their mode of relating to the world as emerging adults. The spiritual dimensions of these shifts have long-term implications for young people’s choices and experiences (Miller, 2015). In this section, I review inner and relational changes occurring during adolescence that impact spiritual development, as well as sociocultural influences on this process.

Lisa Miller (2015) argues that an adolescent quest for calling, meaning, and purpose is generated by inner and relational transformations experienced at this stage of life. This quest constitutes a “window of awakening”, she says; if engaged, the opportunity leads to formation of a bedrock of transcendent awareness and experience anchored in spiritual individuation, but if rejected or neglected, it yields instead to an insecure foundation for ongoing wellbeing and direction. Briefly, the surge of biological, psychological, and social changes that occur in the second decade of life are vast, both in terms of experience and impact. Neurologically, the ongoing process of synaptogenesis that creates, ruptures, and reroutes neural connections throughout the lifespan dramatically accelerates during adolescence, along with accompanying

neural sensitivity and conductivity (e.g., Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008; Giedd et al., 1999). Among other effects, these changes yield new cognitive capacities in abstract thinking and symbolism, allowing young people to engage with questions that transcend concrete experience, such as those related to meaning, purpose, and belief (Johnson-Miller, 2006). Spiritual perception as a means of recognizing, interpreting, and applying spiritual principles and forces (Noguchi, 2006) becomes a vital element of young people's growing ability to apply cognitive and affective powers in concert (Miller, 2015). Inner changes also affect self-concept and identity, as young people question the customs and culture of familiar communities in search of truth and deep conviction in that which is "me" or "not me" (Miller, 2015). This process of spiritual individuation impacts a young person's relationships with valued others and roles in social settings; what is at stake is the potential integration of moral and civic identities, which can lead young people to consider and contribute to the wellbeing and progress of others, as well as to their own development (Lerner, 2004; Lerner et al., 2008a).

Contextual forces encountered during adolescence also significantly impact spiritual development. Scarlett (2008) argues that the reasons spiritual development is so dramatic in adolescence "have much more to do with transactions occurring between youth and their immediate circumstances and culture than they have to do with maturation and cognitive structure" (p. 51). Encountering and grappling with societal-historical forces in the course of one's life, especially during adolescence, leads to opportunities for elaboration and expression of spiritual potentialities. In fact, there are reciprocal relationships among neuro-biological, relational, and contextual experiences in adolescent development (Miller, 2015). How young people interpret moral dilemmas, grapple with their ambiguities, and develop conviction in a sense of truth – these are the factors at play in the ongoing transactions between youth and their immediate circumstances; encountering moral dilemmas and their related struggles (Akhavan, 2017), grappling with ambiguity in a manner that cultivates humility (Scarlett, 2008), and engaging in a search for truth free of hypocrisy (Miller, 2015) all reinforce spiritual development. The presence of opportunities for these experiences in the environments and

relationships encountered by young people is central to establishing the patterns of thought and action that mark a spiritual life (Miller, 2015).

King (2008) highlights three forms of contextual spirituality: ideological, social, and transcendent. First, spirituality as ideological context entails the societal-historical patterns of belief that give events and experiences meaning. Religious and cultural forms of ideology “give meaning and guide behavior,” offer “ultimate answers and perspective about the larger issues in life,” and, generally, “encourage youth to make actual contributions to their society” (King, 2008, p. 58) by participating in these patterns of meaning-making. Second, spirituality as social context entails the collective, community dimensions of spiritual experience, through which “fellow travellers play an important role in enabling young people to internalize beliefs, values, and morals” (p. 58). Role models provide exemplars of how principles and norms are translated into identity and action, as well as having the potential to direct youth toward spiritually-enriching experiences, such as service (King, 2008). Third, spirituality as transcendent context entails experiencing a reality beyond oneself, based on a belief that there is more to life than what is evident in immediate experience and understanding. Experiencing oneself in relationship with the divine, human, or natural Other can affirm a sense of identity and self-worth, build bonds that bridge differences or distance, and inspire a sense of purpose or meaning born of being part of something larger than oneself (King, 2008). In this relationship, Lerner (1996) emphasizes that spiritual transcendence entails felt connections among humans, an “awareness of the fundamental unity of all beings and of our connectedness to one another and the universe” (p. 56). Any or all of these forms of contextual spirituality could be present in a school.

***Orientations toward transcendent education.*** I have suggested that spiritual development protects against manipulations that could otherwise “trigger... our darkest side” (Benson, 2008, p. ix) by promoting a transcendent sense of connection to the wholeness of humanity. Such a sense of connection promotes values of justice, equity, and compassion for near and distant others. What role can schools play in promoting a transcendent sense of

connection? Although I explore this question more deeply through the data presented in later chapters, a brief examination of some themes in the literature is helpful here. I consider first the relationship between the aims of schooling and their practices, second the question of world citizenship, and third the matter of identity.

*Aims and practices of schooling: Empathy, love, and community.* There is a close relationship between the goals of an educational endeavour and the practices of schooling (Brint, 2017). For illustration, consider the following account of Hitler's vision of the young men (women were considered only suited for breeding; Fest, 1973) who would emerge from Nazi Germany's education system:

My pedagogy is hard. The weak must be hammered away. In my castle of the Teutonic Order a youth will grow up before which the world will tremble. I want a violent, domineering, undismayed, cruel youth. Youth must be all that. It must bear pain. There must be nothing weak and gentle about it. The free, splendid beast of prey must once more flash from its eyes. (Fest, 1973, p. 233)

Consider, in contrast, the vision described by the Dalai Lama (1999):

Through education we can explain to our brothers, sisters and especially the young children that there is a secret treasure that we all have – whether educated or uneducated, rich or poor, this race or that race, of this culture or that culture: we are human beings. We have tremendous potential. The potentials for kindness, compassion and inner peace... Though we cannot force others to become warmhearted, we can teach them, help them discover the value of being warmhearted for themselves. (p. 90)

Each of these visions suggests what should – and should not – be included in the culture and structure of schools. Each vision also suggests to young people how they should conceptualize their relationship to the world. In the pursuit of releasing young people's potential to participate in the twofold process of individual and societal progress, I suggest that cultivating empathy is an important aim of schools.

In his historical examination of humanity's growing capacity for empathy, Jeremy Rifkin

(2009) argues that two forces have progressively increased humans' exposure to new people and new ideas: revolutions in the availability and efficiency of energy, and revolutions in communication systems. "The convergence of energy and communications revolutions," he says, "not only reconfigures society and social roles and relationships but also human consciousness itself. Communications revolutions change the temporal and spatial orientation of human beings and, by so doing, change the way the human brain comprehends reality" (p. 37). One means by which such revolutions create this change in consciousness is through exposure to difference, allowing the emergence of an empathic sense of unity in diversity:

Each more sophisticated communications revolution brings together more diverse people in increasingly more expansive and dense social networks. By extending the central nervous system of each individual and the society as a whole, communications revolutions provide an ever more inclusive playing field for empathy to mature and consciousness to expand... Empathy becomes the thread that weaves an increasingly differentiated and individualized population into an integrated social tapestry, allowing the social organism to function as a whole. (p. 37)

An education based on empathy can "bridge the sense of otherness," bell hooks (2003) suggests. "To be guided by love," she says,

is to live in community with all life. However, a culture of domination, like ours, does not strive to teach us how to live in community. As a consequence, learning to live in community must be a core practice for all of us who desire spirituality in education. (p. 162-163)

To build capacity for empathy and love, then, a school can look to its own community life and the relationships among its members to critically reflect upon what lessons are being taught about the nature of community and one's membership in it. To the degree that schools teach students to live in community free from a culture of domination, young people also become capable of building such communities beyond school walls:

Transformed by love, we do not arrogantly impose our powers on the world around us

or allow the world to overcome us. Transformed by love, we use our minds to recall and recreate the community in which we were created, to know the world in the same spirit in which we are known. (Palmer, 1993, p. 16)

In short, empathy, love, and community are all characteristics of those educational endeavours that seek to promote transcendent engagement and its awareness of the “integrated social tapestry” (Rifkin, 2009, p. 37), of which we are all part and to which we all contribute.

*World citizenship and education.* Nel Noddings (2005) suggests that global awareness can be considered global citizenship when it entails care for the welfare of all inhabitants of the world, including deep concern for economic and social justice, protecting the earth, and social and cultural diversity. However, the construct of global citizenship is “remarkably controversial” (Dower, 2002, p. 30) and not all of its formulations include a dimension of caring; some authors critique this construct as potentially misleading or even harmful when it applies as much to the jet-setting business person as it does to the humanitarian (e.g., Almond, 1990; Dower, 2002; Falk, 1994). Because this controversy is beyond the scope of this work, I do not dwell on the world citizenship literature, merely referring to it as one body of discourse on the relationships between self and humanity. Suffice it to say that the cultivation of a global outlook in schools has the potential to impact young people’s sense of place and belonging in their local and global environs (Cannon & Yaprak, 2002; hooks, 2003, 2009; Osler & Starkey, 2003). Education for world citizenship would benefit from taking into account individuals’ multiple, overlapping, and dynamic allegiances in order to provide “a sufficiently comprehensive context for them to integrate their own experiences and identities” (Osler & Starkey, 2003, p. 252).

*Identity as personhood.* Identity is core to Laurance Splitter’s (2011) concept of the self in relation to an interconnected humanity. He proposes personhood, rather than citizenship, as the fundamental identity upon which moral development is based. He describes citizenship as an appropriate descriptor for many individuals, but highlights that it is a variable characteristic and not a fundamental identity in and of itself. He draws a distinction between kind and degree



– between the universal nature of being human and the particular characteristics of being a human situated in a particular time and place at a given moment. In contrast to citizenship as a characteristic that varies across individuals or even across time for one individual, Splitter suggests personhood as a fundamental identity attributable to every human at all times. Any contradiction between a global identity and a national identity, for example, is resolved by Splitter’s argument that *both* are secondary to personhood and act as characteristics rather than kinds. Such characteristics “are properly seen as two ways of *describing* someone, rather than two ways of *identifying* them” (p. 489, emphasis in original). Citizenship and other group-specific characteristics do not aid us in connecting the individual to all of humanity:

As long as we restrict considerations of identity to what binds individuals together (and thereby, to what makes them different from other individuals who are not part of the group) we are referring to the identity of the group, not to that of its individual members. (p. 490)

The concept of personhood, on the other hand, is a purely unifying concept of humanity that wholly denies “out-group” status to any human being.

A unifying identity concept is particularly valuable in discussions of moral education, argues Splitter: “It is hard to see any merit in attempting to define oneself in terms of a divisive classification, particularly when it comes to seeing ourselves as moral agents” (p. 491). Moral agency, in this light, requires a holistic vision of the fundamental connection among all people, which supersedes any differences among characteristics. Schools can look to their practices and pedagogy, to their culture and customs, to consider the relative weight given to similarities and differences among people, within the school itself and in conceptualizing students’ relations to near and distant others.

Each of these three orientations to the relationship between self and humanity – empathy and community, world citizenship, and personhood – has implications for schools seeking to nurture capacity for transcendent engagement in a twofold purpose of personal and collective development and wellbeing. It is the work of this dissertation to examine the

interactions between school structures and student agency that contribute to this capacity. In the following short section, I briefly review the key dimensions of both forms of engagement I have described: critical and transcendent.

**Critical and transcendent engagement: Summary.** The constructs of critical and transcendent engagement provide a useful framework by which to examine young people’s growing capacity for participation in a twofold purpose of personal and societal wellbeing and progress. Table 2.1 summarizes the elements of these two constructs in relation to the three dimensions of engagement – cognition, emotion-motivation, and action. I examine these themes in relation to this research in Chapters 5 and 6.

Table 2.1.

*Dimensions of Critical and Transcendent Engagement*

	Critical Engagement	Transcendent Engagement
Cognition	Comprehensive thinking Intersubjectivity Consciousness of life-world relationship Epistemic distance Creativity & imagination	Sense of embeddedness in something larger Abstract thinking & symbolism Spiritual perception beyond immediate experiences & material reality Concern for world issues Relationship between knower & known
Emotion-Motivation	Subjective assessment Feedback on life situation Determining grounds for action Evaluating features of available goals Collective sense of purpose	Felt connection to others Love of life Qualities and values of being & doing Spiritual individuation Humility Empathy
Action	Generalized action potence Innovation Risk Cooperative support Collective volition & action Structural supports to extend possibility space	Fulfillment of spiritual needs Search for sacred Exploration of inner space Self-improvement Create & re-create links between “my life” and “all life” Search for truth Mutual support & guidance Recall & recreate loving environments

### Similar Research

Although the concepts introduced in this chapter touch on various bodies of literature, those most relevant to this research include previous work on the interactions between structure and agency in relation to young people's patterns of thought, emotion-motivation, and action (i.e., engagement) related to social justice, civic engagement, and spirituality. Nasir (2008) highlights that in the early years of psychology, pondering spiritual dimensions of life and development was meant to advance knowledge in areas that the biological sciences could not understand. From James's (1900) *Varieties of Religious Experience* to Jung's (1938) examination of authentic religious functions of the unconscious mind, along with Freud's (1900/2008) theories of unconscious drives and needs – early psychology found much to examine about the metaphysical dimensions of experience. By the 1950s, however, Nasir (2008) notes that the field's feelings of inferiority to the physical sciences had led to an exclusive focus on measurement in an effort to develop formulae to quantify psychological phenomena. There is evidence, however, that metaphysical inquiry is resurging in some areas of psychology (e.g., Ellingson, 2001; Nasir, 2008; Piedmont, 1999; Wright, 2000). Therefore, the emergence of this stream of research “represents a continuation of the psychological tradition, not a departure from it” (Nasir, 2008, p. 285).

In community psychology, this resurgence is reflected in two special issues from the *Journal of Community Psychology* (Kloos & Moore, 2000; Moore, Kloos, & Rasmussen, 2001), as well as some more recent individual works (e.g., Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015; Jones & Dokecki, 2008; Maunu & Stein, 2010; Pargament, 2008; Todd & Rufa, 2013). I aim to contribute to this body of literature through my dissertation, applying community psychology tools, principles, and values to the question of the relationship between structure and agency in schools and young people's development of critical and transcendent engagement. In particular, this work applies contextual and ecological thinking (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) with

an orientation toward critical theory and social justice, along with an emphasis on conscientization, strengths, empowerment, and participatory action – all key dimensions of the field (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

Research from other fields recognizes a need for these values and tools in research on young people’s development of capacities for critical and transcendent engagement. One body of literature applying these concepts is that of Positive Youth Development (PYD), which has received some attention from community psychology (e.g., Allison, Edmonds, Wilson, Pope, & Farrell, 2011; Drinkard, Estevez, & Adams, 2017; Durlak et al., 2007; Larson, 2006; McCammon, 2012; Smith, Osgood, Caldwell, Hynes, & Perkins, 2013; Stephens, Bowers, & Lerner, 2018). This approach focuses on six Cs of development: character, competence, confidence, connection, caring, and contributing (Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008a). Although PYD does not necessarily include an orientation toward critiques of power or self-transcendence, as I have described them in this chapter, PYD is concerned with patterns of thought and action that are conducive to participation in personal and collective wellbeing and progress. In an edited volume on the relationship between PYD and spirituality (Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008b), several authors highlight the need for further research on the relationship between sociocultural contexts and adolescent development, including the role of peer groups (Juang & Syed, 2008), institutions such as schools (Nasid, 2008; Nicholas & DeSilva, 2008), and spaces for civic engagement (Sherrod & Spiewak, 2008). “Without a comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural factors in adolescents’ lives,” Nicholas and DeSilva (2008) argue, “it is difficult to understand truly the impact that spirituality has on their development” (p. 305). Likewise, Nasir (2008) emphasizes the importance of considering the interactions between individual and context that form an “intricate relation” (p. 293) of development rather than a polarized “nature versus nurture” debate.

Although research on adolescent development in general (Steinberg & Scheffield-Morris, 2001) and spiritual development specifically (Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004) has learned much about the influence of family, Nicholas and DeSilva (2008) note the neglect of

other contextual factors, such as culture, community, and school. Entwistle (1990) draws attention to the shortcomings of the limited body of school-based research, including failure to invoke a conceptual framework and ineffective emphasis on educational outcomes. “More research on large aggregates of secondary students is probably not going to be productive,” she says, emphasizing that “work is needed on the specifics of classroom climate and school procedures” (p. 203). Specific to spiritual development, Scarlett (2008) also highlights the importance of contextual factors, including phenomenological and hermeneutic detail:

To make accurate and complete assessments of spiritual development, we need details, details that can only come from case material and details that are not only about context and circumstances but also about an individual’s thinking and imagining. These details are essential for determining whether an emerging faith supports a moral life or its opposite – and whether a faith is for positive development in the long term or in the short term only. (p. 53)

“Knowledge about adolescents and their schools is fragmented, in many cases weak, and generally without much theoretical foundation, Entwistle (1990) argues. Among the “notable gaps” she highlights is “the lack of attention to issues such as the effect adolescents have on their schools... We need more studies on the dialectic of development, in which notice is taken of how students and schools reciprocally influence each other” (p 221).

In the years since this call, much critique and some research has been generated about the relationship between society, schools, and students from the perspective of cultural studies (e.g., Giroux, 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Willis, 2003), critical race theory (e.g., López, 2003; Marx & Pennington, 2003), and critical social theory (e.g., Leonardo, 2004). But little of this work, and still less in community psychology, has examined the dynamics of school structures and student agency.

With this dissertation, I am to respond to the call for detailed, case-based, structural research of schooling that integrates individual agency, perception, experience, and co-creation in the school setting. My focus on critical and transcendent engagement in a community

psychology orientation responds to Seymour Sarason's (2001) critique of schooling: "Schools do a very poor job of helping students understand why learning to live with each other is both an individual and group obligation" (p. 604). Learning to live together in a safe and peaceful world – meaning more than simply an absence of aggression and war – might begin in the family, but it takes root in the experiences of school. Or it could, if schools were equipped and designed to bring out this learning. Through this research, I argue that critical and transcendent engagement provide useful frameworks and aims for schools, and I attempt to better understand how these goals play out – at the level of school structure, the level of student experience, and in the interactions between them.

### **The Hazards of Critical and Transcendent Engagement**

I wish to highlight one major hazard of each of the models of engagement I have introduced. The risk of the pursuit of critical engagement, on the one hand, is that it comes to emphasize the interests of a particular marginalized group in a manner that inadvertently instrumentalizes other groups or sacrifices the long-term interests of humanity as a whole for short-term gains in autonomy. Shultz (2007), for example, cautions against efforts for radical education that cast global issues of injustice into simplistic relations among victors, villains, and victims. She emphasizes that engagement "requires finding new ways to be in relationship if change is to be more than just shifting exploitation from one group to another" (p. 254).

The risk of the pursuit of transcendent engagement, on the other hand, is that it becomes an avenue to relieve guilt through noble sentiment and expressions of solidarity, without understanding or targeting the root causes of suffering in the systems of domination that characterize the world. Human rights lawyer Payam Akhavan (2017), for example, describes the "dark side to virtue" (p. 104) that he observed during the Bosnian war in the 1990s, when stories of suffering were documented and shared in an effort to "awaken the sleeping conscience of bystanders a world away" (p. 101) but repeated re-traumatization of the victims through third-party storytelling led to little commensurate aid for rehabilitation, restitution, or transformation: "With every new atrocity that came to light," he laments, "we

hoped the UN would finally find the political will to put an end to these horrors. But it would not come to pass” (p. 105).

These shortcomings highlight that critical and transcendent engagement could ultimately fail to equip young people to exercise their full potential to contribute to the progress of society. The benefit of bringing both critical and transformative engagement to bear in education is that each model compensates for the other to ameliorate these risks: transcendent engagement brings all of humanity into the realm of empathy, and critical engagement precludes passivity by paving the way to renewed and reformed modes of relating.

For this reason, I selected Nancy Campbell Academy (NCA) as the research site for this work. As I describe in the following section and examine in more depth through this dissertation, NCA aims to promote both intellectual and moral excellence as “twin pillars” of development. As a Bahá’í-inspired school that attracts students from all over the world, it offers space for spiritual search and exploration of diversity. This school, in its efforts to promote holistic adolescent development, aims to provide an environment conducive to the integration of critical engagement and transcendent engagement. Based on this premise and the guiding frameworks of structuration theory and systems thinking, in this research I examine how capacity for critical and transcendent engagement emerges from the interplay of structure and agency at NCA. This guiding question is elaborated in Chapter 3, but first I provide more information about NCA as the research site.

### **Nancy Campbell Academy**

Nancy Campbell Academy (NCA) is a not-for-profit, private boarding and day school for grades 9-12 (at the time of data collection; now for grades 7-12) and students learning English as a second language (ESL). It was founded in 1994 in Stratford, Ontario, Canada. Its curriculum is Ontario-certified, allowing students to earn the Ontario Secondary School Diploma, but is supplemented with NCA-specific components, including its World Citizenship Curriculum (WCC), its Moral Capabilities Framework, and an increased focus on service (e.g., requiring 50 hours per year rather than Ontario’s standard 40 hours over four years). NCA’s approach

includes an emphasis on the “twin pillars” of academic excellence and moral excellence. As a small school of 60-120 students per year, it supports close teacher-student interactions by offering class sizes of no more than 18 students and through a faculty-student mentorship model. NCA also emphasizes the role of the arts, including dance, theatre, music, rap, poetry, photography, and visual arts in a variety of class-based and extracurricular activities.

NCA’s curriculum and school structure are based on teachings from the Bahá’í Faith. As described on its website ([nancycampbell.net/culture](http://nancycampbell.net/culture)):

A Nancy Campbell education is an education with a world-embracing vision. Although Nancy Campbell is non-denominational, this vision is inspired by the Bahá’í Faith. A Bahá’í inspired education consists of moral education, the promotion of unity in diversity, the belief that men and women are equal, and that youth can move the world. It teaches that rectitude of conduct, trustworthiness, and honesty are essential elements in the foundation of stability and progress in the world. Our staff and students come from a variety of religious and other belief systems, and people of all faiths, and of no faith, are equally respected and welcomed.

The school’s central value of “unity in diversity” is drawn from the tenets of the Bahá’í Faith and, in addition to belief systems, applies to such forms of diversity as race and culture. NCA is a Bahá’í-inspired school, meaning that it is informed by principles of the Bahá’í Faith, not that it is affiliated in any official capacity with its institutions.

When considering this research site, it should be noted that several distinctive features characterize the NCA student body, including that they have opted out of the public-school system and are paying for a private education, or have received scholarships and/or bursaries to attend. Not only does this alternative schooling experience expose them to values and experiences that might not be typical of public schools (e.g., very small class sizes, mentorship program, the Moral Capabilities Framework, etc.) but it also suggests that the students and their families could be expected to demand a high level of value for their dollars. Furthermore, because approximately 50-75% of the students live in residence each year, their high school



experience is significantly different than for their peers who live at home. Although NCA is an atypical school setting, I suggest that it is a valuable site for the proposed research because of its explicit emphasis on elements of critical and transcendent engagement, which make it a critical case for examination (Patton, 2001). My personal experience as an alumna of this school, elaborated in the next chapter, also recommends it as a fruitful site for this research, contributing to a strong research partnership and a weaving together of insider and outsider perspectives. Through this work, I examine NCA as an exemplary case of schooling for youth engagement, from which I identify underlying principles for schooling that seeks to unleash the constructive powers of youth through critical and transcendent engagement in a twofold purpose.

## Chapter 3 – Methods

The goals of this research highlight the generative power of ongoing interactions between school structures and individual agency – students do not passively encounter the school environment and receive its influence in the form of uncomplicated outcomes, instead changing and being changed by the environment in reciprocal relationship. Neither do school structures necessarily translate into practice in the same form they were envisioned, as they come into relationship with student agency. In this chapter, I describe in detail the objectives and questions guiding my inquiry into these protagonists of the school setting. I then explain my personal standpoint in this work, followed by my research design, participatory approach, and the methods and procedures of data collection and analysis. I also consider issues of trustworthiness and ethics.

### Research Objectives and Questions

The purpose of this case study is to examine the nature of students' relationship with NCA structures and resulting impacts on students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. My goal in conducting this research is to contribute to two bodies of discourse: one related to the nature of schools as sites of personal and societal transformation, and the other related to the development of young people's capacity to contribute to a twofold purpose of individual and collective wellbeing and progress. Toward this goal, my research is framed by structuration theory and systems theory, both of which contribute to an appreciation of the mutual interactions between structure and agency in the conduct of everyday life. It is also framed by the constructs of critical and transcendent engagement, which are indicated to equip young people to contribute to both personal and societal wellbeing and progress.

To guide this inquiry, I ask how students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement emerges from the interplay of structure and agency at NCA. I address three research questions in this work to inform my response to the overarching query:

1. What characteristics of NCA impact students' patterns of thought and action conducive to critical and transcendent engagement?

2. By what mechanisms do school structures and their underlying vision become represented in students' patterns of thought and action?
3. What qualities of the NCA environment impact the strength of the relationship between school structures and students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement?

In this chapter I describe my research methodology and discuss the following topics: (a) research design, including my use of mixed methods; (b) participatory approach; (c) participants; (d) data collection methods and procedures; (e) analysis and synthesis of data; (f) ethical considerations; and (g) trustworthiness. I begin, however, with a story of the path that has led me to this research, which starts in my own years of public schooling.

### **Personal Positioning**

As I believe is evident in this work, I consider myself an intellectual pragmatist; I strive to recognize good ideas wherever they might spring and enjoy the creative process of grappling with the convergences and divergences that arise, continually elaborating a coherent conceptual framework to guide my thinking. With the gift of perspective, I now observe the sprouts of this inclination even in my very early years, when my tendency to link diverse ideas and conceptualize at an abstract level led to being tested and labeled as “gifted.” This indication of intellectual potential meant little to me at the time, to the frustration of anyone with high – or even medium – hopes for my grades. My disdain for school was reined in only by my desire to please my teachers, leading to compliance in the classroom but little effort otherwise. My parents were faced with a bright mind paired with an unaccommodating will; their efforts to encourage me barely penetrated my growing dislike of school and I spent much of my elementary years avoiding school with “sick” days and full-out refusals to attend.

Despite this aversion to formal schooling, I could not avoid the workings of my own mind and the opportunities to learn available in my family and community. My enrichment was found not in the STEM activities and camps my teachers so sincerely wished I enjoyed, but in the day-to-day living of my family and community. My parents, facing financial limitations, substituted their desire to show my sisters and me the world by bringing the world to us. The

Canada World Youth exchange program brought young adults from Canada and Thailand to our home in small-town rural Ontario; Wildfire Dance Theatre – an international, social justice-oriented dance theatre troupe – became a near-annual visitor for several years, filling our home with multiple languages, multicultural music, and the energies and enthusiasm of young adults passionate about a cause; and our family’s membership in the Bahá’í community meant that many of my earliest friends were Iranian, a rare experience for a White child raised in an almost entirely White community. These and other experiences not only developed my sense of global identity, but helped me begin to grasp, at least implicitly, the existence of racism and other prejudices; I learned early-on that bridges were better than walls.

It was in grade eight that I glimpsed a form of schooling I could get on board with, not in my own school, but in my older sister’s move to a boarding school several hours away. Although adventure and escape were a major part of the allure, I was also awakening to the fact that the patterns I was living in relation to school were failing me and would likewise fail to create the lifetime of opportunity and challenge I craved. Seeing my sister, whose struggles with school had been akin to mine, flourish at Nancy Campbell Collegiate Institute (NCCI), as NCA was called at the time, awakened in me a drive to realize that opportunity for myself. My parents, wisely hesitant to send me to live 350km away from home at the tender age of 14, were struck by my sudden interest in school and eventually proposed a compromise: I could go in grade ten if I received high enough marks in grade nine to earn a scholarship. This compromise was both a motivating tool for me to buckle down, as well as a financial necessity for our family. My report card that year came home with 90s instead of 60s and I received a 75% scholarship to live in Stratford and attend NCCI. I stayed there for the rest of my high-school years.

At NCCI I found much of what I had craved, along with unanticipated challenges and opportunities that shaped my orientation toward learning, personal development, and community engagement. I left NCCI as an idealistic, motivated, and confident young person and entered university with good study skills and self-discipline. I soon found, however, that

maintaining my idealism would take work. “Utopian” one professor commented on an essay I had felt particularly passionate about. In that word lay the intellectual and spiritual dilemma of my post-secondary education – was I unrealistic in the vision of a better world I had been encouraged to develop at NCCI? Should I dampen my enthusiasm and base my thinking in “the way things are” instead of the way I wished to work toward, utopian or not?

This dilemma was laid to rest when I encountered the community psychology program at Wilfrid Laurier University. Here I found intellectual rigour paired with idealism – the combination I had longed to find. My coursework introduced me to the ecological model and a strengths-based orientation, both standing out in stark contrast to much of the psychological theory I had theretofore encountered. A research assistantship turned into an honours thesis, where I co-developed and evaluated a 5-session workshop for a youth-led environmental action project, Reduce the Juice (Dittmer & Riemer, 2013). Even then, systems theory and consciousness-raising for youth engagement were key themes of my work. Thus began my interest in education research.

When it came time to choose graduate school, perhaps I would have been wise to find an M.Ed. program, but the social justice and systems orientation of community psychology were impossible to leave behind. I wanted to continue to build a research program focused on education, but intended to do so within a community psychology conceptual framework. Youth Leading Environmental Change (YLEC) provided an opportunity to build on my honours thesis. This six-country education and research program elaborated what my advisor and I had learned with Reduce the Juice, developing a workshop series based on environmental justice, systems thinking, and action competence (see Riemer & Dittmer, 2016 for special issue). With academic, community, and youth partners in all six countries, much of my work in YLEC’s early days involved building patterns of communication and collaboration to span spatial and cultural differences. In February of 2011 – what a time of year to bring partners from Uganda, India, and Bangladesh to the great white north of Canada! – all the academic partners and the research team met in person to develop the core precepts and components of an education

program that could then be adapted to fit each context. Clear from this collaboration was the vital importance of experiential learning: only by applying what they were learning and discussing in the workshops, we decided, would the youth internalize the identity of “environmental change agent.”

The impacts of this approach were clear when I travelled to Uganda just over a year later to interview the YLEC participants from that country (Dittmer et al., 2018). YLEC-Uganda’s community partner had trained the participants to build “rocket stoves” – home cookstoves that used one seventh of the firewood required by traditional three-stone cookstoves and piped smoke out of homes to reduce the health impacts of smoke inhalation. I was struck in our interviews, not only by the participants’ ability to take up this training and run with it – building stoves for their families, their neighbours, and even neighbouring communities in some cases – but by what motivated them. Hope and love, they told me. Yes, they had benefitted from the knowledge that YLEC provided, and they were enabled to act by the opportunities provided by partnerships in the community, but it was hope for the future and love for their communities and nature that propelled their efforts. Here I found pieces of the intellectual puzzle of meaningful education that had been largely absent in my work – the transcendent, the spiritual, the matters of the heart. But how to study these dimensions? My dissertation is one attempt to respond to that question.

In 2012, as I was pondering this matter, I encountered the current principal of NCA, who I had known as the founder of the school during my time there, even though I had had a different principal. He was interested to hear about my research and expressed interest in partnering to examine the effects of the school. “We are learning!” is what I heard in our conversations, and then an invitation: “Come learn with us!” So I returned – full circle – to NCA, this time as a researcher seeking knowledge, rather than as an obstinate youth seeking I did not know what. Perhaps, in that regard, 15-year-old Livia was not so different than how I find myself now: with a strong will, a clear mind, and an insatiable desire to understand the elusive dimensions of life. Now, I invite you to explore these questions with me.

## Research Design

To examine my research questions, I used an embedded single-case study design (Yin, 1989), which is characterized by its focus on a defined setting with clear boundaries for data collection. In this study, the case is NCA and the embedded features of interest are (a) the intended practices and processes of the school, in relationship to broader societal conditions and forces; (b) students' experiences of school structures, in relationship to their life histories and ongoing development as adolescents; and (c) the structurational interactions between institutional structures and individual agency. This list attempts to nest students' school-based experiences in an historical perspective at both the individual and societal levels. The complexity of this nested structuration relationship results in highly dynamic phenomena that are not easily analyzed. Stones (2005) highlights the importance of carefully designing structurational inquiry to be able to work with this type of complexity: "...any adequate attempt to investigate the process of structuration at the substantive level will have to engage, at least at a minimal level, with a combination of hermeneutics and structural diagnostics" (p. 81). As such, he further states, "the detail implied by this will necessarily limit the scope and scale of studies that can be given the structuration treatment" (p. 81). Because of this necessary limitation on scope, the use of a single-site case study was the right choice for my research to allow for an in-depth, detail-oriented investigation of the various features of interest in my research questions.

Likewise, I chose the embedded case-study design as an effective means to contribute to the body of knowledge on schools as learning environments for wise world citizenship. Bassey (1999) describes the case study as a prime strategy for research in education settings. He explains that "an essential feature of case study is that sufficient data are collected for researchers to be able to explore significant features of the case and to put forward interpretations for what is observed" (p. 47). This, in addition to the fact that case studies are conducted mainly in their natural environments, means that the case-study approach provides a deep look at social dynamics, enriched by the inclusion of contextual features that allow for a

better understanding of the lives being lived in the setting. Simons (1996) emphasizes the particular value of case studies' ability to "understand complexity in particular contexts" (p. 225). Considering that my research is neither an intervention assessment, nor an evaluation, and that it aims to examine the interactions among multiple elements of the NCA setting, the ability of a case study to account for complexity makes it a valuable tool.

This research is also ethnography because it is "based on the first-hand experience of social action within a discrete location" and aims to "collect data which will convey the subjective reality of the lived experience of those who inhabit that location" (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 16). As elaborated in the following sections, my data collection and analysis methods are consistent with this approach to generating knowledge. I have made sure not to neglect Eisenhart's (2001) critique that ethnographic methods must be carefully employed to ensure that historic tools of ethnography are not replicated without critically examining their continued utility:

To be sure, participant observation and ethnographic interviewing remain at the methodological core... [T]o be involved directly in the activities of people still seems to be the best method we have for learning about the meaning of things to the people we hope to understand... But interest in permeable boundaries, multiple influences, dispersed networks, connections across multi-leveled and multi-layered sites, and improvised responses means that ethnographers should be exploring ways to expand their reach beyond traditional methods. (p. 23)

She points out, for example, that traditional ethnography, in its "search for patterns, typical instances, coherence, and good stories," can lead researchers to "overlook or ignore contested, ambiguous, or inconsistent data" (p. 23). A further issue specific to schools is that such a setting is not "a microcosm adapted to a particular society" as traditional ethnography would describe it, nor is it "a separate or coherent entity to be compared to a home or community. Rather, [a school] is shown to be 'tangled up' with them in numerous overlapping ways" (p. 23). I have accounted for this dynamic of interaction at a theoretical level by my use of structuration



theory, which includes space to consider super-structural elements such as students' families and the provincial Ministry of Education, without conflating them with the school's distinct structures. Critical Psychology also accounts for socio-historical forces that influence settings explicitly and implicitly, at both individual and institutional levels. But ambiguity and contradictions must also be accounted for methodologically, which, Eisenhart argues, traditional ethnography is not necessarily equipped to do.

As a result, I used several approaches to adapt an ethnographic epistemology to the needs of this inquiry in the form of methodology, both to account for differing perspectives among participants and to exploit the potential of the structuration framework. For example, I used participatory approaches, multiple sources of data, critical observations, life history interviews, and analysis methods that provide opportunities for the emergence of contrasting explanations. I discuss these mixed methods and their triangulation further below. The data thus generated are sufficient in type and scope to satisfy Pole and Morrison's (2003) definition of ethnography, while paying due attention to Eisenhart's (2001) emphasis on the ways in which ethnography should both stretch "upward" and "outward" in order to locate the school and its practices within a network of social systems, and look "downward" and "inward" in order to better understand students' and teachers' experiences and resulting subjectivities.

**Mixed methods.** For this study, I used mixed qualitative methods, collecting data from multiple sources with more than one tool and combining the data at the analysis stage. This approach raised several design questions: What data collection tools are most suited to the needs of the research? In what ways can data from different sources better inform the research than one source alone? In what sequence will types of data be collected? In what ways will findings from early data collection inform subsequent methods? How will contradictions or conflicts in findings be navigated? How will different sources and types of data be weighted when answering research questions? How can one effectively communicate the ways in which different types or sources of data contributed to findings? Although some of these questions are most relevant to issues of analysis and reporting, discussed more fully later on in this

chapter, the use of mixed qualitative methods commits the researcher to a data collection process that is skill-, time-, and resource-intensive (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This approach is often the best choice, however, when a researcher “aims to explore a problem, honor the voices of participants, map the complexity of the situation, and convey multiple perspectives of participants” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 7), as I aim to do in this research.

Although mixed methods generally imply the combined use of qualitative and quantitative data, Morse (e.g., 2003, 2009, 2010) makes the case that one need not cross the qualitative-quantitative divide to consider one’s research mixed methods. Morse (2009) defines mixed method research as consisting of a core component alongside one or more supplementary components, which together “address a single area of inquiry that cannot be addressed by the core component alone” (p. 1523). She suggests that using different qualitative methods simultaneously is helpful “when it is necessary to obtain more than one perspective on a research topic” (2003, p. 200). Considering the goals of this research to gain insight into complex dynamics of a school setting and its impacts on students, I strategically gathered data from different perspectives – student, teacher, and principal – using the methods I judged to be best suited for each group, as explained further in this chapter.

Although a reasonable response to mixing qualitative methods would be to assume that it removes the paradigmatic conflicts of qualitative-quantitative mixing, Barbour (1998) suggests that a multiplicity of traditions and assumptions exist among qualitative methods. A researcher seeking analytical rigour when combining qualitative methods, therefore, must attend to potential contradictions that can emerge from a mixed qualitative approach. She encourages researchers to acknowledge and remain aware of the baggage that can accompany varied methods, in the form of conceptual frameworks that colour their interpretation and use. Morse (2003) also cautions against methodological incongruence, highlighting that “good research is more than just using sets of data collection strategies” (p. 200). Instead, the researcher must consider the congruence between research questions and the methodological framework of the chosen methods: “each method has a distinct way of thinking and

approaching a research problem,” (p. 200) she argues. When approached carefully, mixed methods can be a powerful tool for purposefully linking research questions with the most effective methodological strategy.

In the present work, I account for the risks of conflicting frameworks and methodological incongruence in two ways. The first strategy is using structuration and systems theories as an overarching guiding framework; the language and conceptual frameworks thus provided attenuate the risk of disparate methodologies being thrown together with no unifying links. The second strategy is purposefully choosing qualitative methods that are best suited to my research questions and sample populations, in this case using life history interview (LHI) methodology to examine students’ experiences, and ethnographic methods to examine institutional structures and interactions between structure and agency, described further below. Overall, the LHIs and ethnographic methods delimit the constructs and options at play in data analysis, while preserving space for a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning. As I describe in subsequent sections and chapters, I maintain the intended relationships between questions and methods by weighting the relevance of data types and sources to the relevant research questions, and by presenting findings in a transparent manner that makes the sources and methods evident. In so doing, I aim to maximize the strengths of mixed qualitative methods for answering complex questions from multiple perspectives.

The use of multiple methods also raises the possibility of degrees of convergence among sources. Triangulation is the analytical tool often used to identify the extent of convergence and divergence among findings from different sources. According to Tobin and Begley (2004), this approach was once described in the quantitative-validity sense of enhancing confirmability, but in a post-modern sense is more usefully described as offering completeness, “enlarging the landscape of [researchers’] inquiry, offering a deeper and more comprehensive picture” (p. 393). Richardson (2000) has critiqued the metaphor of triangulation, arguing that the rigid, two-dimensional structure of a triangle leaves little room for the nuances of experienced truth; instead, she uses light theory to describe an alternative approach, using the term

“crystallization” to suggest a process that recognizes that “there are far more than three sides from which to approach the world” (p. 13). The process of triangulation need not entail rigid, bordering-on-positivist assumptions of truth, argue Tobin and Begley (2004) in response. Knafli and Breitmayer (1991) suggest that when using tools of triangulation, “the investigator does not expect multiple sources of data to confirm one another; rather, the expectation is that each source will contribute an additional piece to the puzzle” (p. 229). This sense of triangulation, implying a strategy to increase completeness and depth while maintaining space for inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions, is how I use this concept in my research.

Based on this rationale, in this chapter I describe the details of my research design, starting with a description of the participatory approach upon which this research is based.

### **Participatory Approach**

This research was built upon strong buy-in from NCA’s principal and contributions from students and staff to the planning process. I made monthly visits to the school from January to April in 2015, during which I met with the WCC-11 class, who were joined by one or two members of each other grade level (approximately 18 students in total and one teacher). The first purpose of these meetings was to discuss concepts that would help me design the research. A complementary second purpose was to provide an educational opportunity for students that would satisfy curricular requirements related to social science research skills and knowledge. The first meeting explored the following questions: What is good education? What does it look, feel, and sound like? How does it involve the head, heart, hand, and soul? The second meeting involved us collaboratively mapping (a) the NCA timeline, including major features of the academic year, and (b) the trajectory of a typical student during this year, including highs and lows. During the third meeting I used a technique called the wagon wheel, which involves forming two concentric circles of chairs, facing each other. Students sit in pairs and discuss increasingly challenging questions, switching partners between questions. From these discussions we identified major phenomena of interest in the NCA setting and discussed characteristics of a good research question. The final meeting focused on the development of

interview questions and how to relate such questions to overall research questions. These four meetings provided invaluable insight into how to structure research in this setting.

Based on these meetings, I generated initial research questions, which I shared with the principal, vice principal, and a few teachers. I asked them to react to the terms and concepts in the questions and used probes to delve more deeply into the implications of these provisional questions for the research. This discussion supplemented my exploration of the methodology literature to generate my research plan. Ongoing conversations with the principal and visits to staff meetings provided further opportunities to check in on the research plan.

During data collection in the 2015/16 academic year, I met three times with an advisory committee of seven students. Four of these students were young men and three were young women; two were Canadian, two were from the USA, two were from China, and a sixth was from South America; three spoke English as their second language and two participated in NCA's ESL program, although one had entered the mainstream curriculum by the 2015/16 school year; and five identified their religion as Bahá'í, a sixth as Christian, and a seventh as "none (yet)". One of the advisory committee members also participated in a life history interview (described below). Because of scheduling issues, based on the option for upper-grade students to have a spare period during the school day, six of the participants were in grade 12 and a seventh was in grade 11. One grade 10 student had been invited to participate in the advisory committee but declined because of availability. The seven participating students were invited to join the advisory committee as key informants (Patton, 2001) on the basis of their in-depth engagement with the school; five of the participants were members of student council and, based on my initial observations and feedback from the principal, all seven demonstrated a capacity to analyze social conditions and individual experiences at a deep level.

Advisory committee meetings were intended to create space for ongoing check-ins with students throughout the data collection process. Materials and insights generated in interviews and focus groups were brought to the advisory committee, particularly when quandaries arose in my own thinking that required an insider perspective to address or resolve. Committee

meetings were audio recorded for future reference but were not coded (see data collection and analysis details below). Meetings ran from 30 to 40 minutes in length.

The first advisory committee meeting was held in early November of 2015 and consisted primarily of a card-sort activity, using the list of 37 structures generated by the principal's first and second interviews (described below). Through discussion, the students grouped the list of structures into categories on the basis of the items' relationships to each other in the day-to-day school environment. They then named each category. In this process, they created two new cards to fill gaps they identified in the existing list. I facilitated this discussion, asking for clarification or offering guidance as needed. I also helped them engage with conflicting ideas when they disagreed, talking through different perspectives until consensus was reached on the placement of each card in the categories they created. The resulting categories provided clarity on how students relate to school structures. These insights informed the guides I developed for subsequent interviews and focus groups.

The second advisory committee meeting was held in early December of 2015 and provided an opportunity to discuss a quandary that had arisen during the student life-history interviews. As I describe more fully in Chapter 4, some students (mostly non-Chinese) suggested a deep separation between Chinese and non-Chinese students, whereas other students (mostly Chinese) disagreed, suggesting that any apparent separation was shallow and did not represent exclusion. I brought this question to the advisory committee, using a facilitated activity for the students to share their experiences without needing to defend one position or another. After an initial once-around-the-circle response to the question of whether there is a separation between these groups at the school, I offered three statements and asked the students to weigh the validity of each in light of their observations and experiences at the school: (a) Prejudice creates a separation between Chinese and non-Chinese students at NCA, (b) The separation between Chinese and non-Chinese students at NCA is not caused by prejudice, and (c) There is no real separation between Chinese and non-Chinese students at NCA. The resulting discussion deconstructed the concept of prejudice, separating racism in

terms of a sense of superiority, which they agreed was not the cause of any separation, from aversion to potentially awkward interactions due to language and cultural differences, which they described as subconscious prejudice that does operate in the school. Based on this discussion, I entered the second round of data collection (LHIs and focus groups) with new insight into the potential causes of the separation and what individual factors and school structures might be particularly relevant to responding to this issue.

The third and final advisory committee meeting was held in mid-February of 2016 and included two components. The first was a discussion on the students' preparation to graduate from NCA, framed by two major questions: (a) What type of adult does NCA want its students to become? and (b) What type of adult do you want to become? In regard to the latter question, we briefly discussed how NCA helps and fails to help students prepare for their desired futures. This was an enlightening conversation that distilled several key components of the school's vision and the students' relationship with this vision (described in detail in Chapter 4), that supported and elaborated what I had learned in the interviews and focus groups. The second component of this session differed from the work of the advisory group up to that point, helping me prepare for the teacher focus group, rather than analyzing data already gathered. I asked the students to brainstorm questions in response to this prompt: "What questions should I ask the teachers if I want to learn what they think about teaching here?" The questions the students generated were insightful and showed a genuine interest in the teachers' relationship with the school and the students. These questions included "Do you feel like you're responsible for the students' moral development? If yes, how do you do it?", "How important is it to follow the rules versus adapting to students' needs?", "To what extent do you agree with the [Ontario curriculum] system you're working in versus trying to get around it?", and "How much do you believe in what NCA is doing?"

The small-group discussions in the advisory committee meetings offered an opportunity for wide-ranging, yet in-depth exploration that was not possible in the interviews or the large focus groups. As a member check, the advisory committee discussions offered an

opportunity to course-correct and ensure that subsequent data-collection activities were well planned and grounded in adequate knowledge of the school setting. As such, the advisory committee provided a supportive structure for the main research activities, guiding their progress and contributing to their quality. I now turn to the specifics of my data collection design, beginning with the specific methods used, which will provide context to describe participant recruitment and analysis methods.

### **Participants**

At the beginning of the 2015/16 school year, I introduced the study during a whole-school assembly and visited grade groups to provide more details and answer questions. I then invited all students to participate in the observation component of the research. Any students younger than 16 were asked for verbal assent, and written consent was sought from their parents. Difficulties arose due to students missing the initial introduction or enrolling at the school after research had begun. For these reasons, although the student body was approximately 60 in the school year, 49 were invited and agreed to participate. From these students, 15 were selected through purposive sampling to participate in a life history interview. This method is typical for case-study research because of its ability to generate the most information (Patton, 2001; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). First, I identified 20 students who I confirmed with the principal could understand and communicate in English with relative ease. In discussion with the principal and vice principal, 15 students from this list were invited to participate in an interview, two were asked to participate in the advisory committee instead, and the other three would have been backups had anyone declined to be interviewed. Demographic data for the 15 interview participants are presented in Table 3.1. Interviews were scheduled with each student based on their availability.

All grade 11 and 12 students were invited to participate in a focus group held with their grade group. Thirty agreed – eleven from grade 11 (85% participation) and nineteen from grade 12 (95% participation). Ten of the focus group participants had also participated in an interview. Of the 13 teachers employed during the 2015/16 school year (excluding the



principal), eight participated in a focus group (62%). Demographic data for both focus group samples are presented in Table 3.1. Focus group dates and times were pre-determined, which Table 3.1.

*Demographic Data – Life History Interviews and Focus Groups (Student and Teacher)*

Characteristic	Life History Interview	Focus Group Students	Focus Group Teachers
Participants, <i>n</i>	15	30	9
Gender, <i>n</i> of women/men	7/8	17/13	7/2
Mean Age, years (range)	16.67 (15-18)	16.97 (15-19)	39 (28-53)
Race/Ethnicity, <i>n</i> (%)			
White/Caucasian	5 (33%)	9 (30%)	7 (78%)
Black, African, or Caribbean	2 (13%)	5 (17%)	0
Middle Eastern	4 (27%)	6 (20%)	2 (22%)
Chinese	2 (13%)	10 (33%)	0
Latin American or Hispanic	2 (13%)	3 (10%)	0
Other	2 (13%)	0	0
Indicated Mixed Race, <i>n</i> (%)	3 (20%)	3 (10%)	2 (22%)
Religion, <i>n</i> (%)			
Bahá'í	9 (60%)	15 (50%)	3 (33%)
Christian	1 (7%)	3 (10%)	2 (22%)
Atheist	1 (7%)	1 (3%)	0
Unsure	0	2 (7%)	2 (22%)
None/Non-Denominational	4 (27%)	9 (30%)	2 (22%)
First Language – English, <i>n</i> (%)	7 (47%)	15 (50%)	7 (78%)

affected teachers' participation, as did holding them during school hours since some staff were needed to supervise the cafeteria. The principal and vice principal did not participate in the teacher focus group to avoid stratified power dynamics. I interviewed the principal separately as a critical case (Patton, 2001) given his dual role as principal and founder of the school. The principal is a Canadian-born, White man in his early 60s whose first language is English and who is a member of the Bahá'í Faith.

All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded. Interviews were transcribed to text by me or through an ethics-approved transcription service. All the research methods used in this study were approved by the Wilfrid Laurier University research ethics board.

### **Data Collection & Analysis: Methods and Procedures**

As mentioned above, triangulation among sources and methods was central to my research design. Although data collection occurred in two phases – the first from September to December of 2015 and the second from January to May of 2016 – the use of methods and access to participant groups overlapped. In order to answer my research questions, I gathered and analyzed both contextual and perceptual information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

**Contextual information.** As a case study, this research relied on adequate understanding of contextual features of the NCA settings. Such features include its history, vision, objectives, activities, operating principles, and culture (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). I explored these features through several in-depth interviews with the principal.

In his mid-60s, the principal presents as a grandfatherly figure, sharing experiences born from an interesting and adventurous life. His gentle voice and demeanour exude conviction and complete attention to whatever situation he is engaged, despite the frequent chiming of his cell phone with texts and calls, as often from his five grown children or his wife as from colleagues and employees at NCA or another business of his, a foster-home agency. He is in high demand for his expertise with youth empowerment and speaks of the history of NCA over the past 20-odd years as naturally as if discussing the previous week. His intentional mode of translating experience and knowledge into action is clear in how he describes the methods and purpose of NCA.

At the time of my data collection, the principal had been in this role since 2012, in addition to the early years of the school from 1993-1998. In 1998 another principal was hired; she held this position until 2012. As founder of the school, the current principal has always been the executive director of the school and was involved as a member of the management team, which met weekly, during the period he was not principal. Because of his long-standing

and formative engagement in NCA, the principal represents a critical case (Patton, 2001), who I drew on particularly for contextual data related to the NCA setting's goals, history, characteristics, activities, and processes, along with the guiding values and principles embedded in the structure of the school.

In preparation for these interviews, I examined a collection of relevant documents (i.e., the principal's MA thesis on the Moral Capabilities Framework, the NCA student handbook, the "Message from the Principal" related to curricular requirements, school application materials, scholarship materials, teacher contract templates, the school year calendar, and the residence guide and handbook). I also observed portions of the teacher training held over three days prior to the start of the school year, as well as key school events and activities throughout the school year. These documents and observations provided insight into the manner in which the principal presented and described school structures, and how students and teachers react to the principal. My analysis of these documents and observations informed the interview guides I used for each of my conversations with the principal, as well as the guides for interviews and focus groups with students and teachers (described below). The principal interview guides were also informed by conversations with the advisory committee (described above).

I conducted three interviews with the principal. The first took place in mid-September and was 70 minutes long. The interview guide for this first conversation included questions under four main headings: NCA's vision of wise world citizens and spiritual engagement, NCA structures – roles (of principal, of students, of teachers), NCA structures – activities, and the externally-imposed requirements and challenges faced by NCA. Based on this interview and my observations, I conducted the card sort activity with the advisory committee described previously. I brought the results of that activity back to the principal for a follow-up interview (45 minutes) one week after the first interview. I did not use an interview guide for this conversation, but asked the principal to respond to the groupings and headings created by the advisory committee, and to identify any missing structures. In this conversation he commented on the nature of several structures and reflected on why the advisory committee had grouped

them the way that they had. By the end of this conversation, the final list of structures had been validated by both students and the principal.

I conducted the third and final interview with the principal at the end of the school year in late May. For this conversation, I created an interview guide focused on similar themes and topics as the first interview, but delved more deeply into specific structures and the dynamics among students, structure, and the school community, based on the data I had collected over the school year. This third interview was roughly an hour and forty-five minutes long and covered topics beyond what I had anticipated in my interview guide. My conversations with NCA's principal were wide-ranging, as his comments leapt like a fish in and out of a rushing river, circling toward my questions and away again as new thoughts came to mind, always hinting of deeper waters and branching streams that we would not have time to explore. In this indirect fashion, over our three lengthy conversations, we generated rich commentary on several key topics.

To analyze these data, I first used descriptive codes and values coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013) to identify key structures and related values, attitudes, and beliefs related to contextual characteristics of NCA, including its history, vision, objectives, activities, operating principles, and culture. During this initial coding stage, I also used process coding (Miles et al., 2013), which uses gerunds ("-ing" words) to identify actions and interactions that relate to change over time, and evaluation coding (Miles et al., 2013), which identifies the interviewee's assessments of the significance and effectiveness of particular phenomena. I then used pattern coding (Saldaña, 2012) to organize these codes and identify grouping categories and themes related to these contextual characteristics. Throughout the analysis process, I determined codes and themes in light of elements of my conceptual framework, particularly structuration theory, spiritual development, and engagement. I also derived codes and themes from the transcript in light of new insights and understanding of the school, resulting in an iterative pattern of inductive-deductive coding. The resulting complement of grouped codes formed the basis of the codebook I used to analyze student interviews (described below).

**Perceptual information.** In keeping with my conceptual framework, I examined interactions between school structures, students' patterns of thought and action in the present and the life history, and their experiences in the school setting. Complementing the contextual information just described, therefore, I also collected perceptual information from the perspective of students and teachers to better understand how members of the NCA setting engage with its structures and how this engagement is impacted by individual factors.

**Life history interviews.** The primary data collection method for perceptual information was the life history interview. Dollard (1935) defines the life history account as "a deliberate attempt to define the growth of a person in a cultural milieu and to make theoretical sense of it" (p. 3). This approach allows for the inclusion of context while maintaining the individual as the object of analysis: "the individual remains organically present" and "must be accounted for in his [or her] full, immediate, personal reality" (p. 4). Cole and Knowles (2001) agree, describing life history data as characterized by rich and complex contextual information, which is required to gain understanding of a person's life. The participant in a life history interview is considered a collaborative partner and his or her interpretations of experience are explicitly valued (Haglund, 2004). These features of the life history interview are a good match to my epistemological approach because (a) the interview provides insight into the various experiences that have shaped students' patterns of thought and action over time (relevant to my research questions), and (b) its participatory approach fits the value I place on the collaborative nature of research. This interview style is also a good fit for research with adolescents because it meets the developmental skills and needs of this age group while also building on their skills, insights, and interests as burgeoning adults (Haglund, 2004).

During data collection, I conducted life history interviews with 15 students. Twelve students participated in two interviews, the first in the fall semester and the second in the spring. Two students completed only the first interview, and one completed only the second; these irregularities were caused by scheduling conflicts. Data were kept for these three participants. Interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 66 minutes, averaging 52 minutes; the

range and average of each set of interviews differed by less than three minutes.

To conduct the interviews, I was given a small room that I reached via a horse-shoe shaped catwalk along the perimeter of the school gym. This cozy, attic-like room was half-full of storage boxes, leaving room for two chairs and a small table, lit by a tall lamp and a dim window. It felt both literally and figuratively “above” school life, separating our conversations from the hubbub below. Sounds from basketball games, dance rehearsals, and piano playing periodically floated upwards, a reminder of the day-to-day school life going on outside our interview space. Meanwhile, the LHI participants and I explored and examined their experiences before and during their time at NCA, holding out assumptions and ideas, turning them to see new angles and examining their substance.

The first interview guide was designed to generate a timeline of each student’s life from birth to their arrival at NCA, including major life events, information about their families and communities, and significant role models and other key actors in their lives. Through this conversation were woven questions about students’ beliefs about and experiences with service in the life history (e.g., “Was service a typical activity in the community where you grew up?”), their interest in and knowledge about social issues (e.g., “What is a social issue you feel particularly strongly about?”), and their passions and motivations (e.g., “Tell me about something that inspires you”). I used probes to delve more deeply into students’ comments, such that each interview had its own flavour, despite each covering the same main questions.

Students’ life histories varied more than I had anticipated. Coming to a private international school, I had thought to find a high degree of homogeneity in students’ histories, even if not in their national backgrounds. What I discovered instead was a breadth of socio-economic backgrounds, family structures, spiritual and religious beliefs, academic successes and challenges, and interest in social issues. These and other factors varied within nationalities as much as between them. Despite these differences, however, every student who sat across from me was courteous, interested in what I was trying to do, and willing to contribute their piece to the research, often with great energy and enthusiasm.

In the second interview session, I extended the timelines to include experiences at NCA. This time, in addition to major events and people in their experiences, I was interested to learn about changes in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours over time in relation to their experiences at NCA. Based on what I had learned through my observations, interviews with the principal (described above), and focus groups (described below), I focused my questions on the themes of spiritual development and world citizenship. I asked about specific school structures and activities (e.g., the Moral Capabilities Framework, WCC, service experiences). In keeping with the life history approach, I framed questions in a manner that created space to consider the connections between current and previous experiences (e.g., “Thinking back to before you came to Nancy Campbell, do you think your ideas about spirituality have changed from then to now?”) and also the connections between current and future experience (e.g., “What is one major thing you want to do before you die?” and then “Do you think Nancy Campbell helps prepare you to accomplish that thing? Will you be better equipped to do that by the time you graduate?”). The wealth of students’ experiences and the rich insights they provided into day-to-day life at NCA are evident in the data presented in Chapter 4.

Starting with the basic codebook generated from analyzing the principal’s interviews (see previous subsection), I coded the LHIs to identify common themes between the students and principal. In addition, I used emotion coding and values coding (Miles et al., 2013) to draw out students’ beliefs, world-views, life conditions, values, and attitudes. As with the principal’s interviews, throughout the analysis process I determined codes and themes in light of elements of my conceptual framework and in light of new insights, resulting in an iterative pattern of inductive-deductive analysis.

**Focus groups.** Secondary to the life history interviews, I collected perceptual information from students and teachers through focus groups. I conducted three focus groups, all in the second semester of the school year, in early February 2016. At the beginning of each focus group, I reviewed ground rules for our discussion, including those related to interpersonal dynamics (e.g., only one person speaks at a time, respectful listening and

responding, importance of hearing from a diversity of participants), privacy (e.g., nothing shared in the focus group should be shared with others), and content (e.g., importance of both positive and negative perceptions of NCA, no right or wrong responses). All focus group participants agreed to these ground rules at the outset of each session.

Two focus groups were with students – the grade 11 and 12 cohorts, respectively – and the third was with teachers. The student focus groups were 48 and 50 minutes long, respectively, and the teacher focus group was one hour and 42 minutes. I designed the student focus group guide to generate discussion among the students about school activities and structures I had observed and wanted to learn more about from the students' perspective: the moral dilemma activities, WCC, service projects, the Moral Capabilities Framework. I also asked about the social environment of the school, asking what it is like to be a “Nancy Campbell” – a term students had identified in the life history interviews. The nature of the social environment was also my focus in the teacher focus group guide. I phrased questions to elicit stories from the teachers (i.e., “Tell me about a time when...”). In addition to the questions generated by the student advisory committee (see above), I asked about the positive and negative elements of the environment, barriers to maintaining a positive environment, and the impacts of the environment on students' capacity for service and social action. In all three focus groups, participants dove into the material, initiating an active and vigorous conversation in which I was able to act as facilitator, probing more deeply into comments, requesting alternative perspectives and interpretations, and creating space for more reticent participants to speak.

The data generated through these conversations enriched the material provided by the principal and student interviews. Due to time limitations, I did not fully code the focus group transcripts; instead, through repeated readings and key word searches based on the codebook, I tested my assumptions and initial conclusions from the interviews against the focus group data. This pattern of analysis in mixed methods provides a source of triangulation, both across data sources and across participant groups (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Thurmond, 2001). Interviews benefit from spontaneity, flexibility, and



responsiveness to individual idiosyncrasies, whereas focus groups benefit from participants having opportunity to hear and immediately respond to others in ways they might not have individually (Carter et al., 2014). As such, the focus group data were valuable but secondary in my analysis and interpretation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As described earlier in this chapter, a participatory approach was central to my research design. In addition to contributing to the identification of research questions and methods, the preparatory and ongoing participation of setting stakeholders during the research responds to the ethical duty for reciprocity in community-based research (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, & Wise, 2008). At the interpersonal level, this duty translates into such practices as “reciprocal dialogue” (Yassour-Borochowitz, 2004), through which values of mutual trust, honour, and integrity characterize communication and equal footing is established in the process of deepening understanding; in this research, I strove to establish such relationships with administrators, teachers, and students, representing myself as an alumna and a student interested in learning about their experiences. Between the researcher and the community, reciprocity is expressed in how knowledge generated through research is provided to the participants and research site in a manner that is useful to them (Maiter et al., 2008). In the case of this research, in addition to the member checks already described, my involvement with NCA is ongoing to translate findings from this work into useful resources. First, all participants were asked whether they would like to receive a summary of the research findings following the conclusion of the work; this 2-3 page document will be generated on the basis of key themes and conclusions from this work and shared with them, along with an invitation to read the full document or discuss the findings further. Second, I am continuing to work with NCA’s administration to translate this work into training resources for teachers and administrators. Third, the principal has received many requests from other schools for resources documenting NCA’s approach; a summary of the principles, methods, and guidelines of NCA’s approach will be generated from this work that can be useful for this purpose.

In terms of data collection, a significant ethical consideration in this research was that several participants were younger than 16 years old. As such, I needed to ensure that the students understood what they were acquiescing to and that their parents were also sufficiently informed as to decide whether to provide consent for their child to participate. With all of the students, regardless of their age, I was generally perceived to be in a teacher-like role and/or as a guest of the school, which might have caused the students to agree to participate out of respect, hospitality, or as a result of socialized patterns of obedience to authority. In order to minimize the likelihood of students participating for these reasons, I aimed to make it clear in all spoken and written recruitment communications that participation was optional. I also reiterated this during the consent process to ensure students clearly understood that they were not required to participate prior to signing the consent form.

A related ethical consideration at the individual level, which had implications for all students and teachers, is that NCA is a small school and, therefore, privacy and anonymity could not be guaranteed. Knowledge of who participated in the research was impossible to keep confidential during data collection. In this dissertation and other reports, there is a risk that other students and teachers could identify participants' specific contributions. To minimize this risk, I have omitted personal details from all quotes used in reporting. In a larger sample, some personal details (e.g., home country, grade) might add to the richness of the analysis without risking identification of the participant, but such information is higher risk in this study and was therefore excluded from reporting. I have also used pseudonyms to further mask the identities of the original contributors.

Beyond the individual level, this study has ethical implications for NCA as an institution. Although this project aims to provide useful feedback that can support NCA's development, there is risk that certain findings might negatively impact some stakeholders' (e.g., parents, community members, etc.) perceptions of the school, thereby decreasing their support for NCA. Although in the course of this research no obvious red flags of this nature have arisen from my perspective, I have aimed to provide a well-balanced account of the findings, placing both

positive and negative findings in context, and thereby minimizing any potential backlash.

### **Trustworthiness**

In accordance with Miles and colleagues' (2013) discussion of standards for the quality of conclusions in qualitative research and Lincoln and Guba's (1985, see also Guba, 1981) concept of standards of trustworthiness in naturalistic research, I use the language of goodness criteria to discuss the validity of my research approach. In this section I briefly describe the steps I have taken to promote high levels of quality and authenticity in my data collection and analysis processes in the areas of reflexivity, dependability, and credibility.

As these early chapters have demonstrated, I entered this research space with assumptions, values, and biases that brought me close to the phenomena of study and have attuned me to certain aspects. Although this is natural in qualitative research where the researcher is the research instrument, it has been important to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process in order to make my position as explicit as possible and account for its influence on my perspective and interpretations. Several strategies assist with maintaining reflexivity: (a) providing an "audit trail" account (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985): a rich description allowing the reader to follow the sequence of data collection, processing, and condensing, leading to the final conclusions; (b) considering alternative perspectives and conclusions; and (c) triangulating between multiple perspectives (i.e., students, teachers, founder/principal) and methods (i.e., interviews, observations, focus groups) in order to ensure that my assumptions and biases "are tested as strenuously as possible" (Guba, 1981, p. 87) by encountering a range of data. This chapter has detailed my approach to each of these strategies, and I further elaborate on the reflexivity of my interpretations in Chapter 5.

Audit trail accounts and triangulation also support the dependability (or reliability) of my conclusions by providing evidence that the study was consistent and stable across time and methods. Other strategies I have used to further satisfy this criterion are (a) providing clear research questions and ensuring their congruency with methods, (b) collecting data longitudinally in an explicit and purposeful manner, (c) clearly specifying relevant links

between methods/findings and analytical constructs in order to provide strong theoretical justification for the research, and (d) regularly discussing my analysis and emerging interpretations and questions with my advisor. These strategies have helped maintain consistency over time and integrity to initial intentions.

In addition to the confirmability and dependability of the research, its truth value (credibility/validity/authenticity) requires that conclusions ring true and represent an accurate understanding of the phenomena of interest. As mentioned already, I triangulated among complementary methods and sources; the converging conclusions among them (described in Chapter 5) support the study's credibility. Explicitly grappling with contradictions and tensions that emerge in data collected through different methods and sources is also important in case-study research in order to "embrace the paradoxes inherent in the people, events, and sites we study and explore rather than try to resolve the tensions embedded in them" (Simons, 1996, p. 237). Seeking and considering alternative explanations for findings is another central component of this study and contribute to its credibility (see Appendix D). Other strategies I used include (a) a rich, descriptive writing style that "enables a vicarious presence for the reader" (Miles et al., 2013); (b) linking emerging findings to categories of prior and emerging theory, demonstrating the basis of findings in theoretical constructs found in the literature; (c) highlighting in yellow negative or contradictory codes in the codebook during coding and analysis to provide a visual cue that would trigger my attention to contrasting cases and counter-narratives; and (d) ongoing member checking (Creswell, 2003) in which I shared drafts of my findings and analyses with the principal to clarify my understand and solicit alternative perspectives. One limitation of the member checks was lack of contact with students and teachers to receive similar feedback from other sources. Other limitations of this research are discussed in the next section.

### **Limitations and Delimitations: Methods**

Given the multicultural nature of NCA, ideally I would have conducted this study in more than one language to allow all participants to use their first language. Some students,

particularly those new to ESL studies, had some difficulty participating in English, and others were excluded from the research due to language barriers. The interview guide approach allowed me to reword questions or ask clarifying questions if I had a sense that a participant did not understand what was being asked. As needed, I encouraged focus group participants to translate for each other in order to clarify my questions to each other or their answers to me; students used personal translation devices as needed also.

Just as an exclusively quantitative study would be limited by its exclusion of qualitative data, this work's use of purely qualitative methods lacked the complementarity of quantitative insights. The importance of using multiple qualitative methods to explore the complexity of this study's target phenomena resulted in a resource-intensive data plan, which made additional inclusion of meaningful quantitative methods to be too far beyond the manageable scope of this research. Furthermore, the small size of the research setting would have limited the usefulness of quantitative data for inferential analysis. As such, I regretfully excluded quantitative methods. Despite this exclusion, the rigour of the proposed study was strengthened by the use of multiple qualitative methods and triangulation between sources.

Considering my reliance on qualitative methods, ideally this research would have involved multiple coders to check for cross-coder reliability (Patton, 2001). This was not possible for the purposes of this dissertation. To compensate, I checked in regularly with my advisor and other colleagues for critical discussions about my progress, initial conclusions, and invasive assumptions; these discussions were vital in exposing my biases and raising important questions about my findings that led to greater depth.

An important delimitation of this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) is that I focused on NCA as a setting through the lens of setting members. As such, I excluded other participants who could have shed light on the research questions but are beyond the boundaries of the setting, including parents, alumni, and local community members. Particularly because parents and alumni are internationally scattered, time and resource limitations were a major factor in this decision. Likewise, recruitment and involvement of community stakeholders who come

into contact with NCA through student service projects and other activities would have been laborious and would have therefore exceeded the resources of this research project.

## Chapter 4 – Findings

The purpose of this case study is to better understand the ways in which NCA students develop capacity for critical and transcendent engagement through the dynamic interactions of structure and agency in the NCA setting. As described in the previous chapter, I sought to understand these phenomena through both contextual information gathered about the history, vision, objectives, activities, operating principles, and culture of NCA, and perceptual information about students' and teachers' experiences with the school, in light of their personal histories and patterns of thought and action. The findings described in this chapter represent my best reading of these data, given my conceptual and methodological frameworks, and do not provide an incontrovertible account of the reality of NCA; other findings and conclusions could have been reached given a different sample, framework, or questions. For example, these data are drawn only from current participants in the setting and not alumni, parents, or others with more distance from the school, which colours the data and analysis. These and other limitations are examined further in Chapter 6. In this chapter, I first describe elements of my interpretive process, followed by accounts of my three main findings.

### Interpretive Process

In addition to the data analysis process described in Chapter 3, I reached the findings identified in this chapter using two main approaches. First, I wrote brief memos or concept documents – particularly at the mid-point of the work when I was drafting the second set of interview guides – through which I articulated emerging and divergent findings that surprised me or exposed new questions. Second, following the coding process, I used writing as an analytical process, what Kamler and Thomson (2006) call “research as writing” (p. 2) in which the labour and complexity of the writing process is considered an integral dimension of meaning making and advancing understanding in research. In this mode, I inadvertently wrote this chapter three times: the first time as two chapters, one focused on contextual data and the other on perceptual data, which allowed me to consider the broad scope of the data and to critically examine what was most essential in relation to my research questions, but quickly

became unwieldy; the second time as an integration of the two drafts under headings drawn straight from my codes (i.e., “releasing potential”, “creating structures”, “spiritual engagement”, and “wise world citizenship”), which was helpful but ultimately inadequate in conveying the connections among these codes; and as my third and current version, which is organized according to three major findings, generated on the foundation of my deductive-inductive coding and solidified through the conceptual work of writing and rewriting. Through this process, I have identified these findings and their illustrative quotes as the most essential for responding to my research questions. These findings are represented by the following simple statements, providing summary concepts that I substantiate and illustrate through this chapter (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 2005): (a) students encounter wisdom, a world-embracing vision, and spiritual development as key capacities targeted by NCA; (b) releasing young people’s potential is a goal and experience of both the school and the students; and (c) relational qualities of day-to-day living at NCA interact with students’ development.

In this chapter, I proceed through these findings in this order. The first finding identifies wisdom and world citizenship as key goals and outcomes of the school; these capacities parallel the constructs of critical and transformative engagement described in Chapter 2. The second finding illustrates how students enter into relationship with NCA, finding convergence between their own goals and those of the school and therefore becoming more deeply active in the co-creation of the environment. Finally, the third finding highlights psychological safety and space for spiritual search as key features of NCA that promote a strong relationship between structures, experience, and personal development. In this chapter I present data on each of these findings. I discuss their implications for the research questions in Chapter 5.

### **Finding 1: Wisdom and a World-Embracing Vision**

My first research question asks what changes in students’ thought-action patterns at NCA impact their capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. Through my analysis, I



have identified two foci of NCA's approach as especially relevant to critical and transcendent engagement: wisdom and a world-embracing vision. Spiritual development is a third focus of NCA's approach and is discussed later in this chapter. Throughout our conversations, the principal emphasized the centrality of these three capacities as key goals of NCA's approach to releasing students' potential. My analysis indicates that several school structures intentionally nurture the development of wisdom and a world-embracing vision. In this section, I describe specific NCA structures related to wisdom and a world-embracing vision and outcomes for students in each of these domains.

First, I present NCA's model of wisdom, as described by the principal, which has three components: reading reality, applying a standard for judgment, and taking action. Each of these components is promoted through specific school structures. Through experiences with these structures, students describe developments in their capacity to think critically and openly, make decisions based on an evolving conceptual framework, and translate intentions into action coherent with beliefs.

Second, I use the principal's data to describe NCA's approach to nurturing a world-embracing vision, which is grounded in school values of justice and unity in diversity, and is applied in the world citizenship curriculum (WCC) courses and service opportunities. Students describe a world-embracing vision that rejects an "us and them" orientation, promotes awareness of privilege, and emphasizes their role in a collective process that transcends personal concerns. In this way, as students describe it, they come to see the links between their efforts to serve and similar efforts around the world to advance global wellbeing. The data from the principal and students indicate that NCA cultivates a sense of responsibility to take up a share of this collective work. These dimensions of a world-embracing vision overlap with the categories of wisdom described in the first section: raising consciousness, developing a standard for judgement, and taking action. These overlaps are highlighted in this chapter and discussed further in Chapter 5.

Overall, these triangulated data illustrate wisdom and a world-embracing vision as key goals

and impacts of NCA. Table 4.1 on the following page summarizes the key elements of each of these capacities in relation to the three dimensions of engagement: cognition, emotion-motivation, and action. I discuss the implications of these findings for my research questions in the following chapter.

**Wisdom.** The data indicate that NCA structures are guided by the school's vision of the nature of wisdom and its key characteristics. According to the principal, developing wisdom involves three intersecting processes: raising consciousness, establishing a standard for judgment, and executing lines of action based on this conscious standard:

The first thing is to establish the social reality through consultation, the second is to identify the principles being violated or needed, and the third is to figure out what actions that we would take to change what we're doing in order to have it reflect what we now understand.

In the following sub-sections, I present data that describe the structures created by NCA to promote each of these three processes and the impacts on students, individually as well as in relationship to each other and the world.

**Consciousness-raising.** The first dimension of developing wisdom, according to the principal, is "establish[ing] the social reality" or "be[ing] able to label... and identify [problems]." The principal uses the concept of consciousness-raising to explain how students engage in these processes. This section presents data on the topic of consciousness-raising in relation to building capacity for wisdom. According to NCA's value system, making wise choices for action requires self-knowledge and is oriented toward serving others: "Wisdom to me has to do with trying to take our gifts and our resources and figure out how best to serve." In line with this collectivist attitude, the principal critiques an individualistic approach to developing wisdom, highlighting the capacity required to effectively respond to complexities that arise in collective living:

In a lot of the empowerment psychologies that are out right now and have been for a lot of years, talking about how the individual can do this and that and so on – I believe that

Table 4.1.

*Wisdom, Spiritual Development, and World-Embracing Vision at NCA – Dimensions of Engagement*

	Wisdom	Spiritual Development	World-Embracing Vision
Cognition	Critical thinking and openness	Intelligence and idealism	Awareness of privilege
	Consciousness of social reality	Determining what is of benefit to humanity and society	Elimination of “us and them” thinking
	Analysis of context and root causes	Inspiration	Eradication of prejudice
	Able to deal with ambiguity	Transcendence of immediate life circumstances and concerns	Global vision of justice
	Discernment and judgment		Perception of connections between local & global
Emotion-Motivation	Consistent & evolving pattern of thought		
	Values & moral beliefs – a moral “bottom line”	Determining that which gives meaning to life	Personhood identity – unity in diversity
	Refining values in light of action	Vision of the future	Sense of deep purpose
	Using values to guide choice & action	Happiness & optimism	Sense of (collective) responsibility
	Sense of control over choices	Sense of wholeness	Appreciation for diversity
Action	Planning for the future	Gratitude	Humility
		Empathy & love	Belief in others’ capacity
	Mutual support	Spiritual search – exploring beliefs	Achieving higher purposes
	Accountability	Applying skills and talents	Speaking up for others
	Questioning & learning	Working for the common good	Service
	Applying methods & tools for problem-solving	Determination	Meaningful conversations
	Excellence & follow-through	Learning through tests	Balance of personal & collective development
	Speaking up for yourself	Service	Individual effort in collective work
	Service for the common good	Sacrifice	Contribute to a world-wide impulse for change
	Persistence through challenges	Spiritual fellowship	
Structural supports & opportunities	Service leadership		

those things are true but of course you can never do those things in isolation and so the moment you have to engage with your family, your community, the world then a lot of wisdom is required in terms of how you, how do you move all of this forward for the betterment of the common good.

As such, he believes, wisdom is not built as a solo enterprise in one's own mind, nor is it fostered by an echo chamber of agreeing opinions. Instead, tools are needed to surface, critique, and learn from one's own assumptions, and to encounter new knowledge and divergent lived experiences. To make such assumptions explicit, the principal describes the importance of questioning status quo conditions:

So many things we accept as part of our environment just because they're there and they seem to have a place that has been established. But the real change happens when we start questioning whether they should be there and whether they should have a place, whether they should exist and what benefit it is... Let's not assume that the structures or the things that are going on are okay. They may be but let's examine them. Let's make them all conscious.

Critical consciousness of the impacts of status quo conditions is necessary if, as the principal hopes, all students are to become interested in social justice: "We are looking at every person becoming interested in social justice if we're going to make world citizens."

Several NCA structures are intended to raise consciousness and understanding of a variety of issues. Two key tools the principal emphasizes for this purpose are consultation and reflection, to which I now turn. My analysis of these activities in the data indicates that a key capacity of critical consciousness is the ability to balance open mindedness and critical thinking. Related to these abilities, students' raising consciousness is indicated by their ability to analyze social issues' contextual conditions and their root causes; I present data on each of these sub-themes. I also present data that reflect some students' less critical perspective of issues, evidenced by simplistic analysis that fails to capture context and/or root causes.

*Consultation.* NCA uses the term “consultation” in a specific way. According to the principal, the full process of consulting about an issue requires one or more conversations that are “open and non-judgemental and exploratory” so that “principles [can] be introduced and weighed and valued and applied.”

The data indicate that consultation is used throughout the school community. The principal describes regular meetings during which teachers discuss “what’s really going on” at the school, which, for example, provide opportunities to “read social reality” in order to identify and respond to any burgeoning issues. At the level of the school community, the relationship between consultation and wisdom is especially evident in the principal’s account of a full-school consultation held during morning assembly to address the issue of backbiting (Box 4.1).

Box 4.1. Account of full-school consultation about backbiting

The principal describes backbiting as “the destroyer of all unity.” As such, when a few students reported to the principal that backbiting was becoming a problem, he felt “very disturbed” because of its implications for the wellbeing of students and the school community. However, he was also confident that backbiting “doesn’t happen when people have opportunity to solve their problems in a consultative way.” Based on this premise, he describes his response to this issue of backbiting, which illustrates the school’s approach to building wisdom through consultation:

I thought, “How am I going to – I can’t stop 100 people from talking about what they want to talk about.” So, I realized that my first thing was it’s not my problem, it’s the whole environment and what happens in an environment where backbiting becomes rampant. ...if I were to go and sit in front of the assembly and say, “We have a backbiting problem,” immediately what happens is certain people will take a position... It dichotomizes: “I don’t have a problem. Some other people have a problem,” you know? So then it’s like distancing ourselves from who’s in trouble and who’s not in trouble, where in fact the environment is in trouble. Each of us is being threatened by this and we’re each creating it perhaps. So, to me, one of the essential components is to make sure that every solution is not judgmental, but it is

a judgment that the collective needs to make. And we collectively agree that this is so, and we include everyone.

Would we agree that we have a problem? [This] is the first thing. So I went before the assembly and that's what I did. I asked everybody "Do we have a problem with backbiting? I've heard two or three people tell me that we have a problem. Is that true?" And then there's this silence and after a long silence... one brave person says, "Well, yeah. It's a bit of a problem." Then you know as soon as one says it, then others are saying it. And then we establish, okay, so are we actually saying all together that we have an issue? And then that is a permission, like if we agree on an issue, now we have permission [to discuss it openly]. But let's not jump to that conclusion. We have an issue, but why is this issue a problem? What are the spiritual or meaningful principles this behaviour is violating? What would be the outcome if we do nothing about this problem? And that's an important step because then we talk about what the effects are and how does it make you feel. It's all very important in terms of determining whether or not it's useful or useless, harmful or helpful.

So then we say "let's break up into groups and discuss how to solve this problem. But recognize the administration may have to change certain structures or maybe you have to change certain social structures where you're somehow fostering this amongst each other and how are we going to do that? [Backbiting] is very common in our society. So how are we going to change a pattern that everybody's being trained in on a daily basis?"

Data from the interviews that took place after this consultation suggest resonance between the principal's rejection of backbiting and students' perspectives. Adam, for example, calls backbiting "trash" and says he does not like to hear it. Chantelle talks about the effects of knowing others have talked behind her back: "It's so hard looking at that person knowing that this person talked bad about me." Selena describes how backbiting can spread misinformation, so that "people think people are doing things, but people aren't really doing those things and it just spirals down from there." Jared uses the language of disunity to describe this downward spiral, emphasizing that the effects of backbiting are avoidable: "The problem with backbiting is not just the fact that it causes disunity, but it causes disunity when it didn't need to be caused."

As illustrated in Box 4.1, the consultation is used to collectively assess and revise school structures and thereby contribute to students' growing capacity to make choices for individual behaviour and collective living, based on critical consciousness of social forces that influence and constrain action. This capacity is one of the hallmarks of NCA's concept of wisdom.

Consultation, although learning-oriented, does not necessarily engage students in the praxis of learning from action. Although closely associated, for analytical purposes I here distinguish the concept of reflection from consultation and discuss its contributions to wisdom.

*Reflection.* In terms of paving the way to wisdom, reflection appears in the data as the sister of consultation at NCA. The principal describes reflection as central to raising consciousness and emphasizes the importance of creating structures conducive to reflection:

Creating awareness and mindfulness, I think, is such an important thing and I think that's what the reflection processes do. As many spaces as can be created for one to look at "what it is I'm trying to accomplish, what I'm trying to give, what I'm trying to develop," and then "how do I do that better?"

Both individual and relational opportunities for reflection play a role in consciousness-raising, he says. Discussing the WCC-11 students' post-trip reflection, the principal notes that:

You can see how valuable the engagement of peers in that process is, and peers that aren't frivolous. You know, they can joke around and have fun, but that's not the dominant activity... Once [they] want to dig a little deeper, they come up with things that are so important. In their reflection, the lessons learned were very powerful.

Often, the principal observes, in the context of reflection on service, students assess their capacity to do what is needed and determine pathways to contribute to the "common good." He ties these types of growth-oriented reflection to students' developing ability to make wise choices for action:

[Through reflection] you're developing this capacity of wisdom, right? Did we help people in the way that they needed to be helped? Was what I thought was going to help

really helpful, or not? So then it's a kind of a humbling process in a way. The great thing is when you have the idea that you're going to do something and then you're going to reflect, then you move away from this perfectionistic tendency of having to do the perfect thing or the right thing, which of course doesn't exist. So, I think the idea that we're going to take a step and then we're going to reflect and figure out 'was this of any use?' or 'was it good?' 'what do we want to increase what do we want to decrease?' 'how do we want to change it?' I think that also develops in students the capacity to use the art of judgment to become effective helpers of the common good.

According to this vision, students' capacity to effectively reflect provides an indicator of wisdom, while also building this capacity further in reciprocal relationship with wisdom.

Reflection is also used in disciplinary situations. NCA uses Responsibility Management Time (RMT) in place of traditional detention. According to the principal, RMT is "intended to convey the concept that the responsibility of managing our time is every individual's" and that taking responsibility for a problem involves three intersecting abilities: "to be able to label it and identify it, to be able to understand what principles apply to its resolution, and to make a plan of how it's going to be resolved" – steps that mirror the three processes of building wisdom described at the beginning of this section. Prior to attending an after-school, teacher-led RMT session, the principal explains, the student is asked to fill out a reflection form that becomes the basis for a "counselling format" session, in which there is "a 50/50 dialogue, not just preaching at the person." Teachers and staff (e.g., residence assistants) are asked to give students an RMT reflection form if they show a pattern or ongoing tendency of unacceptable behaviour (e.g., lateness, rudeness, dress code infractions, failing to submit homework), rather than for isolated incidences, which should instead be addressed by a warning or conversation. The RMT session is intended to create a negative consequence for such patterns of behaviour – this activity is not how students would choose to spend their after-school hours – while also, the principal emphasizes, building capacity for self-directed goal-setting:



And then the other part about "What can I do to change this" has to do with building the capacity to set goals and make a plan and resolve it. Sometimes it's [good] to say to a student "Well, I don't know what makes you work. So, I could come up with some idea of what a consequence might be but maybe that wouldn't actually help you, maybe it would. So it's better you choose if a consequence is needed."...The idea was really to move away from just a straight detention to more like a reflection time and building of capacity.

The natural consequences of these self-directed plans can trigger further levels of discipline, the principal explains, if a student receives three to five RMT forms for the same issue:

then it gets escalated to a meeting with myself or [the vice principal] because then it's something that's an intense pattern... Of course, every time they come back they should change their plan, because, okay you tried that and obviously it didn't work because you're here again. So those conversations students really don't like to have... they're really embarrassed to show up again and say this is the same problem... So the consequence then becomes a question: Is this really helping you change?

These conversations, he says, can "unearth a bigger issue" that is the underlying cause of the target pattern of behaviour,

a thread that, when you pull it, is connected to another big ball of something that has to be dealt with... If [problematic behaviour] is connected [to a bigger issue] then we do whatever it takes to resolve that issue because all of our efforts are about resolving the issues to release the capacity of the students.

Together, consultation and reflection are intended to help students critique individual and collective patterns of behaviour. These practices are meant to raise students' consciousness of the dimensions of social forces that impact their lives and the manner in which they are responding to these forces. Important in this process is an appropriate balance of open-mindedness and critical thinking, to which I now turn.

*Open mindedness and critical thinking.* My analysis suggests two indicators of students' growing ability to assess and understand issues with wisdom: open-mindedness and critical thinking. The mingling of these concepts in the data suggests that both are vital for wisdom; neither alone is sufficient. The principal considers learning to think carefully to be a necessary twin to openness:

So one thing is being open... and the other is learning to think, which is a very important thing. Sometimes when I see people do really outrageous things or I myself do something that [makes me] wonder "what was I thinking," what I suddenly realize is that I wasn't. So how do we develop this capacity to think about what we're doing in relationship to the future, in earthly relationship to our own integrity, so that we have an integrated self with a clear moral purpose?

According to the principal, a relational process of consciousness-raising occurs in consultation, through which individuals develop capacity to contrast their beliefs with others' and judge the merits of each, coming to a decision about whether and how to adjust their previously-held views in light of new insight. He highlights that this capacity is characterized by a willingness to set aside a defensive posture in favour of openness:

We have a concept of the highest level of moral development as being able to hear diverse opinions without feeling threatened, really being open and seeking out all diverse opinions and then developing, of course, the capacity to know what you think, what you believe.

At times, he says, this mode of analysis will lead an individual to adjust one's perspective when the merits of another view become evident. The capacity to hold to one's beliefs in response to critical reflection and/or to adjust them when warranted is a form of consciousness-raising described by the principal as a "love for truth":

It's the unconscious elements of our life that become the most dangerous in the long run. So helping all of the students become conscious is important so that they feel like,

not that they have to defend their view, but that they're conscious of their view in relationship to other people's views and they've reflected on it and feel that they should keep holding it or developing it... We tell them that they have to be lovers of truth above all else and that that's not always easy. And it's not easy because we have blinders, and those blinders are the unconscious part of what we're doing.

Further, he mentions how these blinders can inhibit growth: "We have to make [beliefs and values] conscious. We have to make it real. We have to really examine ourselves and understand that those truths have to be applied and deeply understood in order for us to grow." Conceptions of truth, in this sense, are progressive; individual belief systems evolve throughout the lifespan and developing wisdom is "a lifetime process."

From a student's perspective, Jonas describes how consultations at NCA are "elevated conversations" that can feel like "meditating with a group of people." In these spaces, he says, "you're all putting forth your opinions but in such an open environment that everybody can build off it... All these ideas come out that you may not have thought of." Rachel also links openness and collectivism to consultation, emphasizing that "the power of consultation is very strong" and is "a spiritual way of dealing with things because everyone's equal, and no one gets into an argument." Amelia talks about how careful facilitation in WCC helps discussions become "more of a consultation" even when two opposing sides emerge on a topic; in one such case, the teacher "kind of made us think that we were both right... which was really frustrating [\*laughs\*], but eventually he tried to... make the situation logical, you know, to make sense out of it." Through this type of conversation, she says, every student ends up "feeling you have that support... you can see that open door that's telling you to go on" to learn new things. She contrasts this approach to a teacher validating one side or the other: "It's not just like 'okay, what you're saying is not right at all ...[which can make the student] get defensive or either shut down." Instead, the type of facilitation she experiences in WCC "helps [students] to say just whatever it is that they have to say" because they can assume as a "given" that there is a "sense

of understanding” that the classroom is open to diverse viewpoints in order to identify strands of truth that can link them.

Critical thinking is also vital to building understanding because NCA does not subscribe to boundless moral relativism; not every opinion or position is seen as true. As is discussed in greater depth later in this chapter, the principal emphasizes that “some standard by which to discriminate” is needed for wisdom. Prejudice, for example, is explicitly identified as problematic in curriculum and consultation, as is backbiting. What is prioritized, however, is for students to explore ideas with guidance from each other and from teachers, to determine where they will draw lines between views that are helpful and those that are harmful. Although the data do not indicate the extent to which moral relativism is bracketed by teachers and students, they do indicate that NCA aims for open-mindedness guided by a critical mindset. Another indicator of consciousness-raising in the data is the ability to analyze context and root causes of issues.

*Analyzing context.* In line with the principal’s account of school structure, students’ ability to analyze contextual features of social issues is an indicator of their growing capacity for critical consciousness. Aiden talks about how a vision of how one can contribute to a better world is enhanced by understanding real-world conditions and how existing systems influence efforts to make change:

Understanding more about how the real-life system works can help bring that vision [of how to make a difference]. There’s a big difference between... having a certain idea of what you want the world to look like, but it might not actually work like that in real life because a system is already in place. So you kind of need to understand how things already work before you can change them.

Adam also describes the value of learning about social issues: “It’s important to know that these things are happening in our world, and it’s important to know that our world is not such an ideal place to live in... [the] world has its problems too.” Inga talks about the value of doing

service locally and through the WCC-11 trip to learn about the world's problems close-up:

Yes, Nancy Campbell has openly talked about these social issues... it hasn't been hidden, but I think, until you go out into a community where these things are happening on a daily basis and... you talk to them about what's happening, you don't fully understand the extent of these problems.

Students at NCA grapple with the serious problems occurring in the world and their implications for their own lives. Indeed, students' willingness to identify and discuss such problems in our interviews (e.g., terrorism, corruption, sexual violence, racism, etc.) suggests that attempting to exclude these issues from schooling would be denying an important dimension of their growing understanding of the world.

Such social issues have greater and lesser direct impacts on students' lives and, as a result, the school environment. The students describe to me how pornography was one topic brought to the level of the school for consultation, after its use began to become an issue. Like the problem of backbiting, described previously in this chapter (Box 4.1), use of pornography was raised by the administration during a morning assembly for a whole-school consultation. In this instance, the vice principal took the lead, framing the issue in terms of social justice and the effects of pornography on those exploited by its production and those influenced by its availability. He then facilitated a student-led consultation about the impacts of this issue. Selena describes how this consultation impacted her and others' understanding of this issue:

I was very surprised at how well it went. I honestly thought people were going to be really immature... but people really took it as an issue that needs to be raised. I think [the consultation] really did have an impact. I honestly learned so much about pornography. I didn't know anything, like I didn't know the impact it had on people... We watched this TED Talk of a guy who was once addicted to pornography and then stopped... And then [the vice principal] said a couple of words and then we just discussed it. People had a lot to say. I think people knew, or after that understood the

importance of knowing how much it impacts people. It was very mature I think... It was the students [who did most of the talking].

Although the range of moral questions entailed by pornography and other sex work was not deeply explored through this consultation, the implications of pornography as a social justice issue and its influence on students' thoughts and relationships were examined and students' ability to think critically about these contextual issues, alone and collectively, was fostered.

*Analyzing root causes.* Another indicator of students' growing critical consciousness, according to the principal's account of NCA structure, is their ability to analyze the root causes of existing social reality. As Aiden says, an important step in critical thinking is questioning the origins of unjust social conditions: "It's a question of why this exists... and where did it come from." Chantelle examines the root causes of violence and war, including those motivated by religious extremism and racism:

In the future we wouldn't need attacks, you know, like the Paris attack, like terrorism things. People do that for God; they think that this is better than service. People are so into God that they think [the world is] going to change if they kill people. We live in a society where killing is the answer, but that's not the answer, you know. People don't realize that war is not the answer... It [changes] the country that has power, but the countries, they're always fighting with each other... because we are from different nations, we're different colours.

She contrasts these beliefs in the power of violence with beliefs in the power of service and community-building: "Once we compare fighting with community building, with service, you know, you see service growing, you see [people] are becoming better people, they are growing. But when you go to war [no one] grows...". Gina also discusses the power of service, alongside its limitations, and the ability of collective service to alter the roots of community and society:

It's great to do service and help other people, but if you can't inspire other people to want to be the change then what is the point? Because if we have 50 people that want to

do great things in the world and they serve their whole lives and then they die that's great and that might be helpful for a short period of time, but unless you can inspire - not even just inspire, but help people recognize that they themselves can be the change as well, and that they have so many things to offer I think that's the most important thing.... Everyone can [serve] in different capacities and different areas... It's not like "Okay, a group of us from [NCA] are going to come and do service in your community and we're going to help you." It's like "Everyone can serve their own community."

Considering the high value placed on service by NCA, I was struck by Gina's critique of its power, and how she described its effectiveness as being conditional on its ability to instigate collective action and communities becoming protagonists of their own progress. This analysis is echoed by Inga, who critiques the impact of the WCC-11 service trip and expresses hope that the conversations begun through the trip "go a bit further, to talking about how they can change it and getting people together to help fight those social issues." She acknowledges that the short length of the trip - 10 days - limits its impact on the deep-rooted issues of any community but how their efforts might nevertheless add to local conversations about positive change: "We were only there for such a brief amount of time and we only had the time to do the dances and have a few conversations. Hopefully they continue talking about it. It's the spark that makes the change."

*Simplistic analyses.* Although the data just presented suggest that NCA contributes to students' ability to analyze the complexity and root causes of social issues, in general, students' interview data at times reflect a simplistic understanding of the complexity of social problems.

In some cases, this simplicity is born from an idealistic vision of the power of positive forces, disregarding the complexity of societal issues, as in this statement from Jared: "Equality: Men and women, if we were to unite then that would solve that problem." Although true in a broad sense, his statement obscures the multitude of challenges to deal with in pursuit of equality.

In other cases, students' simplicity of analysis excludes systemic factors, instead focusing on individual-level dimensions. Aiden, for example, while aptly attributing the extremes of wealth and poverty in the world to the forces of capitalism, then describes "selfishness" as the root of capitalism and the key target for change:

Capitalism is motivated by making money and so people do whatever it takes to keep their money and make more of it. And, basically that selfishness is at the heart of [capitalism] and addressing that would probably be a great way to start getting rid of [the extremes of wealth and poverty].

Although this statement might be valid, it is limited in its analysis. In Inga's discussion of poverty, we also see a focus on the individual-level: "People who are struggling to provide for their families and themselves need someone to help them. I think they're stuck, probably not much motivation to do much... It's hard to start once you're in a really tough place. It's hard to try and get to a better place." Although clearly marked by compassion, her statements attribute lack of social mobility to individual failings, rather than examining the systemic issues that impact people experiencing poverty, regardless of their motivation and effort.

These types of simplistic analysis indicate that NCA could enhance its impacts on students' critical thinking by including more discussion of the systemic impacts on social issues, although the curriculum required by the province, especially for WCC-11, is focused on the individual-level and can therefore create barriers to greater structural analysis.

***A standard for judgment.*** The second dimension of NCA's approach to developing wisdom, according to the principal, is "identify[ing] the principles being violated or needed" or "being able to understand what principles apply to [a problem's] resolution." These processes speak to the importance of establishing a standard for judgment based on principles, knowledge, and values that become clear through consciousness-raising. The principal emphasizes the importance of such a standard in order to understand the world:

Of course, being open could just allow you to be... open to everything but you have no



idea what thing is a good thing... That would mean, therefore, that there must be some standard by which to discriminate.

According to the principal, such a standard provides the basis by which an individual can think through the merits of truth claims and various opportunities for action. In this view, a moral standard provides values and principles that facilitate critical examination of lines of thought and action in light of their implications for the present and future, for oneself and for others. Here we see a close relationship between critical consciousness-raising, just described, and establishing a standard for judgment. Integrity of purpose is the goal, says the principal, which requires a consistent yet evolving pattern of thought and behaviour.

NCA sees the development of a standard for judgment as offering a wide path, along which there is room for diversity of thought and action. The data indicate that structures such as the moral dilemma exercise provide opportunity for students to grapple with complexity, ambiguity, and emotion to identify principles of their evolving standard. Other structures, such as NCA's Moral Capabilities Framework, provide a scaffold of existing principles that can guide students' thinking as they develop their own standards. In tandem, these activities are key to NCA's approach to help students develop their standards for judgment. The following subsections describe these structures and their impacts.

*The Moral Capabilities Framework.* NCA offers a standard intended as a scaffold for building wisdom. This is the Moral Capabilities Framework (Appendix A), which is Bahá'í-inspired and aligns with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although it shares terminology with the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, it arises from a different tradition and is not affiliated. The Moral Capabilities Framework used by NCA was originally developed by Núr University in Bolivia and was adapted by NCA with the addition of a world citizenship component, reflected in the value of unity in diversity. Because of its roots in human rights, the principal suggests that "we don't try in any way to impose any standard other than a world standard that's agreed to by all the nations, which has to do with respect."

The 19 capabilities included in this framework are grouped into five dimensions: transcending ego toward self and selflessness, living a life of rectitude and discipline, reflecting consistently toward truth, loving yourself to love others, and contributing a sense of justice and beauty (See Appendix A for the full framework). The principal emphasizes that the Framework's breadth is both its strength and its challenge in a school setting:

Even in developing the moral framework we have to be open to [reflection] - Is it doing this job? Is it serving this process? Sometimes I think [the 19 capabilities] are too complex to be kept in mind. But at the same time, I look at the moral capabilities as a world view and a way of getting to a world view. And so they have to be very comprehensive. It doesn't mean that [the students] will get all of them or use all of them, but you do get to know that these are tools that you can wield when you need them. And you also have to [reflect] whether, with that framework, if you encounter any situation can that situation be handled with that framework? To me that's important.

Considering the challenges resulting from the comprehensiveness of the Framework, the principal emphasizes that these capacities are intended to shape the NCA environment in implicit ways, as well as explicitly whenever possible.

The students describe the ways in which the Moral Capabilities Framework impacts the school environment, from their perspective. Aiden says that the administration holds the school community accountable to the Moral Capabilities Framework through an "underlying message of upholding certain standards... So the staff and students definitely are thinking about those things, but no one's like, going through the list of moral capabilities... It's more subtle that going down the list." Instead, the influence of the moral capabilities originates from the administration, and, "depending on what kind of behaviour the administration tries to reinforce, then that also comes from the students eventually." He gives the example of school cleanliness and how a push to keep spaces tidy and free of clutter originated with the vice principal, but "eventually the whole school just looks better because people are keeping track

of their own things and putting things in their lockers instead of around the school.” He describes how it took time for this matter to resonate with the students, who were primarily motivated at first by avoiding the hassle of having to reclaim their things if they were cleaned up by the vice principal, but how “people do want to have the school clean, it just takes a lot less effort than you think, but at the same time takes a lot more effort to make that first change... After that it’s fairly natural.” Aiden associates the simple issue of school cleanliness with the underlying standards of the school, how they include “stuff about orderliness and neatness... because [the administration] knows that’s important in this environment.”

Although students discuss NCA’s Moral Capabilities Framework broadly, when I asked about its specific statements a few students mentioned that they do not know them well. Selena says “They’re amazing, but I don’t know how much [students] are actually aware... [of] how much the school actually revolves around those capabilities.” Amelia mentions the benefits of the Framework – “It helps because... [I] see how I can take care of my mistakes and stuff like that” – but, like Selena, questions how familiar students are with its components: “I don’t think the school or the students are being reminded enough of the moral capabilities, which they should actually because they’re very universal and people should actually follow them.” She suggests that a visual display listing the moral capabilities would be a helpful reminder of the Framework, similar to an existing display at the school that lists virtues such as kindness, courage, and truthfulness:

They have a frame of the virtues and the administration should actually have one of the moral capabilities too... If you’re just walking by you can see one of them and you’re like “Have I done this this way?” or like “Oh, maybe I should start doing it that way.”

Another suggestion Amelia makes for promoting the Framework is to have a “moral capability of the day” announced during assembly “and then, you know, there’s the challenge of spending the whole day doing [it].” Selena also suggests a visual display of the moral capabilities, as well as the idea of the student council preparing themed assemblies on the different components of

the Framework. These comments and suggestions indicate that students value the moral capabilities, even though they are not always well-versed in their specifics, and have ideas for their promotion in the school that could contribute to the administration's efforts to enhance the effects of the Framework.

The moral capabilities are also presented as a self-assessment report card, to be filled out by each student with the support of a teacher-mentor. The report card asks each student to rate themselves on the 19 capabilities, both as they see themselves and as they believe others see them. The teacher is then meant to debrief with the student, discussing strengths and areas for growth, as well as any discrepancies between the self-perception scores and other-perception scores. The principal emphasizes the intentionality and importance of having the report card be a self-assessment, rather than being filled out by the principal or a teacher:

In reflecting on how you do a report card on moral capabilities, we looked at what principles were involved, and one was no one should evaluate somebody else's moral capabilities; so that would mean it would have to be a self-reflection...

The inclusion of others' perceptions is also significant and intentional, based on the principal's understanding of self-concept:

...the way we form our opinions of ourselves from a psychological point of view is from our own view of ourselves as well as the view of significant others. So that's why we designed the report card to say "as I perceive myself" and then "as others perceive me" and then we clarify with the students that it is as significant others.

The intended result of completing and reflecting on this report card is to provide students with an opportunity to evaluate their current patterns of behaviour in light of the standard provided by the Moral Capabilities Framework. In this light, they can make plans for change to help them reach new heights of moral capability. The ability to choose lines of action with conscious regard for their coherence with one's values is a key dimension of NCA's vision of wisdom.

*The Konstanz moral dilemma.* A second school structure that students tie to the

elaboration of their personal moral framework is NCA's use of moral dilemmas. Based on the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (Lind, 2005), the principal explains that NCA's moral dilemma activities aim to help students see the complexity of world issues: "The moral dilemma discussion is another way that we help students see that it's not black and white, it's not simple. There are many opinions." To begin a moral dilemma activity, students are presented with a real-world problem and two possible responses. I observed one such activity when the issue at stake was related to the Syrian refugee crisis, specifically as it manifested at the France-England border, where a large number of refugees were living in dire conditions, with neither nation willing to accept responsibility for their status or well-being. After hearing some details from each country's perspective, students were asked to side with England or with France. They then gathered with the other students who had chosen the same position and discussed their reasoning in small groups. Students then presented their views to the other side, one-by-one, without opportunity for rebuttal or confrontation; the activity is not intended to be a debate, instead simply providing space for the presentation of opinions and views, as well as feelings and emotional reactions: "They are very emotional issues, so emotion is perfectly welcome," says the principal, "but the emotion has to be conveyed with due respect for the rights of others... [otherwise] you've gone over a line and you're not empowering others." At the end, students are asked whether anyone would like to move to the other side of the room, given what they learned during the discussion. The group then debriefs as a whole, guided by a teacher.

The moral dilemma activity is another example of NCA structures that help students balance openness and critical thinking, in the process of developing a standard for judgment. It encourages students to become comfortable with ambiguity and a state of continual learning, hearing diverse opinions and adjusting their convictions in light of new insights. In the principal's view, this activity greatly contributes to the students' skills for wise decision-making because they see how even large and complex issues can be better understood through

careful analysis:

Youth learn that every problem, no matter how big and difficult, with the right structure and the right method, can be solved. And when you have that confidence then you start to embrace that process and you start making sure that you're not violating it because you've seen it work.

In terms of a standard for judgment, the principal intends for this experience to contribute to students' capacity to analyze issues in light of an evolving conceptual framework.

Data from the two student focus groups provide rich description of the students' perspective of this activity and its effects. Students describe the moral dilemma activity as "fun" and "exciting" as well as "overwhelming" and "tricky". They emphasize that their reactions to the exercise depend greatly on the target issue presented, some being "clear cut, whereas others aren't as definitive." In the latter case, the issues can be "really sketchy" and ambiguous; students report difficulty in grappling with all of the information presented, and highlight that there are inevitable gaps in their knowledge. Reflecting on the dilemma of whether France or England should claim responsibility for an enclave of Syrian refugees at their border, Adam expresses his frustration in our interview with the challenge of making a call on such a complex issue: "That one, there was no knowledge behind it. Basically we just knew some events... But I don't think [students] knew anything else about it." Other students report the benefits of having to choose a side in these issues, even with incomplete information. During the same refugee-crisis moral dilemma, a handful of students chose (against instructions) to sit in the middle of the room, rather than choose a side. One student who sat in the middle reflects on the thinking that might have motivated this indecision:

We didn't want to pick a side, but that's like our sense of ignoring the issue, our sense of being very oblivious to it. So by saying "Oh we don't have a side" It's like playing it safe: "I don't know what happens, I don't really care."

Reflecting on subsequent dilemma exercises, when all students chose one side or the other, this

same student reports how the experience shifted through the act of choosing a side, making it more personal:

Picking a side made me feel like I had more control and I was actually aware. And by picking a side, I also felt more emotions because I knew the conflict. I knew the result if I picked this side, [that] this many people were going to die [hypothetically] and it kind of hurt but I had to make a decision.

Another explanation suggested by the students was that hesitancy to engage with the issue, evidenced by sitting in the middle, could be attributed to some nervousness with their peers and unfamiliarity with the school:

That was at the beginning of the year. We were still getting to know each other, still were maybe a little self-conscious about it, [about] who we are, because we don't know who's around us. We don't really know what environment we're in, if we're getting marked on this; we're at school, right? ...So maybe that had an influence on it.

Another student describes how "it takes a certain amount of courage to be able to show what your values are in front of people that you've only known a few months" and speculates that the goal of building courage and bringing students together are reasons why NCA conducts this activity with the whole school during the Wildfire retreat at the beginning of each semester. As students build their relationships with each other and their understanding of the purpose of the moral dilemma exercise, however, they say that they come to identify the skills that are fostered by this activity and can become deeply engaged in the discussion:

It's an experience in building the different skills, problem solving skills... sometimes it's not even about morals, it's about the process of going through that debate, the process of speaking up for yourself, the process of letting other people speak and challenge your ideas and you're challenging other people's ideas.

In terms of students' experience of the activity itself, then, the data suggest that there is variation in students' authentic engagement with the exercise, ranging from self-conscious and

guarded as they are getting to know each other and the school, toward more courageous and engaged as their consciousness, confidence, and skills increase.

Specific to their moral framework, some students see the exercise as an opportunity to gain new insight and refine their ideas: “We discuss and we see different points [of view] ... and then we can also change, you know? Sometimes we change our mind and then we go sit on the other side.” Others, however, feel strongly that the moral dilemmas raise their awareness of their biases and values, rather than instilling new values or conveying a specific moral framework. The moral issue at stake “triggers” students’ biases and values: “We instantly have a strong opinion about [the topic]. It’s like there’s something inside you that triggers and based on your morals and your experiences you choose a side for a reason.”

Other students look to their teachers’ opinions, especially those of the principal and vice principal, to gauge how to respond. This tactic can become difficult, albeit interesting, when teachers disagree, as in the case this student describes:

It [was] a debate between [the principal] and [the vice principal]... They have different opinions and you can kind of see it... At the end of the dilemma, if [the principal] sides with the side I’m on, I feel like I won the debate.

Another student critiques this tendency as “an appeal to authority” and “a predictable bias” that “doesn’t have any grounding on the [moral dilemma] argument.” In my observations, the teachers and administrators were careful to prioritize the views and voices of the students, but would share their perspectives, either as another participant in the activity – in the case of teachers and vice principal – or at the students’ urging, in the case of the principal. In sum, the students’ comments describe three routes by which the moral dilemma exercise influences their moral frameworks: by introducing new information that changes their minds; by raising consciousness of their existing beliefs and values; and by exposing students to the views of their school’s leaders, thereby swaying their attitudes, at least in that moment.

Beyond the confines of the activity itself, data indicate that lingering questions continue



to impact students' moral frameworks. The focus group with the grade 12 students indicates that the moral dilemma exercise engages students' thinking in questions of right and wrong, and the value of moral relativism. One student suggests that the activity is an exercise in relativism, and the judgment of right and wrong depends on one's values and character traits:

Both sides are wrong and you're supposed to pick which one's more wrong... The reason it's a dilemma in the first place is because of your own morals. Let's say if you don't really have morals, you're only a selfish person, then you'd usually be able to say this person gains more [and that's better]... But if you're going to make it a dilemma then you have to try and respect the victims in each situation as much as you can, and you just have to make a decision as to which one will be slightly less disrespectful.

A second student disagreed that both sides are wrong in every moral dilemma, but agreed that deciding which side is right is relative to your moral framework:

It's relative so both options may not be true to your morals, but one may be more akin. So that option is [better], relative to the one you disagree with. That one is right and [the other] one is wrong.

A third pushed back on the concept of moral relativism conveyed by these students:

I think that the concepts of right and wrong are black and white already. If you start making this relative then it's no longer about moral principles that you're trying to stick to these things. If you start making things relative then it's more about making compromises with yourself so you can see how you can save more people.

I include these comments to illustrate how moral dilemmas help students grapple with moral questions, even beyond the boundaries of the activity. It is not clear from my analysis of the data whether there are sufficient supports for students to explore these questions in follow-up conversations. The data indicate that the moral dilemma activities bring questions of moral belief to the forefront of school life and are significant in the school's approach to building capacity for wisdom. These findings from the student data suggest that the dilemma activities

provide compelling thought exercises for the students as they encounter the cognitive and emotional impacts of making wise decisions, even when hypothetical.

*A standard for personal decisions.* In our interviews, eleven students describe several ways in which their experiences at NCA influence their efforts to establish their own standard for judgment and its impacts on their choices. For Darren, the school's moral framework and the related emphasis on spiritual development have brought up questions about his own character and the principles by which he lives his life. These questions have helped him build on childhood guidance from his parents, who "told me if you want to be a very good human being, you should have very good personality [character]. You should have a spirit of helping others. If you have the capability to help others, you have to do that." Since arriving at NCA, "the rules" by which he wants to live his life have been "growing in my heart, but it is not completely good [finished]. It's just growing in my heart." Christine also describes the development of her internal framework, which she calls her "moral bottom line" and how, during and following her time at NCA, "I don't want to break those. Even though [I will be in] really hard situations for me to choose or make a decision, I will based on [my moral bottom line]."

Jonas also discusses how NCA contributes to his self-confidence for making choices, as in a situation where he had an option to do a year of service in China after graduating, or start at university, which is what he chose:

I feel happy [about my decision]. There's no right or wrong decision, which I feel good about. That was something that I also learned at Nancy Campbell... false choices. There's no right or wrong answer. You just do what you feel like you should do. When I got the opportunity [to serve in China], I was like "This is confirmation. Service came to me." Then I was like "Wait, no. I don't think I actually want to do this though. I have a feeling this isn't right for me."

He goes on to express how it is "scary" to think that he might have made a different decision because of others' expectations or external pressures:

When I told some people at work, they were like “You’re going [to China], right?” and I’m like, “I think so. I don’t know.” They’re like, “You have to choose quick” and I’m like, “I know, I only have three days.” It was really stressful but I came to a decision.

Amelia also discusses the importance of an internal “flow” that does not uncritically conform to others’ expectations: “It’s also good to have your own flow, your own rhythm to carry out your own life... I want to be myself. I don’t want to do everything that [others] are doing.” These data suggest that NCA students are actively engaged in the ongoing development of an internal conceptual framework that guides their decision-making, aiding them to make choices that reflect their values and goals, rather than succumbing to other influences.

**Taking action.** The third dimension of NCA’s approach to developing wisdom, according to the principal’s account, is “figur[ing] out what actions... we would take to change what we’re doing in order to have it reflect what we now understand” or “mak[ing] a plan of how [a problem] is going to be resolved.” As such, the ability to translate knowledge into action is an important capacity to be built in pursuit of wisdom, in tandem with the two dimensions already described: consciousness-raising and establishing a standard for judgment. According to the principal, a capacity to make careful choices based on critical consciousness and a standard for judgment is central to wisdom:

Wisdom comes about from not knowing everything you can do but deciding what you should do. Of course, it’s always helpful to know everything you can do in order to make that decision but the far more important thing is what you actually do, and how you chose that option versus the many others that are possible.

The principal has observed that, for many students, the limiting factor when they enter NCA is knowledge of what steps to take, rather than willingness to act for the betterment of the world:

One of the parts of [the intake interview] is “Do you see yourself as someone that wants to change the world?” And of course it’s a big question... Most of them say yes... But a lot of them say “But I don’t know what I would do or how I would do it.”

The task of the school, then, becomes one of inspiration and skill-building, helping the students determine their “path of service”:

So, then I say that the school has the responsibility to structure creative opportunities in consultation with [the students] to inspire that to happen and to help figure that out...

What we need is a willing person who wants to be of service, and what we must creatively do... is figure out what would be inspiring, what would be meaningful.

In the process of moving from choice to action, Amelia identifies how wisdom, in contrast to intelligence, allows one to not only generate ideas and make choices, but also to carry out lines of action with excellence: “I’m smart enough to do this, but am I wise enough to carry it out?”

This section presents data about NCA structures that promote wise action.

Although consultation and reflection build capacity for critical and open thinking, and a standard for judgment provides a benchmark against which to evaluate the quality of one’s choices, further structures are needed to provide sufficient space for learning through action. The principal highlights how, at NCA, service provides a pool of experience that can become the source of insight through reflection:

We need to have at least this much service so that [students] have at least some experience as to what service is about. Then [they] can reflect on that experience... If we haven’t really done anything we’re not actually reflecting on anything, just reflecting on our imagination.

Divorced from action, values and intentions can become hollow and hypocritical, never tested or revised in practice; in the principal’s view, coursework would ideally be linked to students’ lives and behaviour to avoid this effect: “I never want a course, an academic course, to simply be academic. I think humanity has the ability to make things academic as if that’s meaningful and not relate it to their life.”

Because of this intention to link academics and action, one structure that has persisted throughout the recent history of NCA is the requirement of 50 hours of service per year for

each student. This contrasts with the Ontario Ministry of Education's requirement of 40 hours of service over four years. The principal describes how, in the very early years of the school, the administration encouraged this amount of service "sheerly by talking about it and its importance." As the student population grew and this strategy became unwieldy, making the 50 hours mandatory has been, on one hand, he says, "a disservice for us to make things obligatory and not [just] inspire students to want to see the beauty and the joy of and the happiness of it" but necessary, on the other hand, "so that students would actually know they had to do it." As a result, motivating students has become a question of how to "get to the 'want to' as opposed to the 'have to'."

One dimension of motivating students to serve is helping them identify the contribution they want to make to the world: "One thing," the principal emphasizes, "would be to never depart from inspiring students to see that they have a contribution to make, and finding exciting things or ways or structures that would encourage them." Students' involvement in conceiving and planning service project ideas is also seen by the principal as important for motivating students' desire to serve:

When [the school is] developing or designing a [service] project, [students] have to be involved in that consultation because you want them to choose something that they think they can do. And [I am] less concerned about what it is they choose... I'm more interested in seeing that there's motivation behind it.

This approach to working with students to develop service projects is primarily used with grade groups, which meet weekly to plan projects to be implemented monthly. These projects count toward individuals' required service hours, but to reach the 50-hour requirement they also need to engage in other service, either in the school itself or in the wider community.

Another dimension of helping students develop capacity to serve is assisting them through challenges and failures, which students describe as an inevitable result of being willing to try new and difficult things. This intersects with a theme discussed earlier in this chapter, of

NCA as a safe environment for development. Gina talks about how multiple structures in the school community are available to support students through such experiences:

[The school] guides you through [challenges] in a safe environment... [If] you get discouraged, you talk about it with someone else and you share your stories, or you go and talk to the principal or the vice principal, or you talk about it in assembly. It helps rebuild you and it helps [you] to understand that everyone goes through that; it's not just you. That's been super helpful here.

Jared also talks about the impact of the school on his attitude toward challenges, and how a spiritual focus "puts everything in a different perspective." When he is having difficulties, "when I am let down or I am angry... I don't necessarily always see the deeper purpose" to these challenges. "If I were to, that would help me out, because it brings everything back [to] positive... [to see] that this is happening to you to actually help you strengthen." Seeing that "bad things have a deeper purpose" helps him be "more positive about everything" and find opportunities for learning and hope even through challenges and failure.

As these dimensions of student development suggest, the role of action in NCA's approach links naturally to their evolving framework for judgment. In this view, coherence between judgement and action is important for wisdom.

*Coherence between judgment and action.* According to the students, there are close links between the elaboration of one's standard for judgment and service. Coherence between one's beliefs and actions are clear in the students' data as a vital quality for wisdom. Selena explains that any given situation requires one to choose what values to enact and how to do so:

A concept I learned my first year was the higher and lower nature and choosing, like, you have the power to choose and you can choose whether you want to listen to your lower nature or listen to your higher nature... You have the ability to either make a good difference or make a bad difference.

Rachel also emphasizes the importance of choice, highlighting the influence of her faith as a

Bahá'í on her beliefs and choices:

[My faith] influences a lot because you know you have to have good morals and you know all the rules that are set up, but it's your choice whether you want to follow it. It's between you and God.

Jonas also discusses the influence of Bahá'í principles on his growing appreciation of the rationale behind certain moral principles: "You read why [Bahá'u'lláh's] guidelines are put in place with reasons that they are to help us to grow and to be safe through our lives, to end up helping society and that sort of thing." Understanding these underlying reasons for the guidance and rules of their faith helps Jonas and other students choose to align their behaviour with their beliefs. Aiden says how his belief that God "cares what happens in this world... impacts the way I try to relate to people. I try to be a quote-unquote 'good person' just because it's the right thing to do for my belief system." For these Bahá'í students, translating religious beliefs into action shapes their efforts to build coherence between thought and behaviour.

The student data indicate that they are thinking not only about how they currently translate their beliefs into action, but how their capacity to do so develops over time. Rachel discusses the influence of her beliefs on her ongoing development, how she is "trying to be better every day" and the important role reflection plays in this process: "That's why the power of reflection is so important because you reflect on yourself every day to see what you can do better the next day." Jonas talks about how reflection contributes to the ongoing refinement of his character and behaviour, helping him grow into the person he wants to be. For him, reflection through meditation plays a major role in identifying areas where he would like to grow and improve:

[Meditation] gives you that warm feeling. It makes you happy [and] helps you reflect on things ... You really do start thinking a lot more about other people and how to help other people... Or you even just think about yourself... like maybe yesterday I wasn't as patient. When you're meditating you can recognize that and say "Today I'm going to

focus on that.” It influences the way you act that day, or even the day after, or even maybe it can influence you for a very long period of time... Finding these things and then changing the way you act... it influences the way you will act later in life.

Gina describes the process of deciding who she wants to be as a major focus of her time at NCA, “so that by the time that I’m done school I have a clear vision of, okay, this is what I want to do with my life, this is how I’m going to do it.” She emphasizes that her time at NCA “is a really good time to reflect on that.”

These comments indicate that the capacity to weigh and balance different interests and responsibilities contributes to an integrated identity, one in which a consistent self comes together across diverse lines of action. As the principal explains:

Teaching the skills of managing our state and helping [students] to see that they are multifaceted individuals, that they have many things that they can do, and that to be a well-developed person means that you’re multifaceted... [being] able to relate to different things and keep the right attitude to achieve them.

NCA’s emphasis on service, for example, comes into relationship with its emphasis on academic excellence. Striking a balance between service and academics is an institutional responsibility, as well as a task taken on by students and teachers. This requires that students develop patterns and skills that effectively balance these responsibilities. Box 4.2 presents NCA’s approach to promoting students’ capacity to balance the competing concerns of academic success and excellence in service. The goal, according to the principal, is to come to think of the harmony between these domains rather than their competition, to develop a values framework that orients the individual to consider both their personal progress and the wellbeing of others, and to act in a manner that works toward goals while promoting continual learning and engagement in personal and collective wellbeing and development.



#### Box 4.2. Promoting Harmony between Academics and Service

NCA's model of service shapes students' priorities. For example, to reach 50 hours of service per year, students must plan throughout the year to balance their academic responsibilities with the commitments they make to short-term and ongoing service projects.

The principal describes how students grow from the challenge of balancing these tasks:

There was a point where I felt we were doing so much service... I was worried about whether or not [the students] were doing enough academics... But what I found was the opposite was happening: ...because the students understood the meaning and purpose of what they were learning [in classes], they were able to do things faster and better and more sensibly, more integrated into actual experience in the world.

Especially in the more clearly related courses, such as WCC, service is intended to provide a context in which the purpose of course content becomes apparent. The knowledge and skills gained through, for example, preparing a presentation on racial inequality for class, are quickly made relevant by, for example, serving a junior youth program that engages young people from diverse backgrounds.

According to the data, tension between service and academics is an ongoing site of institutional learning and experimentation. One teacher observes, in regards to the "interplay" between academics and service, that "I don't think the school has found a balance yet, and maybe it never will, but it's an interesting juggle... The constant, never-ending juggle." During the first semester of the school year, NCA was piloting a new service model. It required all students on scholarship or bursary to serve the junior youth empowerment program; they trained as animators (facilitators) of a junior youth group. According to the principal, the school took this approach "not because our students aren't motivated to want to do these things but [because] Nancy Campbell is a place where you could be so distracted by a million things to do." Despite good intentions, however, problems arose over the first semester that led to significant changes. Motivation for service was one dimension of this issue. The teachers comment on how

this “experiment” was problematic because it required students to engage in a specific form of service, regardless of their intrinsic interest in junior youth groups. One teacher highlights the importance of the “spirit with which [service] is done”:

I think last semester was an interesting experiment, trying to get people to do service because we say so, versus [them] coming with an open heart that really wants to be there. The difference between a kid who wants to do something and one who has to do it is mind-boggling... It changes the whole energy of service.

Another teacher, who had worked closely with this group of students, describes the change that occurred when the requirements were shifted, in response to what had been learned first semester, to give students more say in their path of service:

It didn't work at all [last semester] and I was chasing people around the school... [saying] “it's all organized, where are you?” and they're like “oh, it's now? It's today?” ...So then when we changed it to just the Tuesday meeting where [we say] whoever wants to do community-building stuff just come and talk about it, share your ideas and make plans for the next week, one week at a time – it has drastically changed. Now there's a core group, they're dedicated... it's been amazing... [Even if] I'm not there they have the meetings. That would not happen last semester.

This experiment and its alteration in response to learning demonstrates how the ongoing creation, revision, and enhancement of structures at NCA is experienced by teachers and students to align personal and institutional action with underlying values. In this case, the early frustration of teachers and apathy of students indicate that the institutional strategy of required involvement in the program was ineffective or even counter-productive to the school's goals regarding service. The process of recognizing and responding to these indicators yielded deeper insights into how NCA's belief system – which emphasizes multiple dimensions of adolescent development in concert – is best translated into its activities. The implications of

this translation process for the environment were clear, especially to the teachers who noted benefits for students' teamwork in the field of service, as well as improvements in their own relationships with students. By returning to a choice-driven approach to participation, the principal responded to the leadership of the teachers guiding this process and thereby reinforced teachers' and students' agency in selecting and committing to a path of service. Although both strategies – mandatory and optional service – reflected different dimensions of NCA's belief system, the learning generated through experience with the former indicated the need for a change of course to preserve the wellbeing of students and the school in the long-term. Through collective responsibility for the wellbeing and progress of students and the school community, therefore, a course correction ensued, and students engaged in the new pattern with vigour.

The capacity to make conscious choices in the face of varied lines of action requires a capacity to manage one's attitude in response to different circumstances. The principal describes how the WCC-11 service trip often acts as a crucible for many students, as they develop this capacity in the face of very challenging service:

[The students] had to think in a certain way to be able to achieve [their goals], to rise above the formidable obstacles to deliver what they were trying to do... looking at the higher purpose of what they were doing.

Beyond simply assisting students to accomplish their goals, the principal explains that NCA conveys to students that the spirit in which they serve determines the outcomes of their efforts, "so they're very aware that their attitude determines the results. It's not just magical." This emphasis on helping students cultivate the ability to consciously assess and manage their attitudes, the principal says, is intended to cultivate wise decision-making and ongoing wellbeing regardless of changes in circumstances.

*Reframing thought and action in light of service.* According to the principal data and my

observations, regular and frequent service experiences are intended to engage NCA students in a continuous learning process. Rapid cycling between theory and action, supplemented by opportunities for reflection, aim to support students' academic development, skill-building, and career plans. This theme of cycling between theory, action, and reflection is also evident in Box 4.2's description of how service and academics are balanced in the school through ongoing institutional learning. At the individual level, by pairing academics with service – making both substantial in students' lives – priorities shift and students begin to plan their futures with service in mind: "They might become a banker, but they'll be a different kind of banker," says the principal. This principle is reflected in one student's comment during her valedictorian speech, recounted by the principal: "When I came to this school in grade 10, I was going to be a business woman. Now I'm going to be a business woman, but I'm going to be a business woman that really helps other people and makes a real difference in peoples' lives."

Similar to reframing career plans in light of experiences with service, the life history interviews indicate that students reframe their previous exposure to community involvement as they engage with NCA's model of service. Having been a beneficiary of service, for example, especially in childhood, gives students a more positive impression of the value of service and the importance of becoming personally involved. Rachel describes how being a participant in children's classes helped her growing up: "When I was a kid, I was in children's class and people would come and serve and teach. And that would just make me feel really happy. So then that impacted me a lot as a kid." Her initial experiences with service as a participant in the junior youth (JY) spiritual empowerment program have likewise inspired a positive relationship with service: "I joined a JY group and started getting involved in service and learning what service was... Those years were some of my best years... turning into a teenager... The JY program really helped me." Selena also describes the importance of the JY empowerment program in her life and how it motivates her to serve:

It did make a big difference in my life. I learned things that I wouldn't learn anywhere

else. I think there are a lot of kids out there that need that sort of education, and I feel like they want it but they don't know where to go, and I feel like, yeah, that's sort of my way of giving to the world.

Selena also reports how, as she grew into adolescence and came to NCA, previous patterns of service – both giving and receiving – became more conscious and purposeful patterns of life:

Whenever my mom talked about service with me [growing up] I would be like “Oh yeah. Service is good. I have to do it.” And then when I came [to NCA] it became a pattern in my life I was like “Whoa!” ...[I'm] realizing now how much she focused her life on service, but at the time I thought it was just like what moms do.

Overall, the life history interviews indicate that many students come to NCA with some familiarity with service, often determined by the words and actions of their parents and by firsthand experience as beneficiaries of others' service. Students' formative relationship with service is often unconscious, however, and becomes more evident in their lives in response to NCA's emphasis on service.

**A world-embracing vision.** As mentioned, NCA added unity in diversity when it adapted the original Moral Capabilities Framework for its school. In addition to the applications of this value to the school's relational environment, described later in this chapter, NCA broadens this concept to consider the global dynamics of world citizenship. In this view, the data indicate that a world-embracing vision is central to NCA's approach and that it intersects with wisdom in its connotations of consciousness-raising, moral judgment, and taking action for collective wellbeing. These are themes discussed in this section.

**Encountering and appreciating diversity.** The principal explains that NCA's approach to world citizenship education is informed by the Bahá'í teaching that one should “let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self.” This concept is woven into many dimensions of school life, he says, including the diversity of the school itself as an international school. Students encounter and appreciate each other's cultures through formal

school structures (e.g., celebrating Chinese New Year, including diverse foods at the cafeteria, matching boarding students from different countries as roommates) as well as informal social structures. Students also encounter diversity through the WCC-11 service project, as described by the principal:

When students go and do that service overseas... it is powerful because they see another whole cultural context and they see the struggle of another whole people... Because they serve with [locals] they get to make close friends [from that place] and it's probably one of the most powerful bonds [of the trip]. They're able to see that we're not so different between different peoples. We have common human needs and struggles. The scale of something might be different in one place or another but the struggle of building community and caring about our communities and making differences is everywhere.

As this quote expresses, such encounters are intended to build students' appreciation for diversity while cultivating a sense of the unity of humanity that transcends differences.

The life history interviews indicate that, as an international school, NCA builds on the previous experiences of those students who had already begun to develop a global identity. For some students, like Gina, moving around to different countries had helped her feel "like everything is connected":

I've traveled all over the world in the last few years and I've never felt like it wasn't my home... I've never felt like I'd go to a place and I'm completely from a different planet. I always feel like there's some type of connection.

Although she had already considered herself a world citizen, coming to NCA has helped Gina feel a sense of purpose in bringing together her multiple cultural ties:

I've always considered myself, like "oh yeah, I'm such a world citizen. I've been to all these places. I'm so cool." [I've had to] realize, yeah sure you might have many different cultures in your life, but if you're not using them to connect the world and you're not

using them to really serve the world, then what's the point? ...That's my biggest reflection this year... How do I use the beautiful things in every culture [in my life] to really help the world and serve?

Inga has also lived in several countries and describes how her multi-national upbringing led her to identify as a world citizen before even learning the term at NCA:

I'm from a lot of countries... I kind of already consider myself a world citizen. I don't consider myself just [one nationality]. I'm kind of like a mix of everything, so there's always going to be something different about how I do stuff when I'm in a country.

She went on to describe some ambiguity in her citizenship identity when trying to tie it to one country or another: "I don't know where I'm from. I feel like I'm just from here; wherever I am I become accustomed to the ways and I adapt easily."

Similar ambiguity of identity arises for other students, sometimes for reasons tied to the politics of their country of birth. Chantelle critiques the rampant corruption of her home country and how it led her to choose to come to Canada for high school:

It's a country that has a lot of corruption and it's really bothering me. So I kind of ran away from that. I know I should stay and fight it but I believe that if I stayed in [my home country] I wouldn't be the person I am today.

She also analyzes her country's tendency to "mix culture with violence" and how prejudice leads people to "feeling this thing about different nationalities, that one is better than the other" and how that influences the social environment of youth: "I used to be very violent because I was in this environment where everyone beat each other." These experiences form a backdrop for engagement with NCA's emphasis on world-embracing vision.

Adam also shared with me the identity dilemma that marks his life history. Adam is the son of a mixed-race couple from two nations in conflict: "Sometimes I imagine myself, like my face, as two sides...". His identity dilemma crystallized when his cousin was killed in a war between these two countries, by soldiers from Adam's country: "I don't know how to feel about

that... I don't know who to support... I'm somewhere in between." When I asked whether he would like change his response on the demographic form to include both countries, he chose only to list the country of his birth:

I was born [there] and everyone calls me one... I have to accept what happened, and I have to accept that I'm half-half and I have both nations' blood in me... But it's mentally challenging for me to say that I'm proud of [my birth country] or I'm proud of the actions of its residents, because I'm not. I'm definitely not.

He tells me that being in Canada has helped him deal with his identity struggles, and that the diversity of NCA has helped him become more accepting of other cultures:

I have a different mentality and different traditions, but we're all people. We all have hearts, we all have brains, we all have ears, eyes... Maybe different skin colour, but it's not something that's very different... Everyone can develop a very open-minded mentality, their spiritual side, as well as anyone else.

The depth of experience and analysis demonstrated by the students in regards to national and cultural group memberships suggest that young people can have complicated relationships with national and cultural identities, and they bring these relationships with them to their schooling experiences.

Language differences are another aspect of diversity that students describe as building both walls and bridges among students. This issue is especially pertinent at NCA because of its ESL program. Box 4.3 provides an example of students' reactions to the question of separation between Chinese and non-Chinese students in school activities.

**Box 4.3. The Question of Separation Between Chinese and non-Chinese students**

In my observations of the student body, there was a visible separation between the Chinese and non-Chinese students. In assembly and in the cafeteria, especially, there were clear groupings defined most obviously by language differences. Although race is another explanation, those Chinese students with stronger English skills were most likely to be sitting



among the non-Chinese students, or at least to visit with non-Chinese friends before sitting down. In fact, the more I observed this apparent separation, the more cross-overs I saw, especially during the transition periods of the school day – on the way to sit down for assembly, in hallways between classes, and in the gym after school; in these spaces there was cross-cultural and cross-language mingling in one-on-one and small-group conversations. I was interested to learn from the students about the relationship between the Chinese and non-Chinese students.

Speaking to several non-Chinese students, my initial impressions of a separation were supported: "...it's hard for them to socialize too because they're speaking Chinese so they like hanging out with each other" (Chantelle); "I'm close with the Chinese people now and I know that they will sit together and they won't separate unless they're pretty much forced to" (Jonas); "There's a group of people that try to incorporate [everyone] but there's another group of people that don't see the importance in that, so there's a big line between the non-Chinese and the Chinese students" (Selena). Other students, including Chinese and non-Chinese, dispute that the grouping of students represented any fundamental separation. In response to hearing that other students had described this type of separation, Christine, who is Chinese, disagrees:

I don't really think so. I think we like to stick together because... maybe we experienced something we want to share with our really good friends in our mother language. [We] will speak, and really feel like [we] are talking comfortably. So I don't feel like it's a separation... I feel we are really a part of the school, no separation.

Darren also describes the language barrier as a key reason for the tendency of the Chinese students to group together, but rejects the idea of a sense of separation:

We always sit together... but we are not separate [from the] other students... We don't feel separate... [but] sometimes when we get to a new place we feel lonely and we are going to find somebody who can talk with you. Even though you are able to communicate

with the foreign students, you still don't know how to say what you are thinking with your thoughts in your mind to them.

In our second interview, Darren describes more how the "foreign" (i.e., non-Chinese) students helped him feel welcome and part of the school when he first arrived in Canada:

When I first come to Nancy Campbell, I don't know anybody. Also, I don't know any English. But all the foreigner friends, all the foreigner students come to me and introduce themselves to me... I [was] a new student with poor English in Canada... I don't know the roads, the way to school... I also don't know how to buy some life stuff... All the Nancy Campbell students taught me. That's why I learned. After coming to Nancy Campbell I learned how to help people, because the people always offer me a lot of help.

Chantelle, who is not Chinese, also believes that day-to-day separation of Chinese and non-Chinese students does not represent a deep disconnect. She describes how Chinese students had led the whole student body in a spontaneous bonding activity at the end of the previous school year:

At Wildfire we had this connection... We did a circle and one of the Chinese people said "I'm going to miss all of you guys; you guys are part of my heart" and then [another Chinese student] was like "okay let's everyone repeat: together, together, always, always, forever, forever, together always as friends" [and] everyone was saying it... I'm always going to remember that... it was so meaningful.

These data suggest that the evident separation of Chinese and non-Chinese students does not reflect an underlying divide, but rather emerges as a social support for students whose first language is Chinese.

Overall, students' previous experiences with cultural diversity, international politics, and societal issues such as prejudice and violence are integral aspects of their reactions to NCA's approach to fostering a global vision. Encountering and appreciating diversity is not

sufficient, however, to build this capacity. NCA's underlying value system is a further dimension and orients a world-embracing vision toward social justice.

***A global vision of justice.*** The principal identifies an underlying emphasis on social justice as central to the school's approach to world citizenship education: "We are looking at every person becoming interested in social justice if we're going to make world citizens." A social justice education, in the principal's view, involves critical examination of social structures and issues, related to the consciousness-raising dimension of wisdom, discussed earlier in this chapter. A world-embracing view of social justice is integrated into the school's WCC courses, which are central to the school's approach to world citizenship education. WCC-12 builds on the work done in WCC-10 on examining the historical and societal dimensions of world religions and in WCC-11 through emphasis on human development and the service trip, discussed previously. Jonas describes how the years of WCC contribute to an arc of development:

For [WCC-10] we talked about world religions - we focus on all the religions and all their beliefs... Then [WCC-11] you learn about the process of a human's life from birth to death... [and] you do the service trip, which I guess also is a part of becoming a better person and learning to help people... [WCC-12] was really broad. We did a lot. It was a lot of theories. It was more social justice issues we learned in WCC-12... equality and justice and that sort of thing.

In WCC-12, according to the principal, the curriculum is meant to "try to get [students] to understand that these problems are more complex than you think... that we've got this aggregate problem of what's going on in the world," introducing them to the systems and stakeholders that influence social issues: "There are policy makers and people that are trying to figure out how to structure things so the world could become better... even though there are all kinds of other motives mixed in there that we can [examine]." Inspiration for world vision, in his view, comes from connecting one's choices to broader implications for social justice:

Some people think that Bahá'u'lláh says “Let your vision be world embracing rather than confined to your own self” because He wants us to be happy and open-minded, but I think [it asks more of us]. I think when we look at the aggregate problem it really impacts us as to what we have to change... Unless we see where [our choices] take the whole world, we won't reconsider.

As such, he says,

the goal of [WCC-12] is for [students] to see from a world-embracing view: “Where is the world at?” “What is it really grappling with?” “What are the conditions people are living in?” and “What ever happened to our [collective] will, that we would accept that the world is like this?”

One step in developing a world-embracing vision, then, is to identify global social issues and identify their implications and root causes, parallel to the discussion of wisdom above.

A key service-related attitude evident in the data is students' orientation to the reciprocal relationship between their personal development through service and the progress of the collective, or common good, that is being served. One teacher describes how important it is for students to build their capacity to hold these dimensions in balance or in productive tension with each other as “yin and yang”:

You have to make sure that you balance the community and your individuality constantly because if you don't balance them, it's like a yin and yang, never have an extreme otherwise you're going to have problems, massive problems. Too individualistic: problems; too community oriented: problems. And [the students] actually learned to recognize it.

Aiden describes how he sees service as a key tool to “improve the world and not just improve your own condition” and how a collective feeling can emerge from service, “knowing that you're doing your part [in your community]” and knowing that “if a billion [people around the world] are all doing something, that's a pretty big, significant thing.” Service is a bridge, he says,

allowing individuals to act “for a greater purpose than themselves” because world citizenship “is not just about helping people, or about those particular people, but about working towards the betterment of the whole world and [we’re all] just doing a smaller part.” Mindfulness of contributing a small part in a global effort for justice is conducive to balancing the yin and yang of personal and collective development, because it helps the students frame their efforts within a broad vision of grassroots change. Christine explains how this perspective has changed her relationship with the world:

Before I came [to NCA] I don’t feel I have too much relationship with the world. I’m just a little one; I can do nothing to help the world. I feel too small to do it. But, after I came, I realize it’s not [that way.] Even though a person’s small, compared to the whole world or the whole earth... we can still do some small changes in our community. A person, when you say [it] is small, it is small. But when you say it’s big, it’s pretty big as well.

The important focus, says Amelia, is on “performing tasks with love... [to] benefit others and yourself... you’re not just thinking about yourself or you’re not just thinking about other people, you know; you’re going both ways.” She emphasizes the importance of using one’s talents to serve others, not just oneself, a sentiment echoed by Darren:

Everybody wants to be [an] important part of the world, but it depends on if you’re a useful [person]... Other people need you, the society needs you... [People] can help people by their capabilities and they also can make money for their own family. They can [help their] family have a great life, and can also help other people... That means the person is a useful person.

As they come to see themselves as connected to a global movement toward justice, the data indicate that students bring their talents, responsibilities, and goals into harmony, identifying the positive impacts of service on both personal and collective wellbeing and progress.

These data indicate that willingness to critically examine current conditions, a social justice orientation, and an orientation toward personal and collective progress through service

are key ingredients in NCA's approach to building students' world-embracing vision. These three dynamics are parallel to the three elements of wisdom already described: building consciousness, establishing a standard for judgment, and making choices for action. Students and teachers describe how these values and processes are experienced in the context of NCA school structures.

***"Your first identity is a member of the human race."*** The students discuss what world citizenship means to them and how NCA has impacted their own identities as world citizens. Christine discusses the importance of developing a world-embracing vision in order to "see things in a larger picture – not just consider[ing] a family or a country, they will consider the world, the trends, the patterns." She uses the language of family to describe humanity; "each person," she says, "is a world citizen because we only have one earth and we all live here. So we're here just like a family, a world family." Amelia also uses the metaphor of a family to capture her sense of connection to the world. In your family, she says, "you would want to know that they're all okay... that they're not going through a crisis without any help. You always want to be there for them." This is how world citizens view the whole world, according to Amelia: "Humanity would be their family."

With a view of humanity as one family, a world-embracing vision can also expand to include temporal dimensions, as well as spatial. Gina emphasizes how a spiritual connection to future generations is a dimension of a world-embracing vision:

A lot of the time people just think about their own lives and they think "Okay, I'm going to be alive for another 60, 80 years and I'm going to have kids or grandkids and they're just going to have their own lives." But when you think of a world vision... [you] are thinking so far into the future [because world citizens] want what's best for the world, not just in our lifetimes, but for the world.

Inga echoes this emphasis on intergenerational vision, thinking about her generation's responsibility to the children of the future: "I think now is the time that everyone... in their life

should work towards trying to make the area they live in and even the whole world a better place for the new people coming into the world, [as well as] the people already here.” These data suggest students’ consciousness of the implications of both space and time as dimensions of world citizenship.

Teachers describe how, through NCA structures, the value of unity in diversity naturally includes the world, rather than being confined only to in-school dynamics. This counteracts any inclinations toward an “us versus them” attitude in students, says one teacher, by “embrac[ing] all views as... legitimate because you have this idea that it’s not just us or just them” who can be correct on matters of belief. As this teacher describes, at NCA “there’s always the idea of searching and longing to understand from all sides of the sphere, which is just a beautiful concept [and] actually very rare in discussions on spirituality.” This teacher highlights how diversity and a global vision is

the centre point of the school itself, not just a periphery issue, like “well, we should probably teach all sorts of religions, right?” No. We are teaching other religions and we’re all seeking an understanding that other religions have tenets that we would never think about because it’s a different cultural setting.

Diversity of views that includes religious and cultural differences around the world is, according to this teacher, central to NCA’s approach to building a world-embracing vision.

In keeping with this point, several students describe how rejecting an “us versus them” identity is an important dimension of their development of a world-embracing vision. Aiden talks about how world citizenship requires that “you understand that your first identity as a person here isn’t being a member of a country, but just being a person - a member of the human race who lives in the world” and then “treating people as such.” He emphasizes that “you don’t have to let go of your country or your culture or your background or anything” to do this, but that it is important to be aware of how those dimensions can become “a barrier to associating with other people.” “If,” for example, he says, “you don’t know how to talk to people

outside that context, that could be pretty limiting. Or, if you are scared of anything that's different from what you've seen growing up, then that could also be limiting." World citizenship is "more of a mindset than something that you just are," he says, because "no one gets a world citizenship card. At least not yet."

Students describe how avoiding an "us versus them" attitude is also fostered by rejecting systemic prejudices that see some groups as being more capable of contributing to society than other groups. Selena highlights sexism and racism as problematic in this regard, because they lead to systemic assumptions about who has capacity to make a difference in the world. She talks about how all of humanity can contribute to progress and how problems can arise "because all of humanity is every single human being in the world, so if [some people] are not seen as people that contribute in the same amount, in an equal amount, then it's going to be unbalanced." Gina also sees the potential for world citizenship all around the world, bridging differences of belief: "In any country you can find people like that. It doesn't have to be Bahá'ís or it doesn't have to be Christians. It can be anyone." Connections grow from these sparks:

It's those types of people that when they're in communities they influence a lot of other people and they bring that light to that community and it sparks this flame and that's what connects everyone. Because even if there's one person like that in every community in the world, the world is going to naturally become so connected because everyone would share that sort of world vision.

These students see themselves in this role and how their responsibilities in this area will shift and grow as they emerge from school and begin establishing families and careers.

***Recognizing privilege.*** Another dimension of moral development raised by the students is the importance of recognizing one's privilege in order to appreciate what you have and empathize with others. Inga discusses the global nature of relative privilege and how it's important to avoid the complacency that arises from ignorance of others' suffering:

It's important to be aware, like if there's a war in a different country and a whole bunch



of people are dying, you can't just remove yourself from the situation and say "Well, I'm not from there, I'm from Canada." I think you need to think about others who are less fortunate than you, others who are going through harder times than you. Whenever you're okay, someone might be starving, and whenever you're comfortable in your home, someone might be in the streets.

According to the students, NCA provides opportunities to become more aware of their privilege and translate this into authentic relationships and service. Gina expresses how her experiences on the WCC-11 service trip raised her consciousness of the privileges she experiences:

I was talking to [a local youth] and we were talking about what we were going to do after school... He was like "So, what are you going to do when you graduate" and I said "well, I want go into [field of study]." I said "What do you want to do?" and he was like "Well, not everyone has it set out like you guys have it."

She realized on that trip that ignoring the personal and structural limitations others face can be inauthentic and disrespectful to the people she meets, and that "real conversations" are challenging, but more genuine:

In the past I've always tried to make people feel better about their own realities, so when somebody would tell me "I don't have the chance to be a doctor" or I can't do this or I can't do that, I would always try to be very nice and say "no, you can do whatever you want to do"... Something I learned in the Bahamas [is] that it's more genuine to have real conversations with people and really talk about their reality.

Service, she says, is an opportunity that she has in common with everyone, and a place where everyone can apply their skills and talents:

I found it was better to just talk about service... You have so many capabilities and you can do all these things but how can you do them right now? Talking about service instead of just saying "Oh yeah, I'm sure everything will work out. Everything is great."

Jared also discusses his evolving self-concept while on the service trip, and how he saw

himself as a “messenger” rather than a “saviour.” He describes how this mentality “keeps you in the right place,” “kept the ego checked,” and “kept everything in perspective properly.” A saviour mentality, he says, would have been disrespectful and inauthentic to pretend that, as a Canadian, he is not affected by the social issues about which they perform:

I can't go act like a saviour when I also have the same problems that these people have. We all have the same problems in Canada. It is not like we are going to be the saviours and save these [\*sarcastically\*] “poor third-world country people.” It wasn't like that. Instead, he says that his goal was “to raise awareness about all these issues: gang violence, drug abuse, equality between men and women. Also, just talking with the people themselves” to learn more about their reality. “The message was just, I don't know, unity. Just bringing unity and happiness.”

In another vein, Jared also discusses the privilege of being at NCA and the importance of appreciating this opportunity, especially in light of the experiences of a close family member, which paint a picture of how Jared's life could have been:

Being at Nancy Campbell has also been a privilege in itself, just the opportunity. If I look at someone like my [family member] who has been a huge part of my life. Me and him are very similar people... [but] since he went to public school, he just ended up going down a harder path than I ended up going down... I realized how privileged I am.”

He is cognizant of the effects of this privilege and how the path could easily have been different for either of them: “If I were to go to public school I would probably end up in the same position he is in. If he came to this school he would be in a better position.” Adam also refers to the benefits of being at NCA and living in a privileged country, and how realizing these privileges can build empathy for others and motivation to make a difference:

You have this amazing experience here, but imagine if you wouldn't have it... Or imagine yourself taking away all of these opportunities in this country and moving yourself to another poor country which doesn't have any opportunities, where kids and people find

their own opportunities, which is not that easy. Imagine how hard it would be for you and for other people to live in these conditions. [NCA] makes you think how it is for others to be like that... which motivates you to help them.

On the topic of how consciousness of one's privilege motivates service, Selena also talks about how the privilege of being at NCA nurtures a humble attitude of service:

Realizing how blessed I am allows me to, sort of, I don't know – I don't want to say “help others” because that makes me sound like I'm superior, but I guess, be humble and continue serving and always being aware that everyone is the same, everyone is equal... It really all comes down to the spiritual aspect of things.

These comments demonstrate students' willingness to consider privilege in the context of service and global injustice, which I had not explicitly included in the interview guides.

***A sense of responsibility.*** As in the discussion of wisdom, the data indicate that knowledge is not enough to establish a world-embracing vision; conscious knowledge is crystallized and elaborated through practical application. Earlier in this chapter, I described NCA's emphasis on service for fostering wisdom by learning through experience; service is also intended to contribute to students' sense of purpose in relation to global conditions and sense of responsibility for fulfilling this purpose. As the principal describes:

My goal, which is the goal of the [Bahá'í] Faith... is what the House of Justice, [the central administrative body of the Bahá'í Faith], said in a letter: “The time has come for every human being to be responsible for the wellbeing of humanity.” That's my goal... It's easy to see that just as a nice set of words, but I think it's an education imperative. Whatever we have done in our education system has created people that accept the deplorable, [who] excuse themselves from feeling that they can have any effect, or [who] have been overwhelmed by the idea that systems will take care of the world... Whatever we've done to disconnect people from their personal responsibility has to stop.

A sense of responsibility is not meant to be burdensome to the individual in this view, instead

becoming a natural expression of one's values and lived experience:

[Building a sense of global responsibility] has to be so attractive and so empowering that it becomes like the [WCC-11 students] you were talking with yesterday, [who said] "Now I know what service is. I can't wait to do more of it. It really is the only thing that makes any difference. It really is the meaning of things." To me, you couldn't ask for better than that, because it keeps them doing better, it's a commitment to doing better.

NCA's intention, then, is to help students develop a picture of world issues and their solutions in which every individual can, and should, play an active role.

As students develop an awareness of their place in the world, including their privilege, and a growing sense of self-efficacy that they can translate their beliefs into action, they describe a commensurate increase in their sense of motivation and purpose to play a positive role. Adam says that, just by nature of living, "you are an impact to Earth throughout all your life, so whatever you do it is an impact to what will happen to the future." Darren agrees with this relationship and sees it as an opportunity "to make the world better because I always believe that I am part of the world, so I can make it better because I can make my part to be good" by being a "useful [person], and... [being] good for other peoples." Selena sees this sense of purpose and responsibility as a characteristic of world citizenship:

being a world citizen is the understanding that we're all in this together ... Everyone has a responsibility and everyone has a role and it's a matter of whether you choose to fulfill that responsibility.

A sense of purpose, in this view, canalizes one's feelings of responsibility toward lines of action that can prevent the tendency to remove oneself from this picture. A sense of purpose, says the principal, makes every individual an agent of change, who can overcome obstacles to achieve goals: "Everything we try to do in terms of [NCA] structures is about trying to build capacity... to overcome whatever the obstacles are to reach the goals [the students] want to achieve." Of course, for the students as young adults, such goals include personal aspirations for academic

success and future careers; but the principal emphasizes that NCA is also trying to “start [the students] thinking that they have to focus on some higher purposes, not just on whatever is happening [in their own lives].”

Such higher purposes, when informed by world citizenship, the principal says, “include all of humanity... looking after the welfare of all... developing empathy and compassion.” Furthermore, such higher purposes are meant to be motivated by more than praise and reinforcement from the school or other external sources, which involve “appealing to the egos of people.” The principal sees this approach to motivation as “an easy sell” but “not very sustainable” because “maybe an individual gets fired up about [the goal] but then [later] that individual leaves the group.” Instead, he says, sustainable motivation comes from within:

I found that [students] got more motivated as they did service to know that they could do things, they could offer things. That caused me to start saying to the students, “This is not a place where we do things to you but where you learn to do things for the world.”

And we all learn to do things for the world.

Through internally-driven motivation, then, individual and collective purpose and volition can be built to contribute to the well-being of the world. In this manner, students’ capacity grows to overcome inertia of inaction.

**Summary: Wisdom and a world-embracing vision.** As summarized in Appendix B, these data empirically identify two key constructs related to NCA’s approach to building capacity for students’ engagement in the twofold purpose: wisdom and a world-embracing vision. At NCA, consultation and reflection are employed in a variety of structures as the primary tool for consciousness-raising. The degree to which students bring their agency to bear on these structures through participation in structure influences the impacts of these activities on the students, on the school environment, and on the administration’s ability to translate its values into practice. Reciprocally, the capacity of the institution to create engaging spaces that challenge students and call them to higher levels of thinking and action impacts the evolution

of students' standard for judgement and ability to act in response to heightened consciousness. In response to the first research question, therefore, my first finding provides insight into the relationship between structure and agency at NCA and how it impacts students' growing capacity for critical and transcendent engagement in a twofold purpose, as demonstrated in their patterns of thought and action. I interpret these data further in Chapter 5.

### **Finding 2: The Purpose is Potential**

My second research question concerns the mechanisms through which school structures and their underlying vision become represented in students' patterns of thought and action. This question has three elements: the underlying vision of the school, its representation and expression in students' thought-action patterns, and the mechanism that connects them. My second finding relates to these three dimensions: Releasing young people's potential is the goal of both the school and the students and is felt through structures and experience. In this section, I present data to support and elaborate this finding.

First, I draw primarily from the principal's account to describe NCA's core precepts: that its purpose is to release human potential through capacity building that is oriented toward wellbeing and justice, and its environment should be structured to promote these aims. There are strong parallels between the goals of NCA and the twofold purpose of personal and societal wellbeing and progress I described in Chapter 2. The data indicate that NCA's emphasis on wisdom and a world-embracing vision – described in the previous section – is intended to build capacity for this twofold process. I focus in this section on the principal's description of how structures are created and refined to work toward these goals.

Second, I present data that illustrate the vision students have for their own development. The data indicate that students arrive at NCA with goals and a vision of their own progress. Students aim for personal development primarily in two areas: branching out from parents and overcoming negative "teen culture." All of the students describe NCA as contributing to their personal development in these and other ways. Drawing primarily on the

life history interviews, I describe the different paths that brought these students to NCA and the common threads that link them once they arrive. Third, I highlight the ways students become active agents in the co-creation of the school environment as both a cause and outcome of their development. I describe elements of individual agency and the collective experience that characterize the dynamics of co-creating the school environment.

Overall, these data provide insight into the ways that students come into relationship with NCA and its structures. In this section, I focus on how convergence between the common goals of the school and the students contributes to a reciprocal relationship of mutual influence between school and students.

**NCA's transformative centre.** According to the principal, the “transformative centre” of NCA is a vision of “building capacity” and “releasing potential” of young people. He describes how decisions about structure emanate from this vision:

To me, the purpose of structure in a school should be the release of human potential: the fanning of the flame of talents and capabilities, and the extension and broadening of knowledge for whatever the [students'] interests are. The development of discipline in the pursuit of those interests, but with joy.

A second core dimension of NCA's “transformative centre” described by the principal is nurturing an orientation toward social justice and world citizenship: “We are looking at every person becoming interested in social justice if we're going to make world citizens.” The development of capacity and the release of potential, therefore, is not considered valuable purely in itself; such development could even be considered harmful, the principal argues, if students become highly effective at using their skills, talents, and interests to exploit others for personal gain. NCA holds a core belief in the potential of young people to be a source of social good, for the mutual benefit of their own lives and collective wellbeing.

A high vision of the potential of youth is vital in school administration, according to the principal, because decisions about schooling begin with beliefs about youth – how they learn

and what they can understand: “if you believe people cannot act in a wise way or make good decisions, then you treat them like that.” These low expectations “cause schools to create a whole bunch of structures... the goal of which is to try to motivate, channel, [and] create responsibility.” In effect, such structures “create a consumer mentality... [in which] teachers often proceed to wonder why students don’t become engaged or don’t want to say anything in class.” At worst, such structures “alienate, create resistance, create anger [and] frustration.” As a result, he says, “what we’re seeing in a lot of schools is that that’s how people relate to education and, certainly, it doesn’t create empowered learners... It creates a whole mediocre system. To me, all of that has to be reversed.”

The students report the effects of mediocre schooling in their own life histories, ranging from ambivalence, to dissatisfaction, to deep alienation (Box 4.4). Their comments illustrate the principal’s description of a schooling environment that fails to create empowered learners.

Box 4.4. Students’ dissatisfaction with previous schooling approaches

“I didn’t really like public school. I just didn’t like it. It wasn’t fulfilling. It wasn’t that I wasn’t happy... it was just bleh. And the teachers didn’t care and it’s kind of ‘this sucks.’” (Jonas)

“I wasn’t happy at school. It was boring, you know, the same every day.” (Adam)

“School was... a little bit overwhelming. But boring at the same time... [the teachers] wrote a lot but they [didn’t] speak and explain much. So I was bored.” (Shane)

“It really put hard work for you. You just memorize it, then you take the test, then you graduate. No other skills or capabilities are developed.” (Christine)

“In my old school what was important was your grades, whether you were smart or not, that was important. But we never thought about leadership.” (Chantelle)

“I didn’t do homework and sometimes I did something in school, something that annoyed people, annoyed the teacher, so the teacher doesn’t like me.” (Darren)

“I got bullied... I was very angry.” (Chad)



“[My old school had] really strict teachers and was really strict altogether... they always thought the worst of us and never gave us the benefit of the doubt... there was no trust between the teachers and the students.” (Inga)

**The role of structure.** Despite his critique of overly-structured environments, the principal in no way rejects the importance of structure. Instead, he emphasizes that its creation must be “mindful” and informed by a lofty vision. He marks the importance of “systemic change” and how “there are lots of good conversations going on in every school” about how to better serve students’ development. He suggests that schools tend to be “trained in mindlessness” and that there is little opportunity to “create mindfulness” in school settings – for administrators, teachers, and students to contribute to conditions that are based on a high standard of potential. “There are so many things [we] can create [in schools] just by the contingencies we outline,” he says, and by elevating institutional assumptions about young people as learners:

I think a school environment has to focus on [creating mindful structures] with the expectation that the people they’re dealing with want to be mindful, want to have a better life, want to be happy, want to be excited about what they’re learning, want to have different ways of learning so they can get even more excited.

At NCA, the principal says, these beliefs and assumptions about youth are translated into school’s structures: “All the structures that we’ve created at Nancy Campbell, to me, have that focus: support focus, nurturing focus, encouragement focus, moving away from a critical focus. Critical thinking, yes, but not critical of individuals.” NCA expects that, to the degree that its values are translated into practice, high quality school structures will promote students’ positive development.

**The art of administration.** In order to mindfully translate its vision of a high standard of schooling into day-to-day school operations that foster positive development, NCA operates

in what the principal calls an explicit and deliberate “learning mode” to translate the goal of releasing potential into practice. To make learning central to its operations, the principal describes how NCA has had to avoid uncritical acceptance of existing approaches to schooling, especially during its formative years:

All of our structures really were considered in a revolutionary kind of way. No structure of how a school has been would affect whether or not we kept doing it. In other words, the structures are a servant to the process of creating wise leaders that make a difference in service.

This approach has required the reimagining of many taken-for-granted concepts of schooling and their integration into the broad process of building young people’s capacity. The principal emphasizes that translating these concepts into structures has required a learning orientation to continually assess what activities best serve the school’s core goals:

If it’s an administrator’s task to organize space and time to release potential, then that has to be something that we pay a lot of attention to. And that we weigh each of these structures in light of our goals and objectives and their effectiveness to release that potential. And, because everything keeps changing as people evolve and develop, the things that you might have created earlier may not work. But the ones that are key, they withstand the test of time. So there’s quite a few of those that we’ve been doing for a long time.

Such key structures, he says, “pass on like invisible DNA... As an administration you’re looking for those things. They have to be praised and encouraged. They have to be developed, supported, [and] acknowledged to be increased.” For example, the teachers describe how connections across grades are fostered by the students themselves, who pass this element of culture down to new students:

There isn’t a division between older kids and younger kids. The older kids have benefitted from being tutored by the older kids when they were the younger kids, so

part of the culture has passed along because... they become the older kids and train the younger ones... I don't know if as teachers or adults we could create that, but they've created it themselves.

Administration at NCA, then, is not seen as a top-down system of static structure, but rather as complementary and responsive to shifts and movement in the school community. In this light, the principal describes administration as “an art.”

As an art, he says, school administration “is not formulaic... it’s always evolving and changing as humanity is evolving and changing.” The principal encourages this attitude in teachers and administrators to reduce any tendency to blame students for problematic school conditions, instead attributing causes primarily to the institutional level:

I tell the teachers, “We will not blame the students, or the environment. We are in charge of the environment. We have to figure out how to make this environment bring out the development of these students and ourselves. It’s not their fault. They don’t have the money, they don’t have the programs, they don’t have the means, they don’t have the authority. So how can we blame them? We may not be listening; we may not be able to figure out what to do but at least start there: ‘I don’t know what to do.’”

The effectiveness of structures to remove barriers to students’ development requires ongoing “tuning of the environment”, he says, based on observations of indicators discernible in the environment: “are the students showing us what we’re looking for? What evidence do we have that they are treating each other inclusively? Are there patterns that are happening that could be better?” This flow of information represents a vital aspect of structural development at NCA, one that links staff, students, and administration.

Ideally, then, the principal describes a process through which teachers and administrators at NCA “read the social reality of the students and identify anything they might be concerned about. And then by putting that forward in consultation maybe it becomes evident that some of the other teachers are concerned by a similar thing.” This approach, he

says, can lead to an analysis of the school's existing ability to address that issue:

Once we look at what we're seeing, [we can ask] is there a program that's already in place that's going to affect that? Or is there a course that's going to affect that? Or are there other structures that are going to affect that, that are going to kick in, or have kicked in, or haven't kicked in [yet]?

Or, if no existing structures will do the job, "do we have to design something that will affect it?"

Of note also is the principal's central role in the art of administration at the school level. His ubiquitous influence as principal of NCA is difficult to describe. He represents to many students both the apex of guidance for institutional, relational, and individual progress, and the source of empowerment and leadership distributed among teachers, staff, and students. Part of the principal's power as a leader arises from his talent for relating authentically with students and his ability to provide a role model at once confident and humble. Rachel describes this dynamic when describing why he is a role model in the school: "It's just the way he is. Like how he has a good relationship with all the students, and like he's so firm but he's also kind, and he always knows what to say." Through this relationship with students and teachers, the principal intentionally fosters collective responsibility for maintaining a positive school environment.

***Collective responsibility for the environment.*** "Tuning" the environment relies on the school community as a whole, says the principal: "We are all creating an environment, 'we' being everyone. That environment is the responsibility of all of us." The principal emphasizes that this mode requires transparency to make clear to students and other collaborators that learning is ongoing: "We've also given a very clear message that we don't know what we're doing. We [just] know we're doing our best to consult about what is best..." He describes how this message is communicated to incoming students to avoid breeding apathy or passivity:

I try to make sure that we don't ever present the school to new students or any students as "Nancy Campbell is it." It has to be "Nancy Campbell is something but it might be nothing this year depending on what you do."

Such an approach, he says, is intended to build confidence in the students that they can take risks to contribute to this learning process: “they’re not wondering whether or not they should step out here or [take] risks here because they know that that’s what is going to make [the school] richer and better” as experience leads to further experimentation and learning.

Channels of communication between students and staff are key to the administration’s ability to create, adjust, and enhance structures to release students’ potential. The principal describes how he tries to create non-threatening opportunities for students to share their concerns with him and other staff: “A soft touch... everything should begin with a conversation... And that conversation has to be open and non-judgmental and exploratory.” The role of the administration is “very active... but it must not be an oppressive role. It’s a very delicate balance to make sure that you don’t slide into one: not do enough, or do too much.” Much like in a dance, stepping forward and backward as needed, the administration aims to respond to the rhythms of school life in how it implements NCA’s core values and goals.

Sometimes, indicators of a problem come directly from students to the principal:

Once I hear something two or three times from different students, that’s an indicator that something is up in this area... It’s probably talked about a lot more amongst [the students] before it ever comes to that level, but I have to be responsive to that.

Other times, students’ concerns are passed on to the principal by other staff, including teachers, residence staff, and administrators. Speaking about the residence coordinator (RC), for example, who is described by both the principal and the student advisory committee as someone who “knows everything” and with whom the students feel free to discuss their issues, the principal describes the way information might flow to him:

Usually after [the RC talks with a student], if there’s a concern, she’ll let me know and we might meet together with the student or the parents or whoever might be involved... She doesn’t share everything [with me]. It’s just if it’s something that’s going to lead the students into problems. If it’s a manageable thing then she’ll just guide them because

she's a trusted person for them. She always makes it clear in the beginning that if it's something that's harmful then she must say something and so she'll tell them up front. But there's a lot of nuances of things that indicate there's something going on.

Sometimes she might just say [to me] "It might be good that you have a chat with so and so about how they're doing" and that's the information I'll get.

Through several means, then, staff and students contribute to the continual flow of information upon which the creation and tuning of school structures are based. Later in this chapter, I provide examples of how students participate in more direct forms of structure-building. For now, suffice it to say that decisions about school structures are learning-driven: anchored in the school's transformative centre and based on a collective responsibility for the quality of the environment, structures become responsive to flows of information from branching tributaries of day-to-day feedback into deeper currents of artful administration.

**Stepping out of teen culture and into NCA.** Some students arrive at NCA unaware of its emphasis on arts, service, and spiritual development, whereas other deliberately choose it as the next step in their personal flourishing in these areas. Four students I interviewed had little or no knowledge of NCA before arriving at the school. Adam knew only that it was a small school, which appealed to him, and that it was in Canada, which he preferred. Darren also knew little more than that the school had a small student body. Inga knew only that it was in Ontario; she was surprised on her first day by the small size of the school and its emphasis on the arts. Jay knew only that his mom was sending him to NCA to remove him from a negative peer group, a situation he felt was "totally blown out of proportion." Regardless, when he arrived and learned about the school's focus on the arts and service, he thought "It was different. I was like 'this is school?' This is great." With the exception of Jay, who had had previous contact with Bahá'ís, these and three other students I interviewed knew little or nothing about the Bahá'í Faith before enrolling at the school.

Across these differences, the students' data show their awareness of many social and developmental challenges and opportunities that they face as adolescents. Data also show that they seek avenues through which they might better understand and respond to the exigencies of their lives. These data demonstrate that students' experiences at NCA interact with their evolving beliefs, goals, and intentions for unleashing their own potential as emerging adults.

***Students' personal and relational development.*** Eleven students emphasize the importance of personal development as a priority of their adolescence. They identify two focus areas for their personal and relational development: branching out from parents and overcoming negative aspects of "teen culture." First, students express the importance of differentiating themselves from their parents and familiar communities in search of their own patterns of life. As Aiden explains:

We both [me and my parents] wanted me to try an environment apart from public school for different reasons. My parents' reason for it was they wanted me to also be learning spiritual values in addition to academics... I agree with that for sure – but I also really want to have space where I can sort of grow and mature and come into my own away from some of the influences I had around me most of my life... not just my parents but the same small city and so on... Just understanding why I believe the things I believe, what the most important things in life are to me, not just to my parents.

Amelia also describes how branching out from her parents, particularly her mother, has helped her reshape her family relationships in light of her growing maturity as an emerging adult:

[To my mother] life is very one-sided, there's always a right or a wrong ... Sometimes she calls family meetings and it does not go well at all. So in those family meetings I actually have a voice now. It's like "hey mom, I want to do this and this is how it will benefit [the whole family]. I'm not just thinking of myself and I'm not just living for me..." And she gets that. She's impressed.

In contrast with this emphasis on relationships with family, Chantelle describes how

adolescents' relationships with peers can become more important to them than those with adults: "When we are teenagers we only want to hang out with teenagers. We think that our friends are right and our parents are not right. Our parents are our enemies and adults are boring." This is one impact of the "teen culture" that dominates society, and that several students (9) say they would like to leave behind. Problems emanate from "typical teenager" behaviour, they say, including shallow friendships, problematic alcohol and drug use, excessive sexualization of peers, boredom, bullying, and backbiting. Darren sees the effects on youth whose lives become characterized by "a lot of things with no significance." Chantelle identifies a link between societal messages of the value of youth and the resulting patterns of belief and behaviour among adolescents:

If [youth] grow up in a society [where] people tell them, oppress them, [saying] that they can't do anything, they're not capable of anything, [then] they won't have the motivation. But, if you are growing up in a society where they're saying "You're capable to change the world" [then] you can be capable to change the world.

For some students, like Aiden, leaving behind negative aspects of teen culture is a key reason he transferred to NCA: "[I wanted to be in] a new environment where I could be around supportive and inspired and motivated people." He comments on the motivation behind friendships at NCA, for example, versus in his previous schooling experiences:

It's easier [for guys and girls to be friends] here because there's less sexual pressure of people saying "Okay, you have to get to know this person so you can do sexual things with them." It's not a good pressure to have when you're just trying to be friends... [At NCA] no one is really thinking about that on a daily basis. No one came here with a goal of trying to do things like that. That's not why we get into friendships here.

Whether students elect to branch away from a previous context, are encouraged or required to switch by parents, or arrive unaware of the school's philosophy, their paths converge when they arrive at NCA and they begin to learn together how to reshape their



personal and relational patterns of life to overcome the problems of teen culture.

***Impacts of NCA on patterns of wellbeing.*** The students identify several impacts of NCA on their ability to transform patterns of individual and relational wellbeing. Shane, for example, describes how he knows now “all the bad things that I need to avoid” in teen culture. His experience with service at NCA has not only helped him see his role in “changing minds and hearts so [we] can become better people,” but has also enriched the way he spends his personal time, making it more meaningful:

Well that’s kind of like my life before I went to Nancy Campbell – I know nothing about service. I just go to school and learn, study, hang out with friends, and go back to home and watch TV. Doing nothing. And then when I come to Nancy Campbell I know more about service and stuff... I joined [service groups] and then go to places and help people.

Anger was another target for transformation described by two students. Chad describes how being bullied at a previous school led him to lash out in anger, resulting in further exclusion, bullying, and eventual expulsion. During our interview, he describes how moving to a new country in middle school contributed to his anger: “I was really angry at the [bullying] kids. I was still angry... that I moved... I was just angry [because] I left everyone [behind in my old country].” Having come to NCA with this history, he describes how the school created an opportunity to move forward on a path of self-improvement, helping him overcome his anger: “I was meant to come here... my whole life I’ve been changing into a better person and so I feel like this is just the [next] step... I’m never going to stop growing. Never.” Chantelle also describes struggling with anger in the past, particularly toward her parents, who she considered her “enemies”: “I look at myself when I was [younger]... I love my parents, I don’t know how they could handle me. I was so angry.” She describes how anger led to other negative behaviours that have since transformed: “I don’t get rage anymore. It’s something that I used to have a lot in [my home country]. I used to gossip, backbite, go rage at people a lot.” She now recognizes that her environment had become a negative influence on her priorities:

I was very immature. I was hanging out with my friends and I just wanted to go to parties. I was very materialistic... I didn't even care about my friends anymore, or my family, my religion, my God... My dad saw how sad I was... My life didn't make sense...

[When] my dad asked me if I wanted to go to Nancy Campbell I was like "yes, I want to."

Based on my interactions with her, it is very difficult to picture Chantelle this way. Her enthusiasm and effusive compassion were palpable. Our conversations were saturated with optimism and punctuated with frequent statements of gratitude for her parents, her friends, her faith, and the school. She describes how NCA fostered this dramatic shift in her attitude and behaviour, bringing her "back to [her] childhood":

People sometimes tell me... "you act like a child" and I'm like "thank you" because I love children. They're so pure. I'd rather be like a child than like a stupid teenager that doesn't care about anything... [NCA] brought me my childhood again, my feeling of service, and I realized how happy I am when I'm doing service... To make change is so much better than going to parties, hanging out with bad people, and swearing a lot.

Across students' varied reasons for coming to NCA, they find opportunities to pursue independence and personal development. The interview participants describe ways that their patterns of thought and action are reshaped through new awareness and capacities. Witnessing these changes and resulting impacts on relationships with friends, family, and societal norms leads students to participate more actively in the co-creation of the school environment.

**Co-creating the NCA environment.** The data indicate that the day-to-day NCA environment is co-created. Students describe how a sense of collective purpose and will develops over time, promoting a sense of common responsibility and motivation; this leads to increased individual efforts to contribute to a positive school environment. In tension with this development is a tendency to take NCA structures and values for granted, leading to a mismatch between students' experiences and expectations.

**Impacts of relational dynamics.** According to both teachers and students, the quality

of teacher-student relationships interacts with student engagement and agency in the school. Jonas, for example, describes how teachers' close knowledge of the students and care for their development contributes to teachers' ability to guide students well:

The teachers, they really care about you. They want to see you grow and they want to see you develop... They get to know you more... Whereas the teachers back in public school... you don't really have the connection with teachers so they don't do that same thing, they don't encourage you to go do something because they don't really know you.

Teachers echo the importance of knowing students well and how the students "need to know that we really care about them as people first." This echoes comments made by the principal, that students should know what their teachers think of them beyond report card comments, and that the essence of this relationship should be positive and transparent. Teachers see how enacting these principles motivates students' academic engagement. As one teacher says, if students know teachers care and "that we're here to help them, they will really want to learn after that." Otherwise, "they sense that you are there just to teach and that's it, nothing else... Once they know that you really care about them, other things will just follow. [They will] want to learn." From a student perspective, Gina describes how these positive relationships enable bidirectional contributions to the learning environment, where avenues for open communication enable students to shape class content to their learning needs: "You really need to just think... if a teacher is not teaching a course the way that I want them to teach, how can I talk to them? ...That in itself builds a lot of leadership and initiative." Students' participation in shaping the learning space at this high level reflects NCA's goal of creating structures that release students' potential for agency.

***Sense of collective purpose and will.*** Students describe collective participation and responsibility for the school environment as growing in parallel to a sense of collective purpose and will. Selena describes how students "have the same needs, like [the need] to feel as if we're a part of something." Emergence of common values and goals contributes to a vision of the way

NCA life can contribute to progress toward these goals. Students' common vision drives effort to translate this vision into reality in the school environment; as one student describes, "a lot of people here are really trying to make an effort" based on "a very common way of thinking, like what [we] want the world to look like." This effort creates a reinforcing loop inspiring further effort, one student explains, because seeing other students' "enthusiasm" and "willingness to make a change, it definitely inspires you... Having people that are as excited as you are, [as] willing as you are, [it] definitely encourages you to do it all together and just do it."

Gina describes one risk in this dynamic – that common goals and norms, although influential, can be taken for granted: "There's a lot of things that people just take for granted because you see it everywhere in this school." This can lead to dissatisfaction with the school environment when negative dimensions of school life become the focus:

People don't value [our common goals] as much because it's so easy to get caught up in negative things because [the school] is so small that you have more time to focus on the negative. You take for granted all the positive things that it does because it's so small.

Gina says that leaving NCA can be "a shock" when students realize that NCA's emphasis on values like service, youth empowerment, and unity in diversity is "not just this common thing, because at this school it really is... It's kind of challenging to realize that it's not like that everywhere. Which just speaks about how effective it is at this school."

***Students' influence on the school environment.*** A tendency to take NCA for granted is challenged when students become aware of their role in shaping the school environment. Gina goes on to describe how realizing the value of NCA's approach can reframe negative feelings as opportunities to improve the school environment: "You really need to just think, okay if this school's not organized how can I help to be more organized?" Explicit action can then be taken.

Grade 12 students are described as being particularly influential in shaping the school environment, with the power to provide positive role models and set a tone that inspires action; conversely, these students negatively impact the school if they fail to cultivate an

encouraging environment. As an upper-year student, Amelia describes how she gradually became aware of the implicit effect she has on her peers and the school culture:

[When I came to NCA] I didn't feel like a significant figure at the school, because I didn't have [experience with] the rules that other people had. Now, I'm starting to realize that people actually get affected by what I say and what my judgment is.

As this realization took hold, she came to notice the leadership role she was occupying:

Now, I'm seeing [my role] the way other people see it. It's like "Oh, I didn't know that I make you feel a certain way. I didn't know I made you act a certain way" because apparently people actually look up to me and try to mimic my actions.

This role has altered her perception of the purpose of NCA and its impact on her development. At first, she thought she was "coming to [NCA] for the education part of it" but the unexpected leadership role she has discovered has led her to "feel the need to get out there" and "to just be the best person that I can be" so that "by my actions I hope [my friends] see a difference" and are inspired to also contribute to the school.

Darren also mentions how he has refined his actions to become more service-oriented toward his peers, after experiencing the benefits of other students' help when he arrived at NCA: "I help the new students a lot, especially the Chinese new students. They're just like me when I came to Nancy Campbell." Over time, this service orientation has led him to other paths of service and leadership among his peers. NCA students take initiative to support each other, to gain skills, and to cope with challenges, as described by Christine:

In the past I just passed everyone's life. If they don't talk to me, I won't care [about] their side at all. I just live and concern [myself] with my own life, how my life's going. But here, when I see some people [who] feel sad I will ask what happened. I care about the people around me. Not just to look into my own life.

The outward-orientation Gina, Amelia, Darren, and Christine describe reinforces their sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of the NCA community, as well as emphasizing their belief that

they can make a difference in their peers' lives.

***Learning through crisis and victory.*** Although students describe the importance of contributing to the school environment, the data also indicate the emergence of disconnects between institutional intentions and student practices. Earlier in this chapter, I provide an in-depth example of how students reported increasing backbiting to the principal, which spurred a whole-school consultation on the issue. (see Box 4.1). Jared discusses this experience and how it impacted the school community:

[After the consultation on backbiting], people were kind of considerate or a bit concerned about [backbiting]... In the moment people are empowered about it. But it dies down and [backbiting] happens again and you find people forget about it.

Rather than indicating that such activities are useless however, Jared identifies in this example the importance of structures that promote student agency to learn how to create a positive environment: "I don't think it's a fault anywhere in the administration... I feel like they've tried their best to do what they can, but to an extent [the students] need to work together to make that problem disappear." He sees this as a learning experience that positively impacts the student body as they overcome challenges and achieve victories:

I feel like [the administration] takes the step that they can take, but at the same time I feel like maybe it should be dealt with between the [students] because we have these crises in order to have victories... In order for the crisis to be able to serve its purpose, we have to be able to learn how to, to gain something from it ourselves.

The data suggest that students' efforts to maintain awareness of backbiting following the assembly have ebbed and flowed; they also strongly indicate, however, that the administration's efforts to raise consciousness of this and other issues have promoted an ongoing mentality that the school environment is everyone's responsibility. The dynamic relationship between NCA administration and student body is an important dimension of the school environment.

***Discipline in the environment.*** Although NCA encourages students to be active in the school environment, there are limits to their freedom. Bracketing students' freedom of choice, for example, are requirements of the Ministry of Education (e.g., school attendance), as well NCA's own rules for school standards and student safety. When students' behaviour transgresses these requirements and rules, NCA makes clear the limitations on students' freedom, through structures such as responsibility management time (RMT) and suspensions. These structures are intended as much as a deterrent as a punishment, guiding students to make choices that align with the rules. Aiden describes how RMT serves this purpose:

After school... you'll have to say what you did, why you did it, and why you shouldn't do it, and after that you're free to go. Just a conversation with someone and that's basically it. It's more about correcting than punishment.

More severe punishments, such as suspensions, he says, guide students to see the supports that exist to help students cope with challenges and problems:

[The vice principal] has been pretty helpful because I think he really tries to go the extra step with all the students... One time we got in trouble [in residence], me and a few other students... For our punishment we were [suspended from residence] and had to do homestays, and he actually had me go to his house specifically so he could talk to me on the drive there and the drive [to school] in the morning... He actually wanted to know what was going on... It was really helpful to understand the issues about trust and so on. He didn't have to do that. It was pretty nice to see him care that much... I do feel better about talking to him about [my problems] since then.

Discipline, then, is the other side of the freedom-of-choice coin, placing constraints on students' behaviour to ensure school standards, safety rules, and Ministry requirements are met, while also promoting a supportive environment to address issues that underlie behaviour.

***Chaos in the environment.*** Another effect of the environment of choice is the challenge posed to the school environment by students' varying willingness to engage in activities.

Teachers express ambivalence about this effect. On one hand, they say, students' freedom of choice can contribute to "chaos" that "is sometimes frustrating". If many students have announcements to make during morning assembly, for example, or feel moved to recite a prayer or quote during the morning devotional, assembly can be longer than scheduled and intrude on class time. Similarly, if students are inconsistent in their attendance at service activities, it becomes difficult for teachers to sustain these activities. "I don't know how we pull it together," says one teacher, "I mean, it astounds me continuously that it is pulled together," although this teacher also highlights, on the other hand, the value of the skills students can gain from responding to this chaos:

I think we could still teach them valuable skills with less chaos, [but] I sometimes think that being able to survive that kind of constant shift... is a really useful skill because life is change... There is a lot of chaos coming their way and having already survived a crazy boat ride I think [they] are a little better prepared for that reality.

Similarly, another teacher discusses the agility and innovation at the school level that are enabled by a certain degree of chaos: "Sometimes [the chaos is] the only thing that allows for these things to happen." It is "chaos obviously on one level," but this opens spaces for creating and responding to new opportunities. However, for this same teacher, the chaos has caused "some resentment over the months or the years and also a certain level of disbelief in the plans" based on experiences of ideas being proposed but never realized. The teachers identify this chaos and its associated challenges as contributing to staff turnover. Although teachers express gratitude and enjoyment for their work at NCA, they also identify the growing strain that arises for teachers due to unpredictability in the school environment.

**Summary: The purpose is potential.** These data indicate that student agency and school structures intersect to form shifting patterns of common responsibility for and co-creation of the school environment. Reducing barriers to participation and promoting plurality of involvement contribute to student participation in established structures. School structures



that surface shared values and goals contribute to students' sense of common purpose, which can inspire action and engagement in the school environment. When these values become taken for granted, however, problems can become a focal point and dissatisfaction rises. The school's small size is described as a contributor to this problem, although the data also indicate benefits of the small school size for the flow of information through the school and for the availability of opportunities for student agency. The level of students' motivation to contribute to the school environment is connected to students' capacity for leadership and initiative and the degree to which they promote the wellbeing and development of their fellow students and the learning environment. Students identify their collective agency as an important ingredient for maintaining positive patterns of school life, highlighting the limitations of administrative tools to determine relational dynamics. These themes highlight the complex dimensions of school life within and around which the school's ongoing learning process proceeds. They also highlight the implications of this learning process for the institutional, relational, and individual levels; emerging learning might be implemented by the administration over time spans of months and years, but the day-to-day experiences of students and staff in the school environment are impacted by the state of this learning process at any given moment. In response to my second research question, then, my second finding provides insight into the complex mechanisms by which school structures and their underlying vision and values become represented in students' patterns of thought and action. I interpret these insights further in Chapter 5.

### **Finding 3: A Greenhouse for Development**

My third research question asks what characteristics of the NCA environment impact the strength of relationship between school structures, students' thought-action patterns, and students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. In the following section I present data specific to students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement; in this section I focus on the strength of the relationship between students and the school environment. My

analysis indicates that relational qualities of day-to-day living at NCA interact with students' development. In this section, I present data to support and elaborate this finding.

First, I highlight the importance of psychological safety in the NCA environment. Using metaphors of a "bubble" and a "greenhouse," the NCA principal and teachers emphasize the importance of nurturing development in a protective environment. The importance of a safe and nonthreatening environment is very clear in the students' data as well. My analysis suggests that the safety of the school interacts with the quality of relationships among students and between students and teachers: a safe environment at NCA promotes and depends on relationships based on such values as mutual trust, unity in diversity, and wellbeing. The students emphasize that structures aiming to help them overcome negative trends in teen culture promote a safe environment and build their capacity to identify and reject habits, such as backbiting, that undermine psychological safety. Although these habits are not easily subdued and positive relationships shift over time, students and teachers work hard to achieve depth that overcomes differences and challenges. Teachers emphasize that their diverse skills contribute to a network or "web" that supports students' differing needs, across individuals and over time. As a result of these dynamics, positive relationships and a sense of safety at NCA create a school environment that prepares students for "the real world" after high school.

Second, given the students' goals for personal progress described in the previous section, it is critical to the school's relationship with students that NCA provides space for spiritual development. Students describe the importance of spiritual search for establishing a belief system that will guide them through life. My analysis indicates that that NCA environment is characterized by an interplay between the spiritual and the practical: day-to-day experiences are imbued with spiritual dimensions, while spiritual-seeming experiences are also linked to their practical implications for individual and community life. This dynamic contributes to a pluralistic environment in which determining one's belief system involves identifying "that which gives meaning to life" and "is of benefit to humanity." Although several

students describe their spiritual development in the context of religion, especially the Bahá'í Faith, the principal and students describe a broad path of spiritual search that creates space for different forms of belief and practice. NCA looks for signs of spiritual development in outcomes such as happiness, gratitude, empathy and love, and willingness to sacrifice.

Overall, these data provide insight into the qualities of the school environment that promote a close relationship between students' development and school structures. To illustrate these data of a protective environment conducive to spiritual development, I provide an illustrative example: the principal describes NCA's aversion to any mode that would allow a second class citizenship for non-Bahá'í students. He emphasizes the value of hospitality to create an open environment that welcomes diverse ways of being and knowing.

**A protective environment.** The principal emphasizes the importance of a safe and protective environment for students' development. Several metaphors have been used to describe this environment. The principal recounts how the school is often called a bubble and how this metaphor is used to suggest that NCA is somehow separated from "the real world." He strongly rejects any negative connotations of this metaphor, however, arguing that a protective environment is key to healthy adolescent development:

Some people say that Nancy Campbell [is] like a bubble and then you go into the world. I've heard this so many times, it almost sends me over the edge... What makes us think, at the most critical age for the development of morals, that we throw [students] out into an environment that is entirely out of control and somehow that's reality?

Although learning about global problems and overcoming personal challenges are central NCA's model of education, this should be done, the principal argues, with an eye to students' level of capacity so that they do not encounter more than is beneficial. In other words, he says, these encounters should serve the purpose of building capacity, rather than being done arbitrarily for the sake of some type of real-world experience:

You don't need to have much experience with "reality" - if that is what it is. Probably 10

minutes would be enough for someone who is capable to realize what it is and to know how to structure it. But if they're not capable they become victims of it, victimized by it.

The teachers use a greenhouse metaphor to describe NCA's protective environment, which resonates with the principal's description of students' transition from the school environment to "the real world". As one teacher expresses:

There's one thing about keeping a plant in a greenhouse... you have to [eventually] expose them to the big garden, but you don't want to put the plant in the big garden until it's ready for the winds and the bugs... [People] say "if it doesn't kill you it makes you stronger" but is that true? Because it doesn't kill you, but it affects you, your nerves, for the rest of your life.

The teachers discuss their experiences teaching at other schools and differentiate the protective environment of a greenhouse from the restrictive environment of a cage: "You are so much in a cage when you're in the public system, or [in] a school that has too many requirements that are not following the inner needs of the child." NCA embraces the bubble and greenhouse metaphors, therefore, believing the school's protective effects to be beneficial to students' preparation for life after high school.

Comments from the students support the teachers' and principal's emphasis on the importance of a safe school environment. The majority of students describe NCA as a protective (n=11) and nonthreatening (n=13) environment. Students describe how NCA is imbued with meaningful values that shape a positive environment for development. The data indicate that students rely a great deal on the relational dynamics of the school as sources of safety and strength. My analysis suggests that there is an interaction between the students' sense of psychological safety in the school environment and the quality of the relationships they experience within the school, among students and between students and teachers. This interaction suggests that the safety of the school environment promotes healthy relationships that can persist and deepen in the face of challenges that arise, and that the quality of these

relationships significantly influences the students' sense of safety and security to express themselves and pursue individual and collective growth. The following sub-sections examine these data in-depth.

***Student-student relationships.*** Relational dynamics among students are important in students' day-to-day lives at NCA. Discussion of these dynamics figures prominently in the data from student interviews and focus groups. Their accounts indicate that school values become manifested in students' relationships, often through struggle and effort exerted to overcome interpersonal challenges and the trends of dominant youth culture. As shallow connections prove inadequate to establish authentic friendships, they say, deeper bonds form, fostered by NCA values such as mutual trust, unity in diversity, and safety.

The influence of the school's value system on patterns of student-student relationships stands out in the data. For example, in line with NCA's emphasis on a protective environment for development, Amelia highlights the safe spaces created for self-expression and exploration that emerge from trusting one's peers to withhold judgment: "Nancy Campbell always has the open door, giving you the opportunity for service and going up on the stage and just expressing yourself without any judgement. That's a gift that the school really has." Christine describes how expectations for healthy relationships conveyed by the school support students to build friendships based on trust, which contrasts with the expectations set by her previous school:

In [my old school], our teacher always said "You cannot trust people when you first see them." ...Here it is trust people first, not [only] when they did something [good] to you. She emphasizes how trust "creates more opportunities for people to get to know each other" which is particularly important in a school with a great deal of diversity in the student body.

Inga highlights how NCA's focus on unity in diversity contributes to students' capacity to bridge differences to establish friendships:

We learn a lot about working together and embracing our differences... working with people who have completely different ideas than you, and working together really well.

Making friends from new places and not just being like “Oh, you look like me. Let’s be friends” [or] “Oh, you come from Canada? Let’s be friends.”

Similarly, Gina emphasizes students’ growing capacity to build unity in diversity by finding common ground among diverse perspectives. She describes how this dimension of student-student relationships emanates from the underlying purpose of the school:

I know that it is impossible for everyone to have the same ideas, and even if we did then what would be the point of the school? It wouldn’t really allow you to grow as a person...

She goes on to describe how early feelings of connection often prove superficial and do not align with the vision of the school: “We [felt] so connected at the beginning of the year, but [only] materially... We all like the same TV shows and we like the same music and we like the same clothes... I think people mistook that for spiritual connection.” The students’ efforts to deepen their connection, based on more meaningful commonalities and their growing capacity to connect on the basis of unity in diversity, has been “very beneficial to everyone’s lives here” and “even people who you have conflicts with, at the end of the day... if anything were to happen to that person we would all be there to help.” As the roots of these relationships grow deeper, they are nourished by the values and guiding principles of NCA, which convey the importance of trust, unity in diversity, and safety in order to establish true friendships.

At times, problems among students require substantial effort to overcome, and progress can be marked more so by tolerance than by unity. Chad expresses how his personal differences with other students make it difficult to maintain unity at times, although he and others strive to overcome these challenges by identifying common ground:

When [you have] a school like this, there’s two ways it could go, and I think [the principal] is lucky, because... it’s a smaller school and you’re putting [diverse students] here, and when they realize they’re all fighting for one thing, like they want to do service and they want to help people, they can overcome [their differences].

The small size of NCA figures strongly in Chad's perception of what makes the school work.

Following altercations between students, he says,

people at the end of the day expect you all to be friends, and you are, but I still look at them differently and they look at me differently. [Interviewer: But you're still friends?]

Yeah. Because you have to be. Yeah the school is too small for us to not get along.

In its efforts to promote school unity, Chad says, NCA is working against dominant teen culture. Even the most service-oriented, positive students, he says, "are [still] youth; they'll always do that type of stuff. I don't think you can change someone's mindset 100%." Jonas echoes this challenge, specifically discussing backbiting: "issues like backbiting are issues that happen everywhere... A lot of people talk about a lot of people all the time without even knowing [they're doing it]." Unconsciously backbiting is sometimes foiled at NCA, however, Jonas says, because "we'll catch each other and be like 'we're backbiting. We need to stop,' which would never happen at a public school or any other place like that." The situation at NCA can be negative, he says, but he observes how it compares to other spaces: "[The backbiting] is bad, but it's a lot better than other places... I don't know any other better environments than this school." Maintaining positive student-student relationships, according to these and other students, then, requires ongoing effort to surface habits and mindsets that are contrary to inclusivity and undermine unity, consciously replacing them with efforts to bridge differences.

The data indicate that NCA students come to view the differences that arise among them as problematic in the moment, but productive for individual growth and relational wellbeing over time. Three of the interpersonal challenges commonly described by the students are the formation of friend groups, cliques, or couples that are exclusive to others; backbiting among students, leading to misunderstandings and taking sides; and competitiveness born from arrogance or ego that makes others feel inadequate and can lead to envy and jealousy. Several participants (11) describe the work that goes into creating and maintaining positive student-student relationships in the face of such problems. Chantelle describes her efforts to focus on

her peers' positive qualities and overlook their faults:

I ask God and I try to focus on their personality, the best things. [I] look at the nice time that we spent together [at NCA]... It doesn't mean I need to treat this person bad just because this person treated me bad.

Students also describe helping each other overcome interpersonal challenges in order to maintain friendships and trust. Amelia, for example, describes how they encourage each other to address problems directly:

Most of the time they go to their best friend or somebody they're very close to and they're like "I feel like this person is mad at me." And the usual response is like "maybe you should go talk to them" or stuff like that, which is really the only solution, right? If you feel like somebody is mad at you, just go up to them!

She and other students describe how efforts to address problems directly are influenced by the school's emphasis on the eradication of backbiting (see Box 4.1), which cultivates a critical view of the prevalence of backbiting among youth as a tool for solving problems.

It is worth highlighting that relationships among students are both emergent and variable. Aiden, an upper-grade student in his first year at NCA, became agitated during a focus group in response to his peers' tendency to describe NCA as a family. He called this concept an "illusion" and argued that students "don't care about [each other] enough" to address problems as they arise, instead allowing them to "sink in and build up and build up until the issue has gotten way out of hand" at which point "it's affecting everyone else in this little 'family' because this school is just so small." When we met for Aiden's second life history interview almost three months after the focus group, I asked him about his previous comments. He was contrite and reflective in his response, and quick to explain his attitude at that time as a response to specific circumstances he had been facing as he grappled with challenges at the school:

There were a lot of things going on at the time [of the focus group] both in the school and with myself. There are ups and downs in this school. There's a lot of drama that



happens every now and then that can strain those relationships, but at the end of the day everyone here is a good person and... they just want to make good relationships. Not everyone is going to be best friends, but everyone will come away knowing each other a little better. That's not something you're going to forget.

The shifts in his accounts were very interesting to me and demonstrated the strength of the life history approach for this research, as well as the broader importance of using a longitudinal approach to study the social dynamics of a school setting. NCA's social dynamics are dynamic and emergent – as suggested by language used by students, such as “builds,” “changes,” and having “ups and downs,” – indicating that there is a chronological dimension to the effects of NCA's protective environment on students.

Another component of the school community central to students' day-to-day lives, as well as their ongoing development, is their relationships with teachers, to which I now turn.

***Student-teacher relationships.*** Students and teachers comment extensively on the characteristics of their interactions and relationships at the school. In their descriptions, they contrast their experiences at NCA to experiences at previous schools, highlighting the ways in which school values are manifested in student-teacher relationships at NCA and how this dynamic interacts with academic success and student agency in the learning space.

Students report noticeable differences between their experiences with teachers at NCA and experiences at other schools. Adam finds it to be “different” and “interesting” how “teachers are kind to each other and to students” at NCA. Rachel describes how a visit to her old school highlighted the contrast between student-teacher relationships there and at NCA:

I went to my old school last month to visit a couple friends, and I went to... visit a teacher and they were so cold to me. And I'd been [at] that school for two years! ...I was so glad I'm [at NCA] because at this school it's like your teachers are like your family.

Jonas uses similar terminology to describe NCA student-teacher relationships: “Because your family's not here... some of [the teachers] act more like aunts and uncles and you can go to

them for advice.” Teachers echo this sentiment from their perspective, commenting on their interest in the students’ well-being and moral development:

Because their parents aren’t here, I find myself naturally taking more of an interest in who they are as people... I feel like I am in part responsible for their moral development in the sense that I want to set an example... There’s a big part of me that’s more concerned with who they are as people and where they’re going away from what I’m teaching... Yes, I have some things to teach them here, but there’s a lot more to it than just how to write an essay.

The caring relationships these data reflect contribute to school values becoming manifested in teacher-student relationships.

NCA culture requires a significant adjustment for students accustomed to greater social distance between teachers and students. Both Inga and Jared contrast NCA’s pattern of student-teacher relationships to more “strict” models they have encountered at other schools. Inga describes how diminished social distance impacts the school environment, in how both students and teachers are enabled to contribute to a positive environment:

We’re given a lot of freedom here. The teachers and staff, they trust us with big decisions. I think we sort of make our environment because there aren’t many things restricting us from being able to [do that]. I came from a really strict school where everything was really strict and we didn’t get a say in anything... But here it’s more like the things [the teachers] are doing are for us and the things they’re doing are making – they’re contributing to our environment.

All of the teachers recognize that the private school environment, particularly the small student body, facilitates this behavioural reality, and that similar conditions could be difficult to establish in a public environment. However, they also emphasize the influence of NCA’s underlying values and principles in creating positive relational conditions. As described by one teacher, “I don’t know if it’s just because it’s a private school and it’s small, but I think it has a

lot to do with the ideals that are behind the school itself and what attracts certain people to this environment.” Although this comment referred to attracting students to the school, another teacher mentions how “Nancy Campbell really attracts the kind of teacher that is a true teacher... a true teacher is a healer... and a true school is a healing process... healing yourselves to be the best you can be.” Not all teachers agree with this perspective on the role of teachers and schools, prioritizing instead the importance of the curriculum and rigorous academic preparation for post-secondary schooling. They do agree, however, that NCA attracts teachers who care for their students and are willing to support their students in their own unique way, which coalesce with other teachers’ approaches to create a cohesive web of support and guidance to meet students’ diverse needs. As one teacher expresses it,

At the end of the day, every single [teacher] here is here for [the students] and every single [teacher] is here for [the students] in a different way. And that's such a marvelous thing for [the students] to have access to each type of support that they need... I feel like everybody has so much support in the building that there's never anything that I need to be concerned that I'm lacking because someone else is going to have it.

The resulting web of diverse support and teaching styles contributes to relational wellbeing.

The influence of positive relational principles on disciplinary structures illustrates the interaction between student-teacher relationships and NCA as a protective environment. The teachers agree that one dimension of discipline in the school is a connection between positive relationships and the diminished need for “behaviour management” compared to other schools. One teacher reports that “the behaviour is probably the first thing I noticed” upon arrival at NCA, and that “the small class sizes, the not worrying so much [about] classroom management” contribute to “a really beautiful atmosphere of respect and acceptance.” Another teacher, who has taught in the public school system, describes how, at other schools “the classroom management almost overwhelms every other aspect of what you’re trying to get done... But here you don’t seem to have the same behavioural issues.” She emphasizes how it is

“a relief not to worry,” freeing her to “concentrate on delivering the material, focusing on what [the students] are interested in, and being more of a facilitator of learning rather than the hammer than brings down the rules.” From a student perspective, Jared describes how NCA’s approach to student-teacher relationships influences the way students are disciplined:

Even when people do bad things here, like when people have been caught smoking or stealing or things like that, of course they get in trouble for it, but it is more of a "we are going to help you" type thing. It is more of an environment of encouragement instead of like, “You did this bad thing. You are gone.” It is like, "Okay. This bad thing... you have to pay the consequences, but we are going to try and help you."

He ties this approach to the overarching goal of NCA to release students’ potential, and how other processes, like discipline, are employed in service to this core process: “[At NCA] the rules aren’t being enforced just so the rules can be enforced. The rules are being enforced so you can help people.”

The student-student and student-teacher relational patterns interact with students’ sense of safety in the school environment and NCA’s ability to provide a protective space within which students develop. An important aspect of development that students encounter in the NCA environment is spiritual search. I turn now to this dimension of NCA.

**Cultivating spiritual search.** In its protective environment, NCA strives to cultivate students’ intelligence paired with idealism. Together, the principal says, intelligence and idealism inspire a vision of the future, build motivation to contribute to its realization, and provide tools that harness skills and talents to take steps. Intelligence is often a goal of schooling, but, according to the principal, “intelligence without idealism becomes negative or destructive; it can report the facts and details, but it doesn’t speak to the future, which idealism does.” Idealism is often devalued “because we often think about it as... being emotional. People say, ‘I’m not going to be idealistic with my head in the clouds,’ as if believing in some change that’s good would somehow take you out of touch with reality.”

But idealism is vital, says the principal, “because if we ever become non-idealistic and not willing to think that we can change, then we’re done.” This is “the role of spirituality in education,” he says, “[to] create idealism.”

Spiritual belief, according to the principal, is “that which gives meaning to life” and “is of benefit to humanity.” The pairing of belief and action – of being and doing – is central to NCA’s approach to spiritual development, says the principal, both “helping all the students know that their determination to discern what they truly believe in is very important” as well as “helping them to see that all those beliefs will mean nothing if they don’t know how to apply them.”

My analysis suggests that students find ample opportunity at NCA to grapple with their beliefs and translate what they believe into practice. Students emphasize that autonomy and freedom of choice in one’s spiritual search are very important. Amelia describes her previous experience at a religious school, in which she “saw more students suppressing that whole concept of spirituality, just because they felt like they were being forced into it” such that “they want to [develop spiritually], but because [the school is] making them do it, it takes away that desire completely.” At NCA, in contrast, Amelia describes how “here you have a choice. If you’re intrigued one day, go for it. If you’re not intrigued the next day, that’s okay, you gained some the previous day.” This allows her to avoid doing things “half-heartedly,” instead helping her “actually be genuinely into it” when she chooses to do something. Chantelle echoes this sentiment: “When someone tries to force me to do something, I don’t want to do it. I will do it but... I won’t do it with love.” In the process of spiritual development, she says, “you cannot force anyone to do anything... making them want to want that.” Insights gained through free choice are more meaningful and impactful: “once you do that and you see... you’re like ‘wow!’ You go into the world and you’re like ‘wow!’ You’re not like ‘ugh.’”

Gina contrasts NCA’s approach to that of other schools she’s attended, where “you would just believe whatever, but you could easily not talk about it.” To her, the benefit of NCA for grappling with one’s beliefs is its general emphasis on spirituality, rather than specifically

on the Bahá'í Faith:

The best part of this being a Bahá'í-inspired school for me is not necessarily that it is a Bahá'í-inspired school, but the fact that it was inspired by a religion. I grew up around Christianity so I think that any school that has anything to do with God is good for spirituality because it allows you to explore that more. When it's a part of your school it's easier because then everyone is sort of expected to at least talk about it, whether you believe in God or you don't believe in God, or you're spiritual or you're not spiritual. I think [NCA] forces you to at least explore that concept.

A generally spiritual environment, then, open to the concept of God without being dogmatic, creates space for students to explore their beliefs.

***Spiritual search at NCA.*** Gina's experience in this spiritual environment has contributed to her own spiritual search. As a Bahá'í raised in a Bahá'í family, she describes how being at a Bahá'í-inspired school has impacted her own Bahá'í identity and her perspective of her peers' spiritual search:

This is a Bahá'í-inspired school... and that's been a huge challenge and test, when you go to school with so many Bahá'ís and their views are not the same as yours... you have to remind yourself that everyone in the [Bahá'í] Faith sees it in a different way or everyone is developing on their own. Seeing that has been a huge test to explore what do I believe in and what are my most important values. Because not everyone's would be the same, especially in a diverse school like this.

Rachel, who was not raised in a Bahá'í family but became a Bahá'í soon before this study, also describes the impact of her NCA experience on her spiritual search. Rachel sees spiritual search as a vital dimension of individual development "because your belief system is everything you stand for, you know? If you don't have a belief system, it's like 'who are you?' ...I'm still finding myself but at least I have a belief system." She reached a "turning point" in her spiritual search when she was faced with the possibility of not returning to NCA:

That was a turning point in my life, when I realized I wanted to be a Bahá'í... Everything you say that you love you get tested for. So I got tested and I really wanted to still stay here, and I cannot imagine my life not finishing my four years here.

For these and other Bahá'í students, NCA's emphasis on spiritual search creates an environment that facilitates their exploration of the Bahá'í teachings and their Bahá'í identities.

Bahá'í identity and belief do not dominate the data. Appropriate avenues for spiritual search are intended to be broad at NCA to promote exploration and search. The principal describes how labels of different religions and belief systems can become a barrier to students feeling free to explore their beliefs: "Some people, if you define [belief systems] as spiritual, will want to run away from it." The principal describes how this reaction originates, in part, from mainstream schools' avoidance of the spiritual dimension of experience:

I think by the age of five or six, kids have got the idea that they cannot talk about spiritual concepts in the school system as it exists now. They can frame it in any other way they want, but it certainly cannot be talked about like that.

The principal's response, then, is to "just remove that obstacle" of names and titles:

I don't really care what you call it. What I want to see is inspired learners... I believe that anything that's inspired is spiritual, as long as it's not harmful to others and it's building capacity [to act]. Whether it comes from weighty assessment and your evaluation of what is practical, or whether it comes from principles that allow you to lift off because it's something greater than you presently can see – which is faith – then that's great. I think it's actually through the practice of application that it becomes a little bit clearer what it is to the person and what they want to call it.

Removing this barrier is helpful for students who struggle with the concept of spirituality.

Inga, for example, arrived at NCA unaware of its religious roots and had "never really talked about spirituality" in her atheistic family. She describes how she grappled with the Bahá'í dimension of the school in her early days at the school, such as the devotional that takes

place at the end of each morning assembly:

I've read a few prayers [in morning devotions] but I feel like I wasn't being truthful, I guess... I feel like, not that it was a lie, but that it's not my belief, so I feel like reading someone else's prayers just because the whole school was reading them, I felt kind of like it was wrong, like I wasn't doing it for the right reasons.

Reflecting on these feelings, Inga describes a discomfort with the word "spiritual", preferring the principal's definition of the term as "that which gives meaning": "That [definition] brought in the meaning of spirituality to me because I'd always put it with religion... But 'that which brings meaning' is something I can relate to even though I don't come from a religious family." She describes how coursework has also created space for her to ponder her beliefs and the most appropriate language to express her views:

I was [writing] a position paper on whether we only help others to get something in return, and I wanted to say that "Yes... we always get something in return, but it's not always material." Then the only word I could think of was "it's spiritual" but because I've never really used the word, I kept trying to find a different word to use instead of spiritual. But spiritual kept coming to mind... I wanted to say it's something within. It brings you joy within and happiness within a sense of wholeness.

Inga describes how she has come to see how her beliefs align with a nature-focused view of spirituality, and how the natural world provides a metaphor for how human systems could be: "What some animals have in their ecosystem... is what we should be aiming towards - that complete balance. Everyone is helping each other, but also keeping everything in balance."

Inga's account illustrates how NCA can be experienced by someone who is encountering spiritual discourse for the first time. Multiple spaces that facilitate exploration and experimentation with belief and language have helped Inga identify a conceptual framework that works for her, one that does not reject her atheism, but balances it with principles that "bring meaning" to her life and the life of society, such as environmentalism and service. This is



in keeping with the principal's view that spiritual belief and practice are less about "ritual and dogma" and more about "doing spiritual things by doing things that really make a difference in [one's own] life and other people's lives." It is for this reason that service is a central aspect of school life at NCA, he says; as students develop clarity about their beliefs through their experiences, a sense of deep purpose can emerge: "Whatever [students] have come from in terms of their values, it makes such a difference once they start to feel inside that [service] has meaning to them. That they're attracted to it, that it makes them feel so purposeful."

The morning devotional – also called an "inspirational" by the principal – provides a helpful image of the spiritual space provided in the NCA environment. Box 4.5 provides an account of this activity and its contribution to spiritual fellowship and inspiration.

#### Box 4.5. Spiritual fellowship and inspiration in the morning devotional

Based on my observations, the daily morning devotionals at NCA are an opportunity for a quiet moment – a semicolon punctuating the hubbub of morning routines, separating them from the activity of the rest of the school day. Students and teachers are free to read inspirational passages from religious, artistic, or philosophical sources, sometimes prepared in advance and other times spontaneously or hastily looked up on phones and laptops. At times, students or teachers mention that a prayer is offered for a sick or troubled friend or family member. The students, sitting in their large circle of chairs, fall silent for a few minutes, phones ignored and conversations paused. Some close their eyes, others keep theirs open; some fold their hands or arms, others relax their heads into their hands or simply sit quietly; some are clearly ready to be done and get on with things, while others embrace the moment and revive more slowly once the readings are complete. However one defines the concept of spirituality, this morning devotional is intended to provide a moment in which individuals can find inspiration in potent passages, in the quiet of their minds, and in spiritual fellowship with their fellow students. "What is the opposite of lonely?" Chad countered when I asked what it felt like to be spiritual. His response highlights the importance of relational connection for spiritual development. For Chad, spiritual feeling includes "the feeling of

someone that's there, feeling like you're never alone." The morning devotional is one space at NCA that feeds students' need for spiritual fellowship.

Although the data provided in this section present a picture of pluralism, it is also clear that NCA's roots in the Bahá'í Faith deeply influence day-to-day school life; Bahá'í teachings are translated into school practices large and small. How, then, can the school provide an inclusive arena for spiritual search among its diverse students? In addition to approaches already described (e.g., diversity of content in morning devotionals, flexible terminology, a broad path of search), the principal explicitly discusses the structures that avoid "second class citizenship" that could tier Bahá'í beliefs over others. I review these data in the next sub-section.

***Avoiding second class citizenship.*** Using the metaphor of hospitality, which he had mentioned to me previously as one of the attitudes that informs his administration, the principal emphasizes the importance of a school environment in which respect for differences is paramount: "If we're the hosts of other people, they should feel totally comfortable being exactly who they are in our environment, in this environment which we claim is respectful of all people." The principal speaks strongly about his efforts to create an environment that prevents the marginalization or domination of other views:

I really try to make conscious efforts to not do what previous religions have done, which is to make students other than Bahá'ís feel like second class citizens or feel somehow that they're not quite up to scratch just by the way they're treated. I do it by consciously making it clear that their views are welcome.

This principle is important in teachers' interactions with students as well, he says:

I tell teachers that if you get a Bahá'í saying, "well from the Bahá'í point of view, this and that," then you should ask, "well what's the Christian point of view? What's the Muslim point of view?" so that everyone feels that that environment is totally open.

Many teachers at NCA are not Bahá'ís themselves. Coming from different backgrounds, the

principal emphasizes that NCA teachers are all expected to understand “that this is a Bahá’í-inspired school and [that] they are part of a system of schools in the world that are trying to do these things like moral education.” The principal sees that the teachers “feel happy” when he tells them “I want you to bring out from other people what they believe and think, and not assume because you're working in a Bahá’í-inspired school that I want you to act like you are favouring it in any way.” Rather than recruiting only teachers who are Bahá’ís, NCA primarily requires that all teachers support the Moral Capabilities Framework and its basis in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “We use the moral capabilities as the standard, and that's not a negotiable thing. If you don't believe in the diversity of religion, [for example,] this is not the place for you.”

In addition to conveying this message and expectation of inclusivity to the teachers, the principal communicates to the students the importance of creating an environment free from domination of any kind, including on the basis of religion. Using the parable of the early bird gets the worm, he asks the students to think of this situation from the perspective of the worm and how, far from encouraging a worm to get up and get going – as it does for the bird – this parable shows how oppression can make one want to stay in the proverbial burrow:

That's why I told [the students] that thing about the early bird gets the worm, just so they really get the message that it's so easy to have dominant culture, whatever it is, become dominant... Otherwise we create another world just like what we live in now that we're trying to change.

As such, even in cases where students’ beliefs contradict Bahá’í teachings, space is preserved for their beliefs, so long as these students, in turn, do not dominate others’ right to “believe what they believe they should believe.” Likewise, school rules and codes of conduct also continue to apply. Gina agrees that students are free to believe and think as they choose, “even if it’s not the same as the administration.” Aiden echoes this opinion when he describes how NCA has shown him evidence that “people can have their own spiritual belief systems side by

side and still get along pretty well.”

One indication that this environment is having the desired effect is the principal’s account of feedback from parents who are not Bahá’ís but see positive impacts on their children’s developing spirituality:

I’ve had parents say that “even though they have Bahá’í holy days and [NCA] closes on those holy days, and we know it’s a Bahá’í-inspired school, far from having our children feel like they’re being coerced or pushed, it’s exactly the opposite.” If anything, [they say,] it strengthens [their child’s] faith as they realize the importance of spirituality.

Other parents, however, when learning about the school, have been turned off by its religious basis, sometimes caused by aversion to allowing children to be exposed to different beliefs:

I just think truthfully, for most people, it’s the lack of awareness of what the [Bahá’í] Faith is. It’s prejudiced views about it, or lack of clarity in thinking about whether or not our children should be exposed to diversity of belief. Should [children] even be aware that people believe differently than others? And at what age should that happen?

Through its inclusive approach, NCA intends to create an environment in which students have support and guidance of teachers, peers, and parents for their spiritual search. In NCA’s view, healthy adolescent spiritual development requires a safe environment, free from domination or exclusion of some belief systems in favour of others. While promoting diversity of belief, however, NCA sees common threads that emerge in students’ spiritual development, and works to nurture these spiritual qualities. Such qualities include idealism, transcendence, gratitude, and sacrifice. I describe these qualities and their significance for students’ spiritual education in the following sub-section.

***Indicators of spiritual development.*** According to the data, students’ spiritual search is signalled, in part, by their idealism, as discussed above: willingness and capacity to envision a better future for humanity, and to strive to contribute to realizing this vision. These characteristics are intended to take centre stage in students’ developing belief systems and are

indicated by such qualities as a sense of transcendence, happiness in service, an attitude of gratitude, empathy for others, and willingness to sacrifice. My analysis of the data highlights that these qualities have individual and relational dynamics, such that intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences of their effects are mutually reinforcing. I briefly describe each of these qualities in this sub-section.

*Transcendence.* The principal describes idealism as a type of transcendence that allows us to see beyond present circumstances toward new possibilities. Encountering transcendence in school activities is one means by which students can observe and develop their beliefs through experience and reflection, in relation to their vision of type of people they want to become and the type of world they want to live in. The principal describes how, for example, the WCC-11 service trip and its social justice oriented performances transcend their simple premises and point to significant forms of unity and transformation:

[The dances are] quite simple. There's nothing spectacular about them. They have the least amount of costumes. They have one song that is playing, and bodies with t-shirts. How can that be so compelling? ... And [yet] everybody is mesmerized... I think when [the students] see that, they just get transformed themselves, because they realize something greater, and isn't that really what spirituality is? That there's something greater than ourselves? And our unity brings that out and it makes us so sure of it. Our unity of service and purpose makes us so sure of it.

Such spiritual encounters are not left implicit, but are brought out and examined through reflection. Upon their return following the WCC-11 trip, I observed the group's reflection, which was facilitated by the principal. Their reflections visit and revisit the effects of their group's unity on the potency of their service. Students share how difficult the trip had been for them and how it "pushed us to the limit" but that they had felt so happy despite these trials, in part, one student emphasizes, because they had had a strong sense of collective will and mutual support:

I feel like our collective goal was to like reach this new level of purpose... I didn't find myself complaining even though I was drenched in sweat... We reached this new level of spiritual purpose where we're able to enjoy life, like genuinely enjoy life and be happy and at the same time we were able to inspire and create change and motivate others.

Transcendence, in this light, does not only occur at the level of the individual, but also at the relational level when working together helps all involved reach new heights of understanding, purpose, and happiness. Students identify happiness in service as another important dimension of their spiritual experience.

*Happiness.* Chantelle describes how rejecting a negative mindset can be freeing: "I was like, 'okay, I need to work on myself... [Negative thoughts] are so heavy, it's like a weight. You carry it with you.'" Christine discusses how negativity can prevent growth, and how spirituality can overcome this rut to motivate new efforts to act and serve:

[Spirituality] makes me more energetic and always looking forward to my life... If we look too much in a negative way, we're going to stick to it, always the same, same, same. We won't be happy anymore. [But spirituality] makes me want to know more about myself and try more things that I didn't want to before.

Chantelle emphasizes the importance of service for her wellbeing, describing her mental health struggles and how depression affects her life: "If you have depression you cannot act, you cannot serve, you cannot love yourself, you cannot love what you have" but how service and spirituality are "connected to being alive, to being glad [for] what you have." She talks about how spiritual development can protect students like her from depression:

We need to say bye to this voice in our heads because depression is right there, depression is in our mind. It's the voice that tells us to give up. It's the voice that tells us not to do it. But then if you have this spirituality, [it] helps you to be happy, to be alive, and to say no to that voice.

The culture of service fostered by NCA school structures is intended to cultivate true

happiness, says the principal, one that comes from conviction in one's capacity to reach goals and make a difference, alone and with others:

These are some of the dynamics that start to happen when you feel you're in an environment that can take on big problems and can make a difference: ...the problems don't seem so insurmountable and happiness ensues. What makes us most unhappy is our inability to effect change, to handle crisis, to be able to make a difference. True happiness comes from service and comes from being of service to the common good. [When] people are all striving to be of service to the common good, then everyone starts to feel like they can contribute and that they're needed and that nobody's left out.

As such, although high standards of service are meant to pose a challenge for students, the principal emphasizes that they are not meant to be burdensome or degrading, instead being oriented to reaching new heights: "...always believing that, yes, we can do more, never being unhappy because we're not doing more, but figuring out how to be happy about doing more." Jay describes happiness that comes from service succinctly: that "it can make people feel good that they're doing good."

At NCA, happiness is seen as emerging from service itself, as students see the impacts of their efforts on themselves and others. The principal describes how the school is continually examining its capacity to create spaces for students to encounter this type of happiness:

How do we develop the youth to be mindful that at every moment they are a person contributing... and to do it in a way that conveys to them that they are the happiest when they are being of the greatest service... that, far from trying to ignore or imagine that things are not going on, or wanting to stop ourselves from becoming aware, that true happiness is really becoming fully aware and then trying to do our part?

Such a response to serving the wellbeing of others is seen as contributing to an intrinsically-driven, reinforcing loop in which happiness through service motivates further service. NCA's aim is to make this dynamic conscious for students, so that they can mindfully choose lines of

action based on wise knowledge grounded in experience with service.

Students report that the happiness they find in service contributes to their growth. Amelia describes the “inner peace” and “tranquility inside of you” that comes from doing service “diligently and in a very humble way.” For her, service is one path toward self-development: “you’re always searching for this guidance that you want... always searching for that tranquility inside of you so then you can, in the outer world, be that person, that good person.” Darren sees the value of his life in the way his service impacts others: “I feel really moved... and I can feel the value of my life, what is significant of [me] living in this world.” Jared gives an example of the happiness that comes from service with the junior youth empowerment program:

I could have a bad day otherwise [and] not really feel motivated to go, but I would know that I should go anyway. And then I would go and I always end up feeling happy afterwards because I had been engaged with people who are positive, [which] helps me [and] helps them. Just an uplifting way to do stuff.

Again, we see the interplay of individual and relational wellbeing in students’ development.

Jared’s comment also demonstrates how happiness does not always come easily; students describe how overcoming challenges to do service opens up deeper wells of happiness. Inga talks about the impact of the WCC-11 trip on her sense of happiness: “I was pushed to my limit and I wasn’t expecting it to be that hard... I feel really happy ever since coming back. Even though I’m super tired from the trip still, I feel full of energy.” For Selena, service went from chore to core, shaping her character and contributing to a sense of purpose:

When I was [young], whenever my mom talked about service with me I would be like “Oh yeah. Service is good. I have to do it.” And then when I came [to NCA] and it became a pattern in my life I was like “Whoa!” Like, literally it shapes your character. It does make a big difference... After you do service you feel awesome and you feel like you know why you’re here.



In these comments we see the links between happiness and another spiritual quality, gratitude.

*Gratitude, empathy, and sacrifice.* Students' attitude of gratitude is an important dimension of their spiritual growth. This theme arose several times for students and the principal during and following the WCC-11 service trip. The principal contrasts gratitude with a sense of entitlement: "I tell [the students] all the time that the sign of a materialist is entitlement, and the sign of a spiritual being is gratitude." The students describe how gratitude and selflessness are nurtured through the challenges of the service trip, particularly through the lens of empathy, as they came to see their service through others' eyes. The principal asserts that empathy is nurtured by a sense of unity: "I think when we feel isolated or alienated we're quite prepared to not care what other people think." The students' reflections were often emotional and demonstrated a willingness to share their empathetic and other feelings, which, for some students, had previously been subdued. This supports the principal's assertion that the inclusive (non-isolating) and engaging (non-alienating) mode of experience that had been established during and after the service trip contributed to students' expression of empathy. The students were moved by the stories they learned and the people they met while on their trip, which contributed to their ability to make sacrifices on the path of service.

On this theme, the principal concluded the WCC-11 post-trip reflection by linking the students' comments on gratitude and empathy to their growing capacity to transcend lower concerns for higher priorities, which is how he defines sacrifice:

All of you pushed way beyond what you thought you could do. And you did it for higher purposes, you did it for higher reasons than yourselves. You did it because of your sense of mission, because of your love for the people that were there and what they hoped to see, you did it not to let each other down, and you did it because you knew it was the right thing to do... For the sake of the common good or the higher good you rose above yourselves... It was very amazing to see how much you would sacrifice.

These dimensions of spiritual engagement demonstrate the underlying processes of spiritual

development and maturation that NCA envisions for its students.

***Creative interplay of spiritual and practical.*** Despite being central to the vision of the school, there are few school structures that can be clearly and explicitly labelled as “spiritual”. This is not a mistake; NCA intentionally integrates spirituality into the practical dimensions of schooling. This approach, the principal says, is based on the belief that “the creative interplay of the spiritual and the practical” is where inspiration is born. “The world of existence has two wings,” he says: “the physical and the spiritual. Inspiration comes from the mixing of these two things, so I don’t think we want to too clearly define which realm we’re in because we’re always both.” Avoiding dichotomization of these dimensions of experience has implications for school life. For example, seemingly-practical experiences, such as student council, student awards, and report card evaluations, are imbued with spiritual dimensions, while seemingly-spiritual experiences, such as morning devotions, are also linked to their practical implications for individual and community life.

The NCA student council provides a helpful illustration of the interplay of spiritual and practical dimensions. First is the matter of the student council election. Informed by spiritual principles that aim to prevent the dominance of superficial popularity contests, and mirroring the Bahá’í method of election, there are no nomination or electioneering components. Students are asked not to discuss amongst themselves for whom they might vote, let alone whether they themselves would like to be elected. Instead, all together at once, in a quiet environment initiated with prayers and readings, all students fill out a ballot with the names of any nine students they think would best serve the school on student council. The votes are counted and the names of the nine students with the most votes are elected. The administration’s role in the election process is indirect: to prepare the environment, making sure that – through recruitment, interviews, and scholarships – there are “a number of [students] that really have a vision that inspires them.” In response, the student body “will want [these students] to be their leaders.” Although the practical end result of this process is similar to that of other schools – a

student council is formed – the spiritual principles at work are intended to establish a student council that demonstrates a certain type of leadership.

This is the second component of NCA’s student council that illustrates the interplay of spiritual and practical: the principle of service leadership. The council is accompanied throughout the school year by a staff liaison, and also goes on a weekend retreat twice per year. This guidance provides leadership training, the principal explains, through which members are encouraged “to see themselves not as the leaders, but as the servants” of the student body so that “if they did a good job, it would be like the Chinese proverb: ‘look what *we* have done.’” The principal describes how this model challenges common conceptions of representation in elected leadership:

It takes quite a bit to help the student council to understand that "no, you are not representing the student body. You were chosen as somebody that has to do a certain job, but [the students] represent themselves. They like your judgement, obviously, because they think you're going to do a good job, but don't ever imagine that you're representing their views. You have to consult with them all the time and find out what they want and believe in." That assumption that you're representing them and you know what they want is how the world got into the mess that it is.

This model of service leadership differs greatly from what the principal has encountered at many schools, for which “what [leadership] meant, [for staff and students] was someone who was supposed to look, act, think, and be perfect, which of course was an entirely false concept.” His conviction is that “leadership is really defined by our capacity to read social reality and make decisions that are of benefit to the common good. So whoever is doing that we can consider a leader.” As such, he says, “leadership as a concept only works if we believe everyone is [a leader]” in that everyone is developing these capacities.

The student council members, therefore, are not intended to be a core group, separate from the generality of the student body and above certain types of service: “If our goal is to

create wise leadership,” the principal asserts, “then we don’t want to have people who think they’re above certain activities that are obviously of benefit”, even as this principle is “balanced against the concept of unity in diversity [because] not everyone serves in the same way.” This principle also applies to teachers, he says:

What we’re trying to ask of the students, we must ask of ourselves. In moral leadership, the higher your position, the greater your level of moral responsibility because... whoever you’re serving or looking after, they’re looking at you for the example whether you like it or not. But certainly they don’t want to see [teachers] violating principles and objectives and goals that [they are] espousing for others.

Humility, sacrifice, and mutual encouragement, then, are all relevant spiritual principles that influence the NCA environment as students’ and teachers’ capacity for leadership is developed. Every student is considered to be capable of developing this capacity and opportunities for skill-building are woven into a variety of activities, including student council, service projects, and in-class work. In the example of the election and functioning of NCA’s student council, we see several spiritual principles and practices being explicitly integrated into the practical process of establishing a student council. This illustrates the creative interplay of spiritual and practical that is evident in the data.

**Summary: A greenhouse for development.** These data indicate that NCA’s capacity to generate and maintain a school environment conducive to psychological safety, a positive relational environment, and spiritual search and development is central to its ability to engage students in relationship with school structures. Reciprocally, students’ capacity to consciously engage these structures influences the quality of their relationships, the milieu created for spiritual search, and the ability of the school to inspire through the creative interplay of spiritual and practical dimensions of experience. In addition to the individual-level impacts on students’ wellbeing (i.e., transcendence, happiness, gratitude, empathy, and sacrifice), these data provide helpful insight into the qualities of the school environment that cultivate a strong

relationship between school structures and students' development. In response to my third research question, then, my third finding provides insight into the institutional-, relational-, and individual-level dimensions that contribute to students' growing capacity for critical and transcendent engagement.

### **Chapter Conclusion: Key Findings and Emerging Insights**

Through this chapter, I have provided substantial description of the contextual and perceptual information that informs this research. Framed by structuration theory and systems thinking, the data present a complex and rich picture of the interplay of institutional structures and individual agency, highlighting also the role of the relational environment as a key player in this dynamic. Although these matters will be more fully discussed in the following chapter, I wish to briefly emphasize the interweaving of institution, community, and individual in the context of school structures. Table 4.2 on the next page provides three examples of this interweaving, drawn from the data presented in this chapter. The elements identified in each column represent the dynamics of the three levels that contribute to the quality of the example structure. Although the visual of a table fails to portray their interweaving, taken together across the columns these elements come into complex relationships, as textually described in this chapter. A full accounting of each school structure would be unwieldy, but the three examples presented illustrate the various capacities required by each protagonist of the setting – institution, community, and individual – to generate structures and experiences conducive to capacity for critical and transcendent engagement in a twofold purpose.

In the following chapter, I interpret these data further in light of my research questions, yielding a layered synthesis of the findings and principles of schooling for critical and transcendent engagement gleaned from this case study.

Table 4.2.

*Capacities of the Three Protagonists in Promoting High-Quality School Structures: Three Examples*

Example	Institutional Role	Community Dynamics	Individual Agency
Whole-school consultation	Effectively identifying the need for a whole-school consultation Cultivating analysis of context and root causes of topic issue Framing discussion with guiding principles (e.g., Moral Capabilities Framework, school values system, shared aims)	Collective responsibility for school environment Positive relationships based on mutual trust Freedom from censure Leadership of principal and “veteran” students Unity behind decisions and course of action	Open-mindedness Critical thinking Applying a standard for judgment Comfort with ambiguity Acting on collective decisions Reshaping thought and actions with new insights
Required service hours	Creating spaces for planning, acting, and reflecting Balancing high expectations and adequate structure Operating in a learning mode Anticipating and responding to students’ goals and needs	Teachers guiding students Mutual support to overcome challenges alone and together Students providing positive role models for each other Agility and innovation to respond to emerging needs and opportunities	Transcending personal sphere and concerns to think of others’ needs Transcending lower concerns for higher priorities Finding happiness in conviction, effort, and helping others Developing gratitude; overcoming materialism
Student council election	Preparing the social environment through student recruitment Preparing the election environment with clear expectations and values Cultivating creative interplay of spiritual and practical dimensions	A felt sense of common ground among diverse people Trust in students’ capacity to judge fairly and make good decisions Collective responsibility for the school environment Unity behind the results of the election	Encountering and appreciating diversity in the student body Discernment and sense of justice to overcome superficial popularity Willingness to support the results of the election process

## Chapter 5 – Discussion

Through this case study, I have documented and analyzed varied dimensions of the NCA setting and their interactions with students' agency and development. My findings have identified several aspects of NCA structure that are essential to its approach. Furthermore, I have identified dimensions of a reciprocal relationship between these structures and students' individual and relational patterns of thought and action in the school. The purpose of this research is to better understand the ways in which NCA students develop capacity for critical and transcendent engagement through the dynamic interactions of structure and agency in the NCA setting. This inquiry is guided by my research questions:

1. What characteristics of NCA impact students' patterns of thought and action conducive to critical and transcendent engagement?
2. By what mechanisms do school structures and their underlying vision become represented in students' patterns of thought and action?
3. What qualities of the NCA environment impact the strength of the relationship between school structures and students' thought-action patterns?

As detailed in Chapter 3, in this research I used case-study design and mixed methods to collect life history interview data from 15 students, a comprehensive account of school vision and structure from interviews with the principal, and supplementary data from observations and focus groups with students and teachers. As explained in Chapter 2, this inquiry is guided by structuration theory (e.g., Giddens, 1984; Stones, 2005) and Critical Psychology (Holzkamp, 2013; Tolman, 1994), along with systems thinking as an analytical framework. This conceptual framework provided the basis for deductive coding of the data, which I complemented with inductive coding to identify emerging themes related to NCA's environment and students' experiences. I organized the resulting codes through thematic analysis, which yielded the three key findings described in Chapter 4: that students encounter wisdom, a world-embracing vision, and spiritual development as key capacities targeted by NCA; that releasing young

people's potential is a goal of both the school and the students; and that relational qualities of day-to-day living at NCA interact with students' development.

In this chapter, I synthesize and interpret these findings in light of my conceptual framework and the concepts of critical and transcendent engagement, described in Chapter 2. Appendix C illustrates the process I used to derive analytic themes from my findings. I ground my discussion in relevant literature, integrating descriptive and analytical theories from areas such as adolescent development, learning theory, and community setting analysis to examine and explain the data. I then provide a critical synthesis of the overall discussion, drawing out principles from NCA's approach to building young people's capacity for critical and transcendent engagement in a twofold purpose. In so doing, I construct a holistic understanding of the data and a layered synthesis of the findings, my interpretations, and relevant literature. Throughout, I aim to maintain a critical posture, questioning my own assumptions and raising alternative interpretations (see Appendix D for a summary of this analytical process). This chapter's discussion is intended to contribute to discourse regarding the potential of youth to engage in a twofold process of personal and societal wellbeing and progress, the role of schools in building capacity for this type of engagement, and the relationship between student agency and school structure that engenders an environment in which capacity for engagement can be built. In the following chapter I discuss the conclusions and recommendations I draw from my discussion.

### **Chapter Overview**

My three research questions structure the first sections of this chapter. First, I examine what thought-action patterns demonstrated by NCA students indicate that capacity for critical and transcendent engagement is emerging. My analysis in Chapter 4 found that wisdom and a world-embracing vision are key capacities targeted by NCA. Further examination of the data leads me to suggest that these capacities do not so much "emerge" as they are actively constructed through participation in various school structures that promote engagement and



empowerment. Using Maton's (2008) framework for empowering community settings and drawing on Critical Psychology as my conceptual framework, I discuss the characteristics of NCA that contribute to a relationship between structure and agency that builds students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. From this discussion emerges an emphasis on the relational environment as a mediator between institutional capacity and wellbeing and individual capacity and wellbeing.

Building on the first section, I then examine the mechanisms that contribute to NCA structures and their underlying values becoming represented in students' patterns of thought and action. It is clear that these mechanisms operate through the mediated relationships among individual, institution, and community identified in the first section. My analysis in Chapter 4 found that the transformative centre of the school is the goal of releasing the potential of young people; I also found that students share this goal, aspiring to use their powers but requiring support and channels for action. In this chapter I build on these findings to examine how school structures interact with student experiences in mutual pursuit of this shared aim. I draw on three theories to examine this interaction and to identify mechanisms that facilitate school-student connection: first I employ behaviour setting theory (Barker, 1968; Schoggen, 1989) to identify the basic components of the relationship and the ways contextual features cause certain lines of action to be perceived as feasible while obscuring others; second, I use systems theory to consider the impacts of social processes (Tseng & Seidman, 2007) on the relationship between structure and thought-action patterns, and integrate the effects of relational structures – norms, relationships, and participation in activities – into my discussion; third, I return to principles of Critical Psychology discussed in Chapter 2 (Holzkamp, 2013; Tolman, 1994) as a tool for broadening this analysis to include the societal-historical roots of dominant patterns of structure and behaviour for schools and students. This discussion reinforces the central role of interpersonal relationships and community in shaping the connection between students and school. It also highlights the influence of NCA structures and

values on students' growing capacity to break out from dominant patterns, as they forge new modes of thought and action in the context of NCA culture and community. In turn, students describe increased participation in NCA structures and community as they witness the positive impacts of new modes of thought and action on their relationships with friends, family, and society. These reciprocal relationships among individual, community, and institution are enabled by the common goals shared by the school and students and the related activities and opportunities, which reduce the discrepancy between the interests of dominant forces in the school and the students, raise awareness of the life-world relationship, and expand the field of possibility available to students (Holzkamp, 2013; Tolman, 1994). This discussion reiterates my finding that capacity is actively constructed through the student-community-school relationship, rather than passively emerging.

Having established the mechanisms that operate through the student-community-school relationship to build capacity, I then examine what qualities of the NCA environment influence the strength of the relationship between school structures, community dynamics, and students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. In addition to the structures and opportunities available at NCA to encourage students' active participation in school activities, positive peer groups (Brown, 1990) and teacher relationships (Tseng & Seidman, 2007) in the social ecology of a school are also vital for student wellbeing and growth (Entwhistle, 1990). The strength of the connection between students and NCA is mediated by these relational supports (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007), emphasizing again the role of the school community as a third protagonist in the school environment. To elaborate further on this theme, I consider the influence of alienation on students' development and discuss the practices of NCA that counteract and prevent alienation. For this purpose, I turn to Mann's (2001) analysis of structural causes and responses to alienation in education settings, which provides a helpful framework to assess NCA's ability to prevent alienation and promote engagement.

Overall, the discussion up to that point will have illustrated three important aspects of

students' developing capacity for critical and transcendent engagement in the NCA setting: that structural and relational characteristics of the school enable students' engagement and promote empowerment, that the students' thought-action patterns related to critical and transcendent engagement are shaped through dynamic and reciprocal feedback in complex student-community-school relationships, and that a positive school community contributes to an environment in which alienation is actively prevented and a strong connection between school structure and student development is promoted. These three insights about the NCA setting respond to the three recommendations I made in Chapter 2 in response Watts and Flanagan's (2007) critique of the vertical conception of schools as tools of political socialization and control. These recommendations were that transformative schools (a) build and unleash young people's capacity to think and act critically and creatively about society, (b) centralize the participation of diverse youth as an organizing principle for the formulation of structure, and (c) foster environments in which young people work together with peers and role models to reach shared goals in the context of safe and nurturing relationships. In the following chapter, I identify key processes of the NCA setting conducive to these institutional capacities.

I conclude this chapter with a fourth section, in which I consider the three protagonists of the NCA environment identified through this discussion. Building on the initial assumption of this research – which considered the school and the individual to be the primary actors in the school setting – I identify a tripartite matrix that replaces this assumption, consisting of the individual, the institution, and the community and the dynamics among them. In short, individual capacity to participate and grow in the setting is fostered in accordance with the capacity of the institution to channel individual and relational powers that generate a community distinguished by a culture conducive to agency and cooperation. In this section I discuss this matrix, identifying its role in schooling to promote capacity for critical and spiritual engagement in a twofold purpose of personal and societal wellbeing and progress.

## Setting Characteristics Conducive to Engagement

My first research question asks what characteristics of NCA impact students' patterns of thought and action conducive to critical and transcendent engagement. The data presented in Chapter 4 illustrate several such characteristics of the NCA setting and their impacts on students. Of particular note are the effects on students' wisdom, world-embracing vision, and spiritual development, which were emphasized by all research participants and are parallel to critical and transcendent engagement (see Appendix B). Specifically, across the three empirical categories identified – wisdom, world-embracing vision, and spiritual development – students demonstrate degrees of capacity for critical engagement: comprehensive thinking to see the world with both a critical and empathic lens, generalized action potency to challenge injustice and seek higher levels of coherence with personal and collective wellbeing, and integration of emotion and motivation to understand the world and guide goal-directed efforts. Likewise, across these three categories students also demonstrate growing capacity for self-transcendence, embedding the self in something greater – be it humanity, nature, or a spiritual realm – founded on an individual, evolving belief system characterized by principles that guide spiritual search and direct efforts to advance personal and collective wellbeing.

There are several ways to consider these impacts in more depth. One interpretation of the data could emphasize the individual-level experience of developing these capacities, which would examine characteristics of individual experience more so than setting characteristics. For this first approach, theories of wisdom and judgment (e.g., Maxwell, 2007; Vickers 1995) would provide a useful theoretical framework to understand the impacts of NCA on students. Another approach to interpretation would focus on the institutional-level, considering the generation and application of school structures that are intended to impact students' experiences. For this second approach, theories of social reality (e.g., Searle, 1995), for example, would provide a useful analytical framework to examine school structure. My lens in this research, however, precludes either an individual-focus or an institution-focus, directing

discussion toward the school structures and characteristics that, in relationship with student agency, generate an environment conducive to these impacts. In this section, therefore, I highlight the reciprocal connections among institutional characteristics, individual experience, and relational dynamics. Community psychology is helpful in this regard.

Building on previous work (e.g., Maton & Salem, 1995), Kenneth Maton (2008) has identified characteristics of empowering community settings in individual and collective change. In his analysis of community settings, Maton (2008) identifies six domains of organizations and highlights characteristics of each that are conducive to empowerment. The six domains of a setting are group-based belief system, core activities, relational environment, opportunity-role structure, leadership, and setting maintenance and change. Based on my analysis of the data, the empowering characteristics described by Maton (2008) effectively frame the relationship between features of the school and student engagement at NCA, highlighting particularly important features, such as the role of the principal. In Table 5.1, I identify NCA features relevant to each of Maton's (2008) six characteristics, along with impacts on students relevant to their growing capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. I discuss each of these characteristics and features in the following subsections.

As described in Chapters 1 and 2, in this research I focus on the construct of engagement because its framework is conducive to analysis of specific patterns of cognition, emotion, and action that are helpful in understanding young people's growing capacity to advance personal and societal wellbeing. Here I suggest that there are commonalities between engagement and empowerment that suggest Maton's (2008) framework for empowering community settings is fitting for this research. Although – like engagement – empowerment is conceptualized in various ways, Maton defines it as “a group-based, participatory, developmental process through which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and environment, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced societal marginalization” (p. 5). Maton (2008) describes engagement as

Table 5.1.

*Empowering Setting Characteristics at NCA and their Effects on Students' Capacity for Critical and Transcendent Engagement*

<b>Setting Characteristics</b> (Maton, 2008)	<b>NCA Characteristics</b>	<b>Effects on Students' Capacity for Critical &amp; Transcendent Engagement</b>
<b>Group-based belief system</b> Inspires change Strengths-based Beyond self	Releasing potential is the goal of school and students Emphasis on spiritual search and development Emphasis on service and world-embracing vision High expectations for behaviour, learning, and service Universal expectations of students' capacity to develop	Overcoming negative teen culture & interpersonal patterns Love of truth and attraction to high ideals and concepts Elaboration and application of belief system in service Shared vision of global change & sense of larger purpose Motivation driven by collective expectations of success
<b>Core activities</b> Engaging Active learning Quality	Emphasis on both service and academics Support to grapple with big questions & dilemmas Activities translate school values into action Course content is contextualized through service Opportunities for critical reflection on action	Service raises consciousness of the life-world relationship Skills of thought and action for problem-solving Confidence and ability to grapple with dilemmas Learn to analyze context and root causes of social issues Motivation and participation in school activities
<b>Relational environment</b> Support system Caring relationships Sense of community	High expectations for interpersonal conduct Contact with and appreciation of diversity Small school size Protective and safe environment Consistency and fairness of rule enforcement A network of support: -Nurturing student-teacher relationships -Supportive peer relationships	Psychological safety Rejection of "us versus them" attitudes – unity in diversity Depth of relationships beyond superficialities Growth-orientation to overcome interpersonal differences Willingness to take risks without fear of censure Personal development through self-expression & reflection
<b>Opportunity-role structure</b> Pervasive Highly accessible Multi-functional	Freedom of choice in the school environment Collective problem-solving for school-wide social issues Based on mutual-trust in the environment Promotes student choice and decision-making Chaos – challenging but promotes creativity & agility	Learn to balance multiple roles (e.g., academic & service) Sense of contribution and value in the school Ability to make wise choices for use of time and resources Develop creativity and imagination Develop initiative and adaptability in the face of chaos

<b>Leadership</b>	Strong leadership by principal links practice to values	Develop understanding of the rationale and values of NCA
Inspirational	Instantiation of values in culture and structure	Become actively involved in shaping school culture
Talented	Builds a shared and living vision	Motivated to develop a personal living vision
Shared	Leadership roles on student council open to all	Access to leadership opportunities (e.g., student council)
Committed	Creation of critical-learning & decision-making spaces	Witness a model of empowering leadership
Empowered	Continual flows of information from students to admin	
<b>Setting maintenance and change</b>	Emphasis on institutional learning practices	Build capacity for consultation (e.g., open mindedness)
Learning-focused	Tuning the environment through consultation and reflection	Build capacity for reflection (e.g., critical analysis)
Bridging mechanisms	Structures (e.g., RMT) to promote personal and interpersonal learning	Develop a learning orientation for self and school
External linkages	Building external partnerships for service	Develop a problem-solving orientation
		Experience a model of integrity between values and practice

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one dimension of this construct: empowerment is participatory and involves “active and sustained engagement” (p. 5). As such, I employ his framework with an emphasis on the engagement dimension of empowerment.

**Group-based belief system.** Maton (2008) describes a setting’s group-based belief system as its ideology, values, and assumptions, emphasizing that it is “an integral part of setting culture” and that it specifies “patterns of behaviour that are intended to produce desired outcomes” (p. 8). Of course, a setting’s belief system is not necessarily conducive to empowerment or engagement and can be used to reinforce dynamics of dominance and control (Holzkamp, 2013). Maton (2008) specifies that the group-based belief system of an empowering setting inspires change, is strengths-based, and is focused beyond the individual self. Each of these elements is evident in the research data from NCA.

An empowering belief system inspires change by identifying salient goals and clear means for their achievement (Maton, 2008). As my analysis in Chapter 4 shows, releasing young people’s potential is a goal of both the school and the students at NCA; students’ efforts to branch out from their parents and overcome negative teen culture align with NCA’s high expectations for young people’s potential and are canalized by opportunities to reshape relationships with friends, family, and society. This alignment of beliefs and goals is key to students’ engagement in the school setting because it cultivates their sense that NCA has their best interests at heart, which is conducive to trust and participation.

NCA also emphasizes that students develop their own belief systems and apply them in action, informed both by the school’s belief system and by students’ histories and experiences. The concept of belief as “that which gives meaning” opens a wide pathway of spiritual search that allows for a variety of paces and strides. NCA’s emphasis on elaborating and applying one’s belief system in action supports the students during the critical period of spiritual individuation available during adolescence, as described in Chapter 2 (Miller, 2015). It also contributes to their capacity for wisdom. Maxwell (2007) defines wisdom as “the desire,



the active endeavour, and the capacity to discover and achieve what is desirable and of value in life, both for oneself and for others” (p. 79). Richardson and Pasupathi (2005) argue that adolescence is a crucial period for wisdom development and that the establishment of “building blocks” of wisdom in this developmental stage can pave the way for continued wisdom-development throughout the lifespan. The principal’s emphasis on students becoming “lovers of truth” speaks to the underlying motivation that impels adolescents to continually refine and elaborate their belief systems. Students’ spiritual search, therefore, responds to internal developmental imperatives as well as to NCA’s effort to nurture wisdom. In short, a love of truth and an attraction to meaningful concepts and lofty ideals are empowering for the individual and the group as they develop vision and purpose.

An empowering group-based belief system is directed beyond the self, encouraging members to look outward by incorporating a shared vision and sense of larger purpose (Maton, 2008). Alongside wisdom, NCA encourages a world-embracing vision that cultivates an orientation toward social justice and world citizenship. The data indicate that this approach resonates with the students’ experiences of global identity, cultural diversity, and world citizenship in their life histories, coming to see, as one student described, their “first identity” as being “a member of the human race.” This self-concept aligns with Splitter’s (2001) emphasis on personhood as the fundamental identity of every human, as described in Chapter 2, which promotes a sense of connection to diverse others, regardless of categorical differences. In this mode of thought and action, NCA students come to think of their efforts to improve community as one piece of a world-encompassing movement. NCA’s requirement of 50 hours of service per student per year, for example, alongside a world-embracing vision, cultivates a sense of purpose among students that helps them connect their efforts to a larger process of social change. These elements speak to the effect of NCA’s group-based belief system on students’ spiritual engagement as they come to orient both their identity and their service in

terms of embeddedness in something beyond the self.

Finally, NCA's belief system is strengths-based, emphasizing that each student "has the capacity to achieve setting goals and represents a valuable setting resource" (Maton, 2008, p. 8). As the principal describes, low expectations for students "alienate, create resistance, create anger [and] frustration" and the opposite is the goal of NCA. Williams (2007) highlights that community experiences become integral to adolescents' self-concept. Whether negative or positive, "what young people live is what they know, no more, no less" (p. 813). NCA students' descriptions of the negative effects of teen culture echo these observations, agreeing with Williams's (2007) statement that "such negative expectations [are related to] low motivation, the perfect formula for apathy and inaction" (p. 813). In a supportive and challenging environment, on the other hand, "the positive expectation of success by peers and adults has the power to extend the vision of the future of those who already have self-expectation and to establish positive self-expectation in those without" (p. 813). High expectations and an environment characterized by collective expectations of success are important ingredients for student engagement (Noddings, 2003; Weinstein, 2002). This dynamic speaks to the effect of NCA's group-based belief system on students' capacity for critical engagement, as their field of possibility is broadened to expose newly viable opportunities for generalized action potency in their immediate life-world, to promote personal development and wellbeing.

NCA's values system is incongruent with a stratified vision of seeing some students as capable of achieving the school's high expectations and others as incapable. Even the teachers are held to the same high standard by the principal. Although, as the students and teachers emphasize, some of the success of this universal call to leadership might be a result of the small student population, in the NCA context, a strengths-based orientation is woven throughout its relationships and activities. Core activities are the next feature of empowering settings identified by Maton (2008).

**Core activities.** According to Maton (2008), "core activities refer to the basic

instrumental techniques used to accomplish the central mission of a setting” (p. 10). In empowering settings, these activities are engaging, encourage active learning, and are of high quality in terms of both content and delivery. In a school setting like NCA, where students spend a great deal of time and engage in a variety of activities, it can be challenging to determine which are “core” to the main goal and which are supplemental; indeed, based on the teachers’ description of a web of support at NCA that meets students’ needs and interests in different ways, the designation of what is core for development at an individual-level could differ from student-to-student at any given time. For the purpose of this discussion, however, I focus on the setting-level to identify activities that stand out as being most relevant to the development of students’ capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. In my analysis, these core activities are the WCC courses including the WCC-11 service trip, the moral dilemma activities, the Moral Capabilities Framework report card, the student council election, daily devotional-inspirational, the 50-hour service requirement, whole-school consultations and retreats, artistic activities and performances, RMT and other spaces for reflection and discipline, and the intake interview that takes place before students officially enrol.

These activities are interconnected and share several common characteristics. Of particular importance in NCA’s core activities is the mutual emphasis on service and academics. As explored in Chapter 4, in-school activities such as the WCC classes and moral dilemma exercises introduce students to provocative ideas and challenge them to bring their cognitive, emotional, and spiritual powers to bear on big questions. The context and root causes of issues are examined and students are helped to situate themselves in these issues by examining privilege, personal and collective development, and the impacts of their choices on their own moral sensibilities and on the lives of others in the world; in Holzkamp’s terminology, students are helped to become conscious of the dominant forces at work in the life-world relationship and the possibility spaces available according to their and others’ positions in that relationship. Through service, these ideas and self-concepts are applied and refined to enrich and

contextualize in-class learning and identify potential opportunities to reshape societal conditions of discrimination and injustice. The WCC-11 service trip, for example, stands out as a transformative moment for students at NCA, providing an intense period of outward-oriented service that challenges them to reach new heights of critical thinking and collective purpose.

This dual focus on service and academics promotes active learning and translates NCA's group-based belief system into action. Spaces for service that help students apply their critical thinking and skills for wise judgment contribute to their "release of potential," framed by outward-orientation, empathy, and high expectations for students' conduct and potential. In service, students see a possibility space for generalized action potency that can alter the conditions of day-to-day life for themselves and for others. NCA's core activities also provide students with opportunities to translate their personal goals and belief systems into action, building motivation and participation in school activities as they see convergence between the school's aims and their personal aims. Opportunities for feedback and critical reflection promote students' growing consciousness of the relationship between academic concepts and service experiences. Through overcoming challenges and grappling with dilemmas, students develop habits of thought and action conducive to problem-solving, applicable to their own lives and to social issues. In these dimensions, there is evidence of the comprehensive mode of cognition described by Holzkamp, in students' ability to reflect on and analyze existing conditions and identify potential future states that are worth working towards.

In terms of the quality of activities' content and delivery, these data do not provide an evaluation-level analysis; further research could be conducted to analyze their quality on the basis of internal and external standards of empowerment, engagement, and efficacy. There is some indication in the data that chaos in the opportunity-role structure of the school (see below) impacts the quality of core activities. On the other hand, the flexibility and dynamism of NCA activities are described as being conducive to creativity, initiative, and agile responses to emergent opportunities. Also, in regard to WCC, students were vague about the content and

benefits of the twelfth-grade content, which made it difficult to assess the quality of this activity. Based on students' descriptions of the WCC-10 and WCC-11 classes, WCC-12 seems well positioned to assist students to delve deeply into critical examination of social issues in a way that fosters passion and action, but it was not clear from these data whether that opportunity was harnessed for these students. Further research could focus on the content and experience of grade 12 at NCA, including students' transition out of high school and the resulting opportunities to apply skills and patterns of thought and action in new arenas.

Overall, based on the present data, core activities across the NCA setting are described as meaningful and congruent with school beliefs and students' values and backgrounds. Further, they promote active learning through action and critical reflection on action in light of students' life histories and course concepts. The fruits of these activities are significantly impacted by the protective nature of the NCA environment, which interacts with the quality of relationships among students and between students and teachers. A nurturing relational environment is the third dimension of empowering settings identified by Maton (2008).

**Relational environment.** Maton's (2008) conceptualization of the relational environment "encompasses the quality and nature of interpersonal and intergroup relations in a setting" (p. 11). In empowering settings, he says, "a high-quality relational environment provides the relationships and interpersonal resources necessary for substantially increasing control over one's life and environment" (p. 11) and includes an encompassing support system, caring relationships, and a sense of community. In-line with Evans and Prilleltensky's (2007) framework, my findings indicate that the promotion of wellbeing at the setting-level (i.e., establishing an engaging and empowering environment at NCA) enhances students' personal wellbeing and that this relationship "depends largely on relational well-being" (p. 685) in a mediating role. This pattern indicates that caring relationships among students and between teachers and students contribute to a unified school environment conducive to engagement. Gina's description of the school as an "arena" for learning, for example, emphasizes the quality

of relationships in the school, which facilitate a mode of collaboration and personal development through which students, teachers, and administrators co-create a positive school environment without needing to resort to excessive structure.

In terms of student-student relationships, my analysis indicates that the network of connections built among students at NCA is characterized by (a) a basis in the values of the school, not least the emphasis on unity in diversity; (b) a depth attained through effort exerted to move beyond the trends of dominant youth culture and superficial agreements and disagreements; and (c) an emergent and dynamic nature over time. Structurally, the manner by which high expectations about mutual trust in relationships are communicated by NCA is an important influence on this network, as are opportunities for students to encounter each other in ways that bridge differences. These factors contribute to a relational environment in which students do not necessarily get along at all times, but where patterns of behaviour over time trend toward unity, collaboration, and mutual support.

In terms of student-teacher relationships, my analysis highlights that these relationships tend to be characterized by (a) a basis in the values of the school, not least its emphasis on individual and relational wellbeing and (b) a level of complexity in terms of how different teachers' strengths and styles might serve the varied needs of students in different ways at different times. Structurally, the small size of the school is an important influence on student-teacher relationships. Another important influence is how NCA values are manifested in relational structures, such that the core goal of releasing potential is not displaced by other processes, such as discipline. Through these relationships and their associated norms and patterns of interaction, a positive school climate emerges and a safe space for development – a greenhouse – is established.

The role of a positive school climate for student development harkens back to Dewey's (1916) emphasis on the social dimensions of school life and is reflected more recently in a body of literature that validates its importance (see Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009;

Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alissandro, 2013). Among the beneficial effects of a positive social climate is psychological safety, which promotes student learning and healthy development (Devine & Cohen, 2007). Clear in the present work is the students' and school's emphasis on the importance of a safe environment within which students can take risks, feel supported, and mature through the natural upheavals of adolescence. The data also indicate that the safety of the school environment depends greatly on the quality of student-student and student-teacher relationships in the school. This agrees with reviews of the relevant literature on school social climate (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013).

Behaviour management and discipline is a particularly important site in which the teacher-student relationship colours students' experiences and development. The consistency and fairness of rule enforcement in schools is another factor that affects both students' and teachers' sense of safety in school (Thapa et al., 2013). At NCA, emphasis on reflection and problem-solving – even as students face consequences for breaking rules – conveys to students, as Jared describes, that “the rules aren't being enforced just so the rules can be enforced. The rules are being enforced so [NCA] can help people.” This dynamic, which the teachers acknowledge originates in both the values of NCA and its small size, frees students from fear and frees teachers from the stress and worry that arises when behaviour management “overwhelms every other aspect of what you're trying to get done” as teachers had experienced in other schools. In the context of positive relationships, therefore, discipline at NCA becomes an opportunity for learning, personal growth, and deeper engagement in the school setting.

In this relational environment, students feel free to try new things, express themselves through the arts and other means, and make decisions that impact their own lives and the school environment. These relationships remove barriers to students' engagement, broadening the field of possibility; as Inga highlights: “We're given a lot of freedom here. The teachers and staff, they trust us with big decisions.” This freedom relates to the opportunity-role structure of the school, the next dimension of empowering settings identified by Maton (2008).

**Opportunity-role structure.** Maton's (2008) description of the "availability and configuration of roles within a setting" highlights that, in an empowering setting, "a viable opportunity role structure provides meaningful opportunities for participation, learning, and development for a range of individuals who vary in background, interests, skills, and prior experience" (p. 11). Such a structure, Maton (2008) says, is pervasive, with a large number of roles available at multiple levels of the setting; highly accessible in terms of requiring varying levels of skill, responsibility, and self-confidence, opening new opportunities as members' skills increase; and multifunctional in that it concurrently provides opportunities for skill development, skill utilization, and the exercise of responsibility, voice, and influence.

To elaborate this concept for this case study, I consider how opportunities for NCA students to take on empowering roles in the setting include an array of collective and individual elements, as well as active and passive dimensions. By collective I mean that these roles are open to all students involved and impact all students involved (e.g., whole-school consultations); by individual I mean that these roles are open to some students (e.g., student council) and primarily impact the individual or small groups in the school (e.g., striving for academic excellence). By active I mean that these roles require conscious thought, intention, and agency; by passive I mean that these roles are occupied naturally (in accordance with students' individual capacity), either as a result of being a member of the setting (e.g., peer role modelling), or as a result of dynamics of the relational environment that limit other roles (e.g., creating an inclusive environment). Table 5.2 shows a matrix of these roles along these four dimensions.

The principal emphasizes that excessive structure can undermine student engagement and the release of potential. What Abbott (2005) calls "over schooling" (p. 16) – through which more structure and more time spent in school is expected to lead to better student outcomes – "creates a consumer mentality," according to the principal, which he says can "alienate, create resistance, create anger [and] frustration." This type of relationship to education is



Table 5.2.

*Matrix of Active and Passive Opportunity Roles on the Individual and Collective Levels at NCA*

	Active	Passive
Individual	Student council	
	Service roles & leadership	Peer role modeling
	Academic excellence	Sense of value and contribution
	Acting against prejudice, in and beyond the school	Service leadership
Collective	Whole-school decision making	Influence of the Grade 12 cohort
	WCC-11 service trip teamwork	Creating an inclusive environment
	Peer encouragement	

disempowering for students, he says, and “creates a whole mediocre system.” For this reason, NCA strives to strike a balance between providing opportunities for action and leadership in the school while also promoting students’ decision-making in how they choose to participate.

At NCA, the quality of participation originates in the relationship between school and students. As the previous subsection on the relational environment hinted, availability of roles is not sufficient to ensure participation; mutual trust must be established to motivate students to participate. Trust in students begets trust in the school, contributing to what Zeldin and colleagues (2000) call a “youth-infused” organization, which values the partnership of young people and intentionally creates structures at multiple levels of the organization to promote participation in decision-making. Students emphasize the value of having voice and choice in their development through school activities – having access to opportunities for spiritual development, service, and academic excellence, for example, but retaining their agency in how and when they participate, in many cases. As Chantelle says: “When someone tries to force me to do something, I don’t want to do it. I will do it but... I won’t do it with love.” Several school structures are not optional – academic coursework being the most obvious – but flexibility is available even in obligatory components. The standard of behaviour and high expectations for student conduct set by the school is unshifting, however; NCA’s core values are not sacrificed for the element of student choice.

One challenge in NCA's approach is that freedom of choice for participation can lead to a sense of chaos and doubt at the school-level, according to the teachers. This can impact the quality and availability of activities and opportunities in unpredictable ways. Although this situation is aversive to teachers who have to deal with the resulting unpredictability, little in the student data indicates that this drawback is aversive to students; some even described how these challenges open opportunities for student input and decision-making, contributing to initiative and adaptability. By learning to balance multiple roles and responsibilities (e.g., academics and service, see Box 4.2) in this environment, students co-create the school environment, engaging in the spaces created by chaos to promote alignment between their goals and activity delivery. These opportunities for adaptability and creativity, therefore, are aligned with the capacities for critical and transcendent engagement and increase several empowering dimensions of core activities (see section above) and NCA's opportunity-role structure – but at what cost to the school or teachers? Further inquiry could better identify the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to opportunity-role structure in school settings.

**Leadership.** “Leadership,” Maton (2008) says, “refers to the qualities of the key individuals with formal and/or informal responsibility for a setting” (p. 12). Leaders directly impact setting members, or indirectly influence them by motivating and influencing those (e.g., teachers, staff, student council) who pass on that influence to others. In empowering organizations, leadership is inspirational, talented, shared, committed, and empowered. Each of these dimensions has specific characteristics: inspirational leaders convey a strong vision, motivate action, and provide a role model; talented leadership includes the qualities of interpersonal dynamics that enable inspiration, and organizational dynamics that ensure needed resources are generated; shared and delegated leadership ensures that responsibilities and opportunities are distributed and open to expansion as new leaders arise; committed leaders are dedicated to the organization and its members; and empowered leaders are confident in their autonomy and access to needed resources (Maton, 2008). The present

research elaborates these principles to consider the distinctive relationship between leadership and the instantiation of structure at NCA, focusing on the role of the principal as a central dimension of institutional leadership.

***The principal mediates structure and culture.*** Holding the most implicit and explicit power in the setting, NCA's principal forms conceptual and practical bridges between intended structures and experienced structures, translating school values and vision into culture. Although culture is defined in many ways (e.g., Denison, 1996; Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Norton, Zacher, & Ashkanasy, 2015; Shein, 2004), these conceptualizations share an emphasis on patterns of behaviour (including activities and agency), habits of thought (including values and beliefs), and modes of expression (including symbols and language). Schein (2004) suggests that "leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin" (p. 1). "It can be argued," he says, "that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture" (p. 11). For example, NCA's culture is influenced by the principal's insistence that issues must be "taken to the level of principle" so that the school's vision is always the compass. This emphasis impacts every dimension of the setting described by Maton (2008) discussed in this chapter. In this way, the principal influences interpretation of the value and quality of structures, and what constitutes a problem or a success in any given instance. At NCA, the principal encourages a reciprocal relationship in this regard, soliciting students' and teachers' perceptions of the state of the school, and allowing this feedback to shape and influence his choices and actions as principal.

Structuration theory tells us that structure exists insofar that is created and recreated through agency (Giddens, 1984; Stones, 2005); in the case of NCA, the existence and influence of a structure is mediated by the power of the principal to cultivate a culture that manifests intended structures in patterns of behaviour, habits of thought, and modes of expression. These dimensions of culture and agency emanate, in part, from the shared vision rooted in school values and nurtured by the principal's leadership.

***The principal cultivates shared vision.*** Senge (2006) describes a shared vision as a defining element of inspirational leadership conducive to institutional learning: “Vision establishes an overarching goal. The loftiness of the target compels new ways of thinking and acting. A shared vision also provides a rudder to keep the learning process on course when stresses develop” (p. 195). The principal’s leadership practices that maintain vision as the focal point “create a climate that encourages personal vision” and “communicate [a sense of vision] in such a way that others are encouraged to share their visions” (p. 198). The principal is “willing to continually share [his] personal visions [and is] prepared to ask, ‘Will you follow me?’” which “can be difficult” and “can feel very vulnerable” (p. 200). According to Senge, “this is the art of visionary leadership – how shared visions are built from personal visions” (p. 198).

This process fosters students’ participation in co-creating the school environment and contributes to vibrant culture: “When more people come to share a common vision,” Senge (2006) says,

the vision may not change fundamentally. But it becomes more alive, more real in the sense of a mental reality that people can truly imagine achieving. [Leaders] now have partners, “cocreators” ...Early on, when they are nurturing an individual vision, people may say it is “my vision.” But as the shared vision develops, it becomes both “my vision” and “our vision.” (p. 198)

In addition to creating spaces for learning, then, the principal strives to ensure that the school’s vision is maintained and given life as a dimension of institutional and individual capacity and wellbeing, holding decisions and directions accountable to NCA’s core values.

***The principal distributes leadership.*** At NCA, shared vision is translated into shared responsibility when the principal promotes distributes leadership across the school environment. “Leadership,” according to the principal, “only works if we believe everyone is [a leader].” The election of any student onto student council, without nomination or electioneering, and the power given to the student council to shape the school environment are

examples of this principle in action. Likewise, in his discussion of flows of information through the school, the principal highlights how “the environment is the responsibility of all of us” and that “everything should begin with a conversation.” According to Senge (2006), this is the role of “leader as teacher,” characterized by a “spirit of a leader as a grower of people” and indicated by those leaders that “create space for learning and invite people into that space,” in contrast to “less-masterful teachers” who “focus on what they are teaching and how they are doing it” (p. 329). Critical-learning spaces at NCA invite the school community to grow personally and collectively, taking on leadership and responsibility to shape the environment, as in the example of the whole-school consultation about backbiting (Box 4.1). My observations suggest that the most frequent pattern of school decision-making involves a great deal of consultation and airing of perspectives and ideas in light of school values before a decision is made, either collectively or by the administration.

***Principles of being principal.*** Of course, the longevity of the school as an institution depends on leadership being independent of any particular individual. My analysis indicates that the current principal’s leadership style is a factor of his personal history and characteristics, alongside his engagement with the structures and culture of NCA. Based on these data, it is reasonable to expect that harmony of school values and vision with the principal’s personal patterns of behaviour, habits of thought, and modes of expression would be conducive to effective leadership at NCA. Future principals will bring their own flavour to the role, with differing positive and negative effects, but the DNA of the school remains strong if the fundamental purpose of this leadership position remains clear and includes each of the dimensions identified by Maton (2008). As such, it is worthwhile to consider a theory of leadership that could guide NCA’s administration at this level.

A metaphor might be helpful in this regard. If culture and values are the rudder of a ship, as Senge (2006) describes, the principal is not the captain, but the chain that links the rudder to the ship’s wheel. The principal invites the school community to manage the helm

together – to read weather conditions and sight approaching hazards and opportunities, learning as they go and adjusting their course accordingly. Throughout, however, the principal works closely with the vice principal, teachers, and students to ensure that a strong link is maintained between the movement of the school community and NCA’s core values. A strong chain results in prompt and agile maneuvering, whereas a weak chain would fail to connect values to practice and could misdirect focus away from NCA’s core goals, leading to eddies that can turn it away from its intended course or swamp it with less important concerns. Thus, the importance of the principal’s leadership – or of a comparable leadership structure – cannot be overstated. It is vital both for staying the course and, as needed, initiating adjustments. Setting maintenance and change is the sixth organizational dimension identified by Maton (2008).

**Setting maintenance and change.** In an empowering setting, Maton (2008) says, “the organizational mechanisms used to help the setting adapt both to internal and external challenges and changes” (p. 13) include an organizational learning focus, the presence of bridging mechanisms essential to dealing with intergroup or interpersonal challenges, and external linkages that provide necessary resources and partners for the setting to accomplish its goals. These dimensions of setting maintenance and change enable an adaptive response to challenges based on careful assessment and alteration of underlying mental models and the structures that emerge from them.

Senge (2006) argues that “none of us can carry an organization in our minds... What we carry in our heads are images, assumptions, and stories.” These are “mental models” that “determine not only how we make sense of the world, but how we take action” (p. 164). The assumptions underlying mental models become hazardous if they are allowed implicit reign over action, without critique or analysis for continued usefulness (Evans, Hanlin, & Prilleltensky, 2007). One dimension of effective organizational adaptation, then, is the ability to “surface and test” (Senge, 2006, p. 171) mental models. In his discussion of the critical learning mode in which NCA strives to engage, the principal emphasizes several learning practices:

adopting a posture of critical self-reflection to continually assess coherence between values and practice, operating in a learning mode through cycles of action and reflection, and addressing discrepancies between intention and action that are made evident by continual “tuning ourselves”. These learning practices share an overarching goal of maintaining the school’s integrity to its core processes and values, avoiding distraction and dilution. Based on the principal’s account, we see how ongoing “tuning of the environment” through consultation and reflection provides opportunities for collective identification of the mental models that influence day-to-day life at NCA. These opportunities also provide infrastructure for innovation and experimentation to test new manifestations of existing mental models (e.g., new spaces for consultation) or generate new mental models to test (e.g., when mandatory service hours replaced encouragement of service, as described in Box 4.2). Further, we see attention to ongoing critical learning in how teachers and administrators come together regularly to “read the social reality of the students” and identify existing or potential structures to respond to emerging opportunities and needs.

As a bridging mechanism within the school, NCA’s orientation toward institutional learning promotes a similar orientation at the relational and individual levels. RMT, for example, provides a space in which students can address personal and interpersonal challenges within a reflective framework that promotes planning and problem-solving. The students also describe how they orient themselves toward interpersonal challenges as opportunities for personal and relational growth.

How NCA builds bridges beyond the school environment is largely beyond the scope of this research, although the WCC-11 service trip, for example, depends on partnerships with groups and resources in other countries, as well as the support of parents and students’ home communities who often raise money for the trip. Further research could examine the intersections between NCA’s mode of learning and its ability to access resources and partners outside of the setting.

Although Table 5.1 and the preceding subsections have separated these six dimensions of an empowering organization, it is evident in the data that they operate in concert in the NCA setting. The example provided in Box 4.2 of promoting a balance between academics and service helpfully demonstrates this concerted effect of NCA's structure and culture on students' empowerment and engagement in a twofold process of personal and collective development.

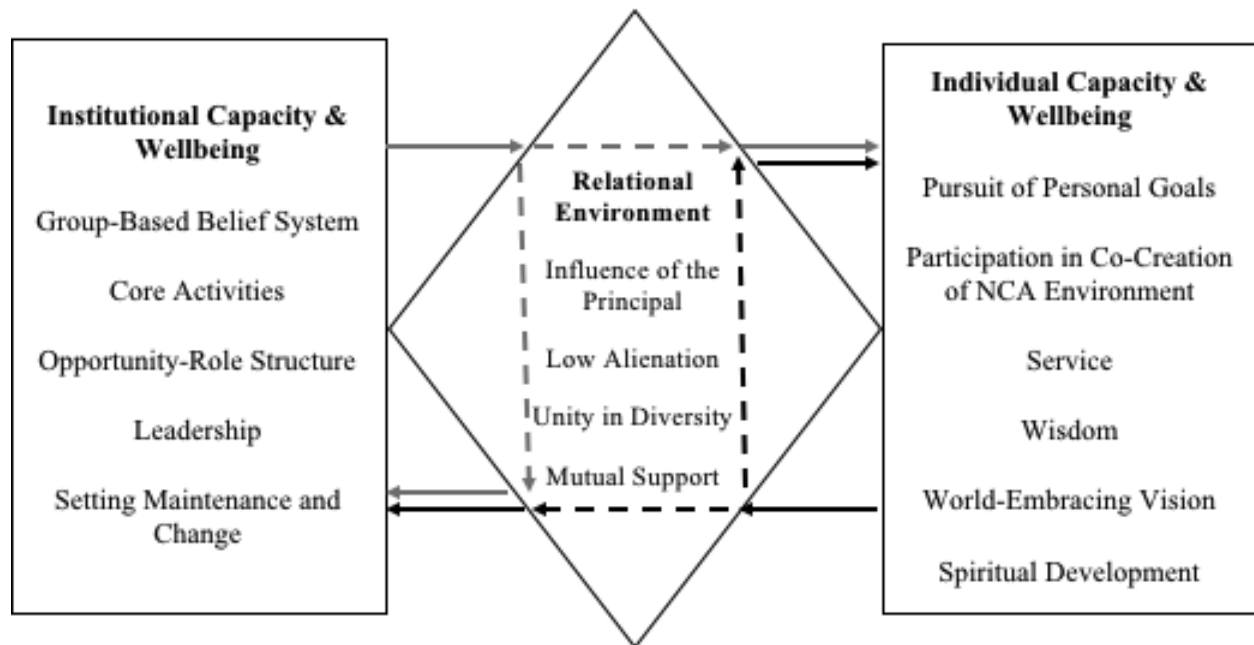
**Summary: Research question one.** My first research question asks what characteristics of NCA impact students' patterns of thought and action conducive to critical and transcendent engagement. In this section's discussion, I have focused my interpretation on setting-level characteristics of NCA (Maton, 2008) and their impacts on students' engagement with the school's structures and principles. My analysis of these characteristics highlights an important insight: the school is continually learning and refining its ability to translate its underlying vision and values into reality through structures, building institutional capacity in parallel to students' growing capacity to translate their beliefs into practice. NCA's core vision, values, and approach are the key ingredients used in many ways throughout the school and yielding greater or lesser impacts on students' capacity in keeping with the school's capacity to maintain fidelity to its vision, values, and approach. In effect, the quality of the characteristics of NCA as an empowering setting (Maton, 2008) – in light of its vision, values, and approach – significantly impact the effectiveness NCA in building capacity for critical and transcendent engagement.

Core activities, for example, promote consciousness of the life-world relationship and the possibility spaces available through service and other lines of action to alter the conditions of day-to-day life for oneself and for others. In the school's relational environment, students live out principles of unity in diversity and mutual support as they encounter cultural and personality differences, providing a microcosmic model of the common personhood that characterizes people wherever they live. The opportunity-role structure provides space for active service, building a sense of initiative and responsibility, and also for passive service,



which contributes to a consciousness that one's actions inevitably affect others, near and far. Through the principal's leadership, the school's vision of student potential becomes shared and gains vitality, as does the co-creation of the school environment and culture, including opportunities for setting maintenance and change. A learning mode characterizes the school's response to problems and change, which is central to the continual reweaving of spiritual development, wisdom, and a world-embracing vision into the NCA environment.

This discussion identifies a second key insight: the continual interactions between setting-level structures and student agency in the generation of day-to-day school life are mediated by the relational environment. This mediated relationship is illustrated in Figure 5.1, identifying the interacting and reciprocal influence of institutional and individual capacity building, mediated through the relational environment, including the influence of the principal (discussed above) and three dimensions discussed further below: low alienation, unity in



*Figure 5.1.* Structural relationship between institutional capacity, relational environment, and individual capacity at NCA

diversity, and mutual support. In the next section, I examine this relationship more closely in order to identify mechanisms through which the structures and core values described in this section come to be represented in students' thought-action patterns.

## **Expanding the Field of Possibility: The Effects of Shared Goals**

My second research question concerns the mechanisms through which school structures and their underlying vision become manifested in students' patterns of thought and action. The data presented in Chapter 4 illustrate how students come into relationship with NCA. As section 4.2 on "the purpose is potential" demonstrates, rather than a unidirectional mechanism of values transmission from school to students, there is a nuanced connection of reciprocity and convergence between the students and institution as dual protagonists, mutually building a community based on shared aims. Students arrive at NCA with interests and goals for their development: in general, they want to branch out from their parents and familiar communities, and to overcome negative aspects of teen culture. They also arrive with differing levels of readiness to engage with these goals and processes. As time passes and through a variety of experiences at NCA, students become more conscious of their goals and how they converge with the goals of the school, especially in its focus on co-creating a school environment that unleashes students' potential to improve their own lives and the communities around them. As students witness their growing ability to reshape relationships with friends, family, and society, they come to trust that the work of NCA is in their best interests and participate more actively in school structures. The strength of this relationship impacts the growing alignment between NCA's vision, values, and approach, and the students' patterns of thought and action in and beyond the school environment. Based on these findings, my second analytical theme examines the effects of NCA and students sharing common goals.

To understand the mechanisms that facilitate this relationship, I use three guiding theories. I begin with behaviour settings theory (e.g., Barker, 1968; Schoggen, 1989), which accounts for the physical and social accommodations environments make for certain behaviours (and not others) and how individuals respond to these accommodations on the basis of perceived opportunities for action, or "affordances". Although behaviour settings theory yields vital insight into the implicit mechanisms of structure-agency influence, in the

case of NCA explicit effort is made to nurture norms, relationships, and activities that reduce backbiting. Social processes (Tseng & Seidman, 2007) – a dimension of systems theory – provide helpful grounding in this regard and are the second guiding theory for this analysis. Social processes theory also highlights the active role of students in participating in the norms, relationships, and activities that characterize the school environment. What both of these theories lack is the scope and language to consider societal-historical forces that influence the conditions experienced in a setting and the agency of its members. For this, I turn to Critical Psychology (Holzkamp, 2013; Tolman, 1995), which, as I discussed in Chapter 2, emphasizes the importance of individuals coming to consciously relate to the life-world relationship and possibilities for action in order to expand opportunities. At NCA, this theory illustrates the dynamic relationships among the school, the students, and society, which contribute to an upward trajectory of learning toward positive patterns of being and doing.

To frame my discussion of these three theories, I use the illustrative example of backbiting, a ubiquitous practice in adolescent culture, according to the students, yet problematized and targeted by NCA's value system and structures. The rich data on students' experiences of backbiting, the school's response to incidences of backbiting, and students' reactions to this response make backbiting a helpful example of how structural features of the school environment impact students' thought-action patterns, and vice versa. I begin this analysis with the theory of behaviour settings.

**Introducing causal loop diagrams.** In order to illustrate the interweaving of structure and thought-action patterns in the NCA environment, I use causal loop diagrams through this section. These are a helpful systems-thinking tool used to map the structure of a system in response to a question or problem, identifying the key variables at work and the relationships among them. I consider this tool to be especially useful in case-study research because it transcends reliance on seeming correlations by identifying what underlying processes enable and constrain dynamics: "correlations among variables reflect the past *behaviour* of a system,"

suggests Sterman (2000), but “correlations do not represent the *structure* of the system... [P]reviously reliable correlations among variables may break down” (p. 141, emphasis in original). Mapping the structure with causal loop diagrams can challenge easy explanations for behaviour, calling into question simplistic accounts of cause and effect by indicating how feedback influences systems. Causal loops include the two types of feedback I discussed in Chapter 2: reinforcing loops (those that exacerbate a pattern, accelerating a positive or negative trajectory) and balancing or stabilizing loops (goal-oriented processes that initiate corrective action in response to discrepancies between a current state of affairs and the goal

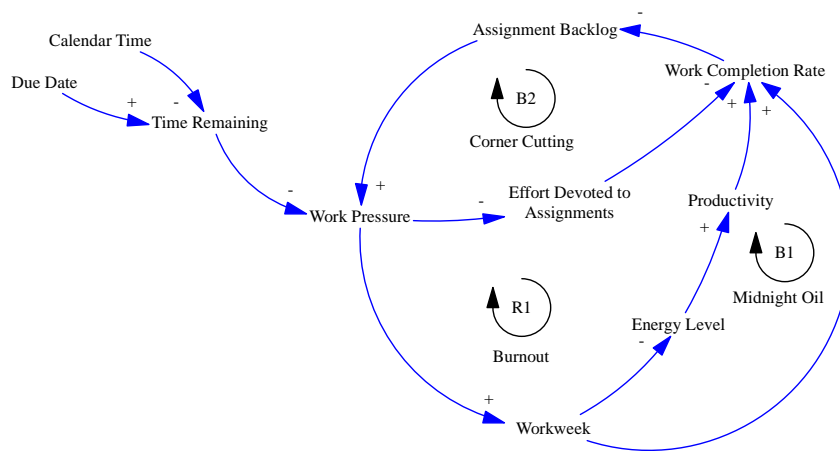


Figure 5.2. Example of a causal loop diagram

state). Figure 5.2 is an example of how these loops operate in the example of student burnout over time (figure adapted from Sterman, 2000, p. 165); the arrow-encircled letter (R or B) at the centre of each loop indicates the type of feedback at work – reinforcing or balancing.

As the example diagram demonstrates, relationships between variables are directional, indicated by arrow-headed vectors. Accompanying each arrow is an indicator of the nature of the relationship, or correlation, between these variables. It is vital to note that a plus sign (+) indicates that, all other variables held constant, these two variables change in the *same direction*; for example: as work pressure increases/decreases, the amount of time per week spent on assignments (“workweek”) also increases/decreases. In contrast, a minus sign (-) indicates that, all other variables held constant, these two variables change in the *opposite*

*direction* from each other; for example: as the amount of time spent on assignment per week increases, the student's energy level decreases, and vice versa. Tracing these relationships in Figure 5.2, for example, we can see how a student with approaching due dates feels increased pressure to complete assignments leading to "corner cutting" (balancing loop 1): pressure to complete assignments decreases the amount of effort devoted to each assignment, which increases the work completion rate, reducing the backlog of assignments, thereby reducing the sense of pressure. Another path to reducing this pressure is "burning the midnight oil" (balancing loop 2): pressure to complete assignments increases the amount of time per week spent on assignments, increasing the work completion rate, leading to reduced assignment backlog and reduced sense of pressure. These two balancing loops are working against the reinforcing loop of burnout: pressure increases the amount of time per week spent on assignments, decreasing the student's energy level, decreasing their productivity, and decreasing the work completion rate; the assignment backlog climbs and work pressure increases. In complex interaction, these three loops illustrate patterns of behaviour and experience that characterize a student coping with a heavy assignment load.

Like any model of human behaviour, causal loop models are simplifications (Meadows, 2008; Sterman, 2000). This limitation should be kept in mind when interpreting these diagrams. Causal loop models do, however, effectively convey dimensions of complexity, dynamism, and reciprocity in human systems. I use these diagrams throughout this section to illustrate how structures and agency interact in the NCA environment, and how these relationships ultimately impact students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement.

**The school as a behaviour setting.** The theory of behaviour settings (Barker, 1968; Schoggen, 1989) suggests that an individual's behaviour cannot be understood in isolation from their environment; neither can the environment be fully understood in isolation from the patterns of behaviour that go on in its context. Barker (1968) provides the example of getting a filling in a dentist's office; patients getting their cavities filled is the "standing pattern of

behaviour” in this setting, which is matched by the encompassing “milieu” of the dentist’s office, tools, and societal role as a medical professional. In their intersections, standing patterns of behaviour and the milieu of a setting generate “ecological units” that consist of two quasi-objective, hybrid dimensions: the “environment piece” and the “behaviour piece.” Both include physiological, social, psychological, and behavioural dimensions. The degree of fit between these pieces in any instance is considered the “affordance” of the environment to a specific behaviour. Behaviour setting theory provides a helpful framework to begin to analyze student behaviour in the NCA environment.

When students arrive at NCA, they report significant differences between its environment and previously unquestioned societal and school environments. Chantelle describes the differences in terms of both messages prevalent in these environments (“people tell [youth]... that they can’t do anything, they’re not capable of anything”) and the response from youth (“...but if you [hear] ‘you’re capable to change the world’ then you can be capable...”). Students also describe the difference at NCA in relation to several problems that they attribute to expectations for “typical” adolescent behaviour, including shallow friendships, problematic alcohol and drug use, excessive sexualization of peers, bullying, boredom, and backbiting. Encountering the NCA environment and its milieu of safety, trust, excellence, spiritual development, and moral decision-making is described by students as contributing to a shift in their self-concept; “typical” adolescent behaviour is no longer the only viable option in the NCA environment.

An important dimension of the shift students experience at NCA is a change in the affordances made available by the school environment. These changes are important because previous patterns of behaviour normalized by the milieus of societal and public-school life are suddenly mismatched with expectations and reactions in the NCA environment. Similarly, the affordances of the NCA setting make new patterns of behaviour viable for students. As a preliminary example, to be elaborated throughout this section, students new to NCA quickly

realize that backbiting is actively discouraged by the school administration based on its value stance that backbiting is “the destroyer of unity.” This pattern of behaviour at the level of the administration and teachers reduces the perceived affordance of backbiting. In this environment, instigating backbiting holds greater risk of backlash or rejection from peers,

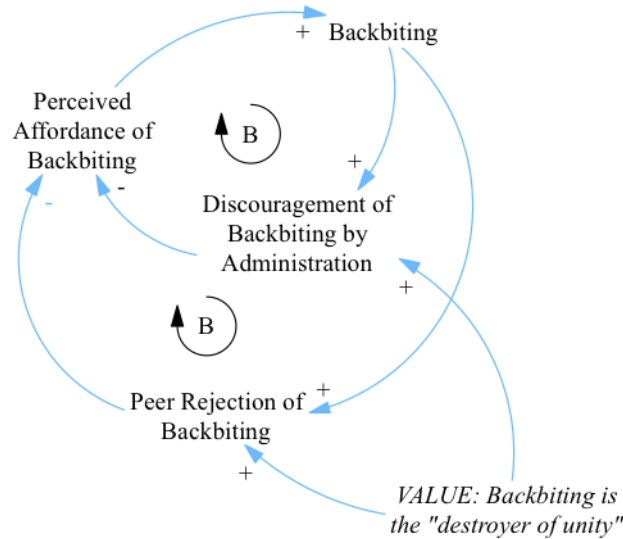


Figure 5.3. Causal loop diagram: Behaviour settings theory and backbiting at NCA

reducing its incidence. Over time, students might themselves adopt the value stance of the school and begin to actively discourage backbiting, further reducing the perceived affordance of this behaviour pattern. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 5.3.

The perceived affordance of backbiting – its fit to the environment – speaks to the connections between individual behaviour and structure. In light of NCA’s effort to promote unity in diversity and its belief that backbiting is the destroyer of unity, the natural goal would be to decrease perceived affordance of backbiting through structures that discourage backbiting and by promoting students’ peer-to-peer rejection of backbiting. To determine whether NCA achieves this goal, we would need to know more about what setting features influence these factors and the perceived affordances of backbiting. Systems theory provides insight into these dimensions.

**Social processes and behaviour in a setting.** Tseng and Seidman (2007) use systems

theory to analyze intervention targets for youth-specific settings (e.g., schools, youth organization, etc.). Among other targets, they identify four characteristics of social processes at work in systems: social processes are (a) ongoing transactions between two or more people or groups, (b) shaped by individuals' roles within the setting, (c) involving a constant stream of action, and (d) existing in the social and temporal space among individuals. In relation to behaviour settings theory, social processes emphasize the "behaviour piece" of the relationship between milieu and patterns of action: the agency of students and other members of the setting. Tseng and Seidman (2007) identify three social processes that impact individual behaviour in settings: norms, relationships, and participation in activities.

First, norms are the typical or average behaviours in a setting and exist in the ongoing transactions between individuals' beliefs and behaviours and those of others. In education research, norms are a key dimension of defining school climate and are measured in terms of shared perceptions of the school (Chan, 1998), patterns of approval and disapproval from others in the setting (Henry, Cartland, Ruchcross, & Monahan, 2004), and expectations in the setting (Weinstein, 2002). At NCA, for example, expectations that students will be involved in regular service activities are translated into normative practices such as expressions of approval for involvement (from teachers and among students), academic accommodations for service commitments, and a sense of common purpose that arises when students hear about others' service efforts. Norms such as these increase the affordance of engagement in service in the milieu of NCA, increasing its perceived viability.

Second, relationships as social processes involve reciprocal relations among individuals and entail dimensions of content (e.g., communication, feedback, exchange), quality (e.g., diversity of connections, warmth, trust), and power (e.g., distributed access to resources, flat versus hierarchical relative power) (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). In education research, relationships between teachers and students are often considered key in young people's development and the outcomes of schools (Pianta, 2006), both in the form of dyadic



relationships and as components of social networks through which young people can connect with non-familial adults (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Jarret, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). As demonstrated in section 4.3, positive student-teacher relationships are integral to NCA's ability to promote a safe and empowering learning environment; such relationships are characterized by warmth, mutual trust and respect, authenticity, and responsiveness to opportunities to enrich the school environment. Relationships among teachers are also an important consideration in understanding school settings (Fullan, 2001). The web of support NCA teachers describe in section 4.3, for example, through which they offer their different strengths and interests to support students in diverse ways, is a vital dimension of the school's ability to be responsive to students.

A further dimension of relationships as a social process highlighted by Tseng and Seidman (2007) is the role of power; they posit that schools would ideally "structure relationships to be responsive to youths' desires and needs" but that, currently, "building youths' individual and collective power is not a central goal of [school] settings" (p. 221). There is evidence in my data, however, that NCA does make this type of empowerment a central goal, creating what Zeldin, and colleagues (2000) call a "youth-infused" organization, in which structures are intentionally created at multiple levels to promote students' participation in decision-making. One example of empowerment through relationships at NCA is students' sense of responsibility in the co-creation of the school environment. Akin to the feminist concept of making the personal political (Armitage, 1989), students become aware of the intimate, reciprocal relationship between their behaviours and the quality of their environment. Over time, they tend to orient themselves even further outward, looking beyond their personal concerns to consider the ways they are contributing to the wellbeing of the school community, and beyond the school to their families, community, and wider society. This is facilitated not only by a relational process, as students come to identify and be motivated by their common vision and goals, but also by school structures that promote their consciousness

of the individual-collective relationship and their involvement in co-creating the environment. Returning to the example of backbiting, the whole-school consultation (see Box 4.1) heightened students' awareness of the abilities and limitations of administration to eliminate backbiting while also generating a vision of the type of school everyone would hope to create; within these themes, students found renewed motivation to combat societal normalization of backbiting, aiming instead to refine their relationships and structures (e.g., student council activities, residence arrangements, informal social time) to reduce backbiting and increase inclusion.

The third social process Tseng and Seidman (2007) identify is participation in activities, which refers to “youths’ and adults’ involvement in the daily activities and routines in settings” (p. 221). Such activities range from highly structured to relatively unstructured, which vary according to the nature of the activities’ goals (e.g., fixed or fluid, institutionally-directed or student-directed). All activities play an important role in establishing contextual factors of the school setting. The quantity of participation (e.g., amount of time spent, number of participants) as well as its quality (e.g., enthusiasm, energy, commitment, focus) have bearing on the social processes within and beyond an activity, influencing setting norms and relationships in proximal and distal ways. The impact of these qualities on the culture and environment of a setting demonstrates how the three social processes – norms, relationships, and participation in activities – converge.

NCA’s whole-school consultation about backbiting illustrates this convergence (see Box 4.1). The administration created this relatively structured activity with the specific goals of raising awareness of the impacts of backbiting and co-developing a plan of action for reducing its incidence in the school. The time for the consultation was institutionally set to maximize student participation (i.e., during morning assembly, which takes place between first and second period – meaning that all students would have arrived at school). The quality of participation in the consultation depended largely on the students, however, and their willingness to engage in discussion. The tone was set, as the data suggest it often is, by

“veteran” students not in their first year at NCA, whom the teachers and principal describe as carrying “the DNA” of the school from year-to-year. Their familiarity with the methods and approaches of the school paved the way for energetic and thoughtful participation in the consultation, which set a standard for new students to observe, internalize, and replicate. Norms of active participation and power-sharing among students and administrators were

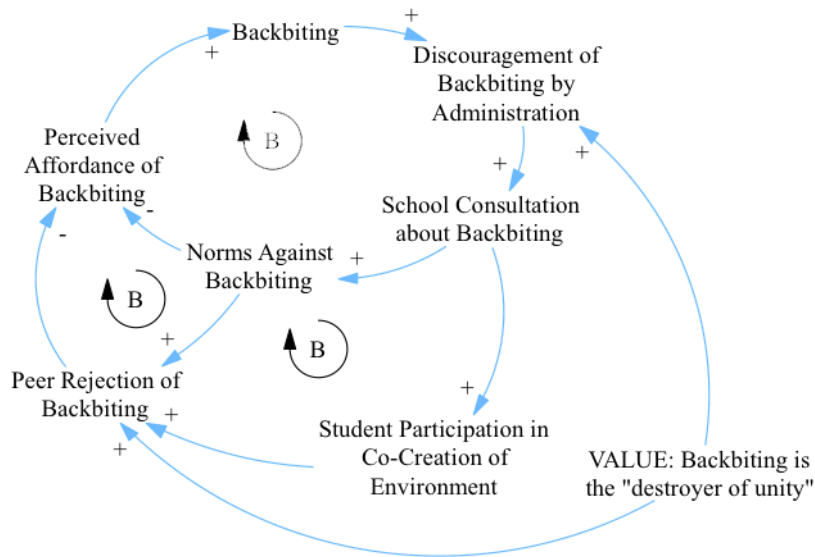


Figure 5.4. Causal loop diagram: Social processes and backbiting at NCA

established or reinforced through participation in this activity; the ripple effect beyond the time boundaries of the consultation itself are evidenced by students’ reflections on its ongoing effects on their relationships with others and their growing identification with NCA’s value of unity in diversity, as described in Chapter 4.

Overall, the social processes identified by Tseng and Seidman (2007) elaborate behaviour setting theory’s description of the relationships among individual behaviours and setting context. Figure 5.4 illustrates this elaboration with a causal loop model that includes norms, relationships, and participation in activities as explanatory factors interceding between structures and behaviour on the topic of backbiting.

The focus of both behaviour settings theory and social process theory is on individuals’ interactions with their immediate environments. These “proximal processes,” Bronfenbrenner

and Morris (1998) argue, are the primary mechanism through which human behaviour is influenced. An important limitation of an exclusive focus on the proximal environment, however, is its ignorance of the broader societal and historical determinants of setting features and patterns of behaviour. Holzkamp's Critical Psychology (e.g., Holzkamp, 2013; Tolman, 1994) also considers the immediate environmental features that enable and constrain action, but expands this explanation by including the influence of historically-elaborated societal structures in its account of how proximal processes, or "immediate life conditions" (Holzkamp, 2013), are generated. In the following sub-section, I elaborate the environment-behaviour model I have generated thus far by adding Critical Psychology theory.

**Critical Psychology and behaviour in settings.** As I discussed in Chapter 2, according to Holzkamp, individuals' subjective reasons for action are based in a relationship between oneself and the world; individuals interpret the world and act in the context of shared meanings and societally-created "possibilities for action" (Tolman, 1994). From the standpoint of the individual, the world is experienced as immediate conditions, which are determined by historically-elaborated societal structures and, reciprocally, by individuals' ongoing conduct of everyday life (Holzkamp, 2013). Individuals are generally ignorant of the workings of this life-world relationship, conscious only of the resulting immediate life conditions. These conditions offer both opportunities for and limits to action, embodied in the positions (roles, jobs, niches, and functions) perceived as available (Tolman, 1994). This is the possibility relationship. At NCA, students' immediate life conditions include the school environment – its affordances, norms, relationships, and activities, as already discussed – as well as individual-specific features of their life histories and broad contextual dynamics. Critical Psychology helps describe the effects of these conditions from the standpoint of the individual.

The possibility relationship between human beings and the world is made possible by what Holzkamp calls "epistemic distance." Epistemic distance is characteristic of human existence and implies that actions in the world are mediated by the world of meaning

structures. We do not engage with an axe, for example, merely in terms of its practical value as a tool; rather, we engage with its “capacity of axing” and the constellation of related meanings regarding its potential practical value as a means of warming a home, its function in the division of labour, an idea of the skills required to use an axe effectively, and a conceptualization of the person who uses an axe (Holzkamp, 2013). In short, epistemic distance enables us to experience and reflect upon the “possibility potential” of the axe for oneself and in general, rather than responding to the world purely by instinct or reflex. In relation to backbiting at NCA, epistemic distance comes into play as students begin to relate more consciously to their behaviour, seeing the meanings associated with backbiting as a normalized tool for solving problems in teen culture.

Epistemic distance contributes to behaviour change among NCA students as they critically reflect on the impacts of backbiting and whether it contributes to the type of relationships and environments they want to have. Insofar as epistemic distance is utilized for critical reflection on the world-self relationship, it enables humans to become conscious of “the overarching connection between the existential and developmental problems of the individual and the overall societal process by which the means and conditions of providing for human life are created in a generalized way” (Holzkamp, 1983, cited in Tolman, 1994, p. 103). In other words, epistemic distance allows individuals to become critically conscious of the world-self relationship and the manner by which it enables and constrains one’s own and others’ possibilities for action. The capacity to “relate consciously to meanings and possibilities for action” (Holzkamp, 1983, cited In Tolman, 1994, p. 106) develops through this growing understanding of the world-self relationship: “Only on the basis of this fundamental comprehension” of the world-self relationship, “this new quality of *consciously-relating-to* societally created possibilities for action” (Tolman, 1994, p. 106, emphasis in original) do individuals become able to extend their possibilities beyond previously-unconscious, societally-imposed limitations. Backbiting, for example – once a taken-for-granted fixture of

adolescent relationships and school environments – becomes open to critique and change at NCA, yielding to new modes of being and doing.

For NCA students, growing consciousness of a variety of societal forces and their contradictions takes several forms. In addition to learning about social justice issues in WCC and through moral dilemmas, students' lived experiences of the differences between NCA and other schools contribute to a growing realization that schools can be different than they had previously thought and that adolescents can resist the limitations imposed by a society that holds low expectations for their potential. NCA students come to realize that school environments are influenced by the forces of negative teen culture and how the field of possibility is broadened and shifted at NCA, in contrast to dominant culture, as a result of its values, expectations, and structures. For example, trust and freedom from judgment become the foundation of friendships and differences are explicitly bridged based on the value of unity in diversity. Data from teachers and students repeatedly highlight such contrasts between NCA and other schooling experiences and how these contrasts expose, as Holzkamp describes, the false sense of freedom that comes from unconsciousness of the possibility relationship:

Freedom exists as long as I move within the limits of what is allowed; as soon as I bump against these limits, I immediately realize that this freedom is rather limited... [This] can best be illustrated by the metaphor of a goldfish in a bowl, which can easily imagine itself to be swimming in the Atlantic as long as it manages to swim without touching the sides. (Holzkamp, 2013, p. 25-26)

Witnessing their own changed patterns of life as a result of their new environment, the data indicate that NCA students are able to identify structural sources of negative teen culture (the sides of the fishbowl), rather than locating these limitations in the individuals themselves (the fish) or relationships among them. Students come to realize that “though restrictions and contradictions are directly experienced at this level, they neither originate there nor are they surmountable solely on this level” (Holzkamp, 2013, p. 26). This indicates capacity for

comprehensive thinking, identified in Chapter 2 as a dimension of critical engagement.

Continuing with the example of backbiting, through this consciousness-raising process the students become more aware of the societal-historical roots of backbiting as a cultural phenomenon that influences the habits and inclinations of young people; this awareness contributes to a critical stance toward backbiting as something that can be resisted and rejected at individual and institutional levels, rather than being seen as intrinsic to “normal” teen relationships and school environments. This attitude, founded on and reinforced through experience, contributes to students’ adoption of the school’s underlying value that backbiting is a “destroyer of unity.” Students’ behaviour under this new perception contributes to NCA structures that promote a high standard of interpersonal conduct, which further reinforces the structural conditions that lead students to critique backbiting in the first place. Figure 5.5 builds on the models presented thus far to illustrate the interaction of students’ growing awareness of the societal-historical roots of negative teen culture in general and the impacts of this awareness on backbiting in the school. Figure 5.5 also accounts for the ebb and flow of backbiting described in the data: as incidences of backbiting diminish, active discouragement of backbiting likewise diminishes, which allows the societal normalization of teen backbiting greater sway over students’ perceived affordance of backbiting. As this pattern resurges, it once again triggers discouragement from the administration and among peers, edging back the prevalence of backbiting. The data indicate that the overall trajectory, albeit not linear, advances toward a school culture free from backbiting.

In this example, we see how NCA structures shift what is “subjectively functional” for students; that is, it adjusts “what particular action is grounded for an individual... [based on] his or her position, its related life situation and the premises it allows for the grounding of action” (Tolman, 1994, p. 114; comparable to affordances in behaviour settings theory). This structural shift not only downplays previously taken for granted action possibilities, but also reveals newly-viable action possibilities. The individual-level shift occurs when students (a)

take up or even extend the action possibilities available to them (generalized action potency), rather than (b) remaining in their already-established life patterns (restrictive action potency).

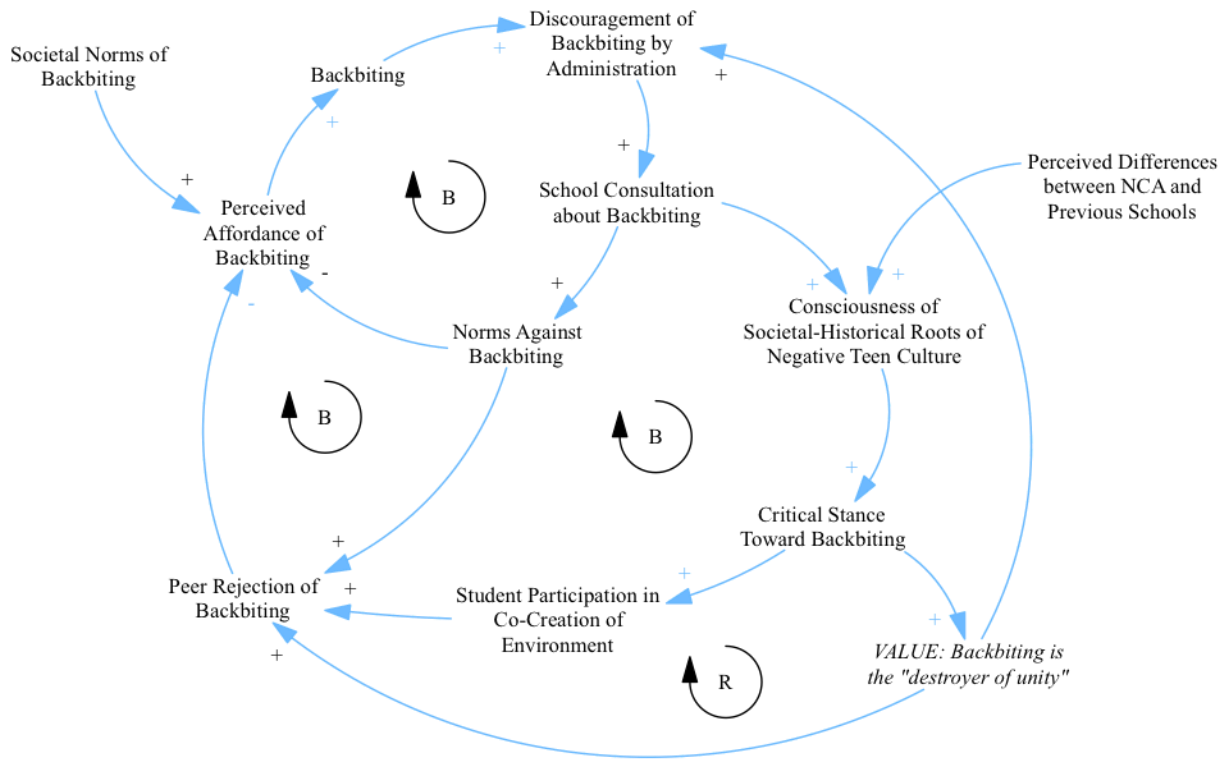


Figure 5.5. Causal loop diagram: Critical Psychology and the influence of societal norms of backbiting at NCA

As individuals choose to extend possibilities for action to adopt other patterns of behaviour, the relational environment is altered, which becomes a self-reinforcing loop. This community-level dynamic is vital for generalized action potency. As I described in Chapter 2, a school that seeks to equip young people to participate in a twofold process of personal and societal progress would pay attention to the structures and experiences that promote collective purpose, volition, and action. The existential risks entailed by generalized action potency, Holzkamp argues, are a significantly limiting factor that deter extending action possibilities. He emphasizes, however, that “considering the societal situatedness of individuals, such risks can be minimized or even eliminated in an ideally functioning society through cooperative support” (Tolman, 1994, p. 115). Although NCA is not an “ideally functioning” school system, in part due



to its base in and reliance on a far-from-ideal society, my analysis indicates that it does provide cooperative structures that support students' efforts to reach higher levels of action potency through collective purpose, volition, and action. This approach stands in stark contrast to the dominance of competition in the neoliberal mode (Giroux, 2012b; Karlberg, 2004), which manifests in school when students are pitted against each other for grades and success and a culture of status and social prestige foments habits of gossip and backbiting. These practices are antithetical to NCA's efforts to build a relational environment of mutual trust and support.

Taking the moral dilemma exercise as an example, the students describe how, in early experiences of the exercise, some students attempted to avoid (e.g., by refusing to choose a side) or manipulate (e.g., by choosing the side they think the principal would choose) their participation to protect themselves from emotional vulnerability and judgment. The data indicate, however, that through role modelling by other students and personal experience with the process and purpose of the exercise (and with NCA as a whole) students became willing to engage with the moral dilemma more authentically. In the resulting possibility space, they acted as cooperative agents of consciousness-raising who critically engaged with questions of right and wrong in productive tension with ambiguity and emotion. This capacity is important for their life-long transformative process because it enables them to identify and resist forces of ideological domination, which Holzkamp argues "can have exactly the same effects as brute force in limiting what is subjectively functional for the individual" (Tolman, 1994, p. 115). Capacity to withstand ideological domination can be seen in students' growing resilience to negative patterns of teen culture, including backbiting and competition, as these examples demonstrate. Young people's power to resist ideological domination protects them from uncritical acceptance of dominant societal narratives and their associated patterns of thought and behaviour, expanding the field of possibility for generalized action potency.

**Summary: Research question two.** My second research question asks how NCA structures and their underlying values come to be represented in students' thought-action

patterns. From this section's discussion, I find that NCA's vision and goals manifest in school structures through two mechanisms: through the intentional creation of activities and systems, on the part of the school, and through students' participation in and contributions to these activities. Together, these dimensions of school structure and student agency shape the school community, contributing to a collective pattern of action that forms a bulwark against backsliding into habits born from unconscious influence of negative social forces.

Because NCA's value system includes a critical view of the broad societal-historical forces that influence the school and the lives of its students – in line with Holzkamp's (2013; Tolman, 1994) concept of comprehensive thinking – the school is well equipped to bring these forces to light through consultation, curriculum, and other consciousness-raising activities. Students' growing ability to critique the impacts of these forces on their lives aids them in achieving their goal of overcoming restrictive thought-action patterns associated with negative teen culture. Their growing consciousness opens a field of possibility in which they are supported through school structures to engage in generalized action potency to overcome teen culture. At the institutional level, this critical engagement process is driven by the school's goal of releasing students' potential to promote wellbeing in their personal lives and their environments. As students witness their growing capacity to reshape relationships with friends, family, and societal norms, they identify more deeply with NCA values and participate more fully in its activities. This is driven in part by the convergence between school goals and students' goals, which fosters a sense of integrity – of being true to oneself and living according to core values – and reinforces commitment to related efforts to pursue valued goals (Harré, 2007). Through the influence of common goals and growing participation, students gradually translate NCA structures and values into patterns of thought and action in their own lives that expand the field of possibility and are conducive to generalized action potency.

The mechanism of change, therefore, is reciprocal. In line with structuration theory, the interactions among structure, thought, and action continually generate the school environment

and its activities. In line with systems theory, this process is dynamic, characterized by feedback, and proceeding irregularly over time rather than in a linear manner. Figure 5.6 illustrates the relationship between school structures and students' thought-action patterns.

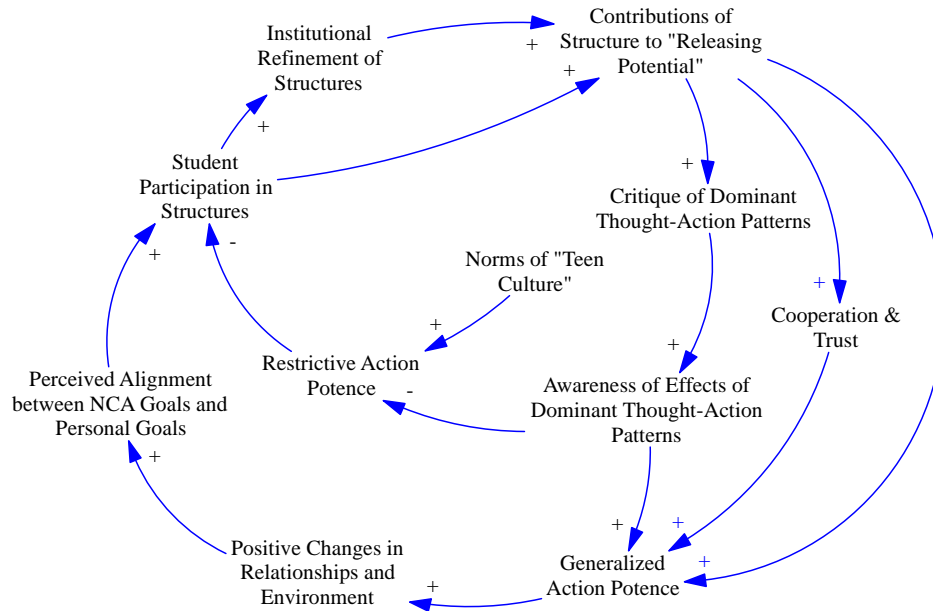


Figure 5.6. Causal loop diagram: Students' thought-action patterns in relationship with NCA

These findings provide helpful insight into the ways by which students come into relationship with the values and structure of NCA, and the manner by which this relationship impacts their patterns of thought and action. In relation to capacity for critical and transcendent engagement, the table in Appendix B highlights the parallels between these theoretical constructs and the patterns of cognition, motivation-emotion, and behaviour fostered by NCA's emphasis on wisdom, spiritual development, and a world-embracing vision. In this section, I have described the mechanisms by which the school environment impacts these thought-action patterns, including the interplay of dynamics among the individual-level, the relational/community-level, and the school-level to overcome societal-historical forces that counteract the common goal of releasing young people's burgeoning potential. The presence of these mechanisms, however, does not necessarily indicate the strength of this effect. In the

following section, I examine the structural, relational, and individual elements that promote engagement and reduce alienation in the school and thereby strengthen the relationship between a lofty vision of young people's potential and impacts on students' development.

### **Promoting Engagement by Reducing Alienation**

My third research question asks what qualities of the NCA environment impact the strength of the relationship between school structures and students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. In this section I closely examine dynamics of the school's community/relational level as a mediator of institutional and individual capacity building, the importance of which has become very clear through this chapter. As such, my third analytical theme examines the ways in which NCA promotes student engagement in school structures by preventing alienation in the school community.

In education research, participation as a reciprocal relationship between students and schools has been measured in many ways, including both functional (e.g., grades, attendance) and affective (e.g., enjoyment, belonging) dimensions (Libbey, 2004). In the previous section, I referred to participation as a key social process that moulds student behaviour in the school setting; in their description of this social process, Tseng and Seidman (2007) highlight the nature and content of the activities themselves, mentioning only "involvement" of youth and adults as the nature of the interaction between individual and structure. According to their description, the relationships embedded in activities are where reciprocity between individual and setting comes into play. To understand NCA's impacts on engagement, therefore, I examine setting-level characteristics in relationship with student experience, emphasizing the ways in which positive relationships and a sense of safety contributes to strong reciprocal impacts among school structures, students' thought-action patterns, and capacity for critical and transcendent engagement.

Alienation is often described as the opposite or antithesis of engagement. The principal highlights alienation as a problematic pattern common in mainstream school systems. As I

described in Chapter 4, a high vision of the potential of youth is vital in NCA's decision-making, because decisions about schooling begin with beliefs how young people learn and what they can understand. The literature agrees with the principal's view that low expectations lead to over-structured schools that attempt to motivate and generate responsibility but lead instead to a consumer mentality (see Abbott, 2005; Noddings, 2003; Weinstein, 2002). According to both the principal and students at NCA, such practices lead to alienation from education and schooling (see Box 4.4 and related text). Students described experiencing alienation to the degree to which they were barred from bringing their whole self to the learning environment, be it from barriers of boredom, overwhelming teaching, hollow content, poor relationships with teachers, bullying, or exclusion – all experienced by NCA students in their life histories.

According to the vertical model of socialization described in Chapters 1 and 2, schools have the power to “configure people's options and inform their normative beliefs” (Flanagan & Campbell, 2003, p. 711). When there is a disconnect between students' goals and school goals, according to this model, youth encounter the environment as “a stranger in a foreign land” (Mann, 2001, p. 11). In this position, “the experience of alienation arises from being in a place where those in power have the potential to impose their particular ways of perceiving and understanding the world” (p. 11). Students who encounter an alienating educational environment are “faced with the decision of whether to join in or not and at what cost” (p. 11). This dichotomy – to join in or not to join in – is unhelpfully limiting, however, especially if a school's goal is to release potential, because it offers little opportunity for a process of growth.

NCA's emphasis on creating a protective environment is intended to prevent alienating conditions and continually build a relationship between school and students. In her analysis of the roots of alienation in higher education, Mann (2001) argues that “critical work must be done in order to examine the conditions which might promote alienation” and that altering these conditions requires changes that are “radical and not cosmetic” (p. 8). In her emphasis on conditions that promote alienation, Mann rejects the postmodern attitude that alienation is an

inevitable dimension of the human experience (Frosh, 1991); instead, she suggests that steps can be taken to reduce alienation in education settings and thereby “engage the learner’s personal stance in the learning process in order to enable them to take on the role of active agent in society” (p. 7; see also Salmon, 1989). This view coheres with Critical Psychology and its emphasis on creating conditions and capacity conducive to generalized action potency, as described in Chapter 2. To address or avoid circumstances of alienation, Mann (2001) suggests five responses, which are enabled by institutional supports and culture, manifest at the relational level, and impact individual wellbeing. To varying degrees, each of these responses is indicated by the data and ties together concepts discussed in the previous two sections of this chapter. Therefore, I frame my response to the third research question with Mann’s (2001) five responses: hospitality, safety, solidarity, redistribution of power, and criticality.

**Hospitality.** Mann’s (2001) description of hospitality includes that “we can remember to welcome new members of our community and to help them feel at home, as we would any visitor or stranger to our own home” (p. 17). This recalls Darren’s discussion of arriving in Canada to attend NCA and being helped by other students to arrange practical matters, such as getting a bank card, buying toiletries, and finding his way around town. There is evidence that this example of student-to-student hospitality represents an informal structure in the school; Darren describes how he and other students provide this same service for newcomers to Canada, perpetuating a hospitable environment in which peer support is provided to international students to minimize alienation by new customs, habits, and surroundings. At the institutional level, hospitality is key to the school’s prevention of “second-class citizenship” for students who are not Bahá’ís. As I described in Chapter 4, even in cases where students’ beliefs contradict Bahá’í teachings, space is preserved for their beliefs, so long as these students, in turn, do not attempt to dominate others’ right to “believe what they believe they should believe.” Hospitality in this sense identifies the risk that alienation could result if students feel coerced to conform to a particular belief system. In her analysis of the causes of

alienation, Mann describes this form of alienation as that which “arises from being in a place where those in power have the potential to impose their particular ways of perceiving and understanding the world” (p. 11). In this chapter, I have argued that students tend to increase their participation in NCA’s structures and belief system as they come to see convergence between its goals and their goals. I suggest that, to the degree that hospitality is prioritized, this participation is not imposed on students. Choice in NCA’s opportunity-role structure – central to the students’ description of their authentic participation in school activities ranging from academics to service to spiritual development – is preserved in the hospitable environment. Safety to experiment and learn from choices is likewise central to students’ authentic participation in activities. A protective environment is the second response Mann describes.

**Safety.** Alienation arises in conditions that restrict the possibility of living a creative life, instead reinforcing a compliant life (Mann, 2001). In conditions of compliance, one feels “caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 65, quoted in Mann, 2001, p. 12). The effects of such conditions might be felt suddenly or accrue over time:

The raised hand is sometimes ignored, the question to the teacher is sometimes brushed aside... it is probably true that most of these denials are psychologically trivial when considered individually. But when considered cumulatively their significance increases. (Jackson, 1968, p. 15, quoted in Mann, 2001, p. 12)

Such conditions, “where one’s self is not validated in good enough relationships and contexts,” lead to “a loss of a sense of self, and of agency and desire” (Mann, 2001, p. 12). Safety is required, Mann argues, to avoid this form of alienation in schools. Safe schooling spaces are those in which “students are accepted and respected, and in which unformed, ambiguous, non-rational, illogical, [and] unclear ideas, expressions and play are welcomed and listened to.” In such spaces, “we can nurture creativity, the desire to learn and the coming to voice” (p. 17).

In the data, students, teachers, and the principal all emphasize the importance of these characteristics of safety for the NCA environment. The metaphors of a bubble or a greenhouse

described by the principal and teachers convey the importance of preserving space in the school environment for students' development. The students emphasize the importance of the social dimensions of the school in assuring that they have a safe "arena" for growth; this arena is characterized by freedom from fear of judgement and rejection by peers and teachers, alongside an emergent attitude of valuing and transcending differences to promote mutual wellbeing. Teachers highlight how, in line with Mann's comment that change needs to be "radical and not cosmetic" (p. 8), it can be emotional and inspiring to see the impacts of an environment free from fear, in comparison to other schools they've witnessed. This psychological safety is particularly important for spiritual development, as students branch away from the customs and culture of familiar communities in pursuit of, as Aiden describes, "understanding why I believe the things I believe in, what the most important things in life are to me, not just my parents." This requires a safe space for psychological risk-taking and spiritual individuation as assumptions are called into question and tested (Miller, 2015).

In relation to alienation, Mann (2001) emphasizes the benefit of a safe environment for creative experience and expression. In conditions driven by fear, compliance is the norm and leads to alienation. Creativity, on the other hand, involves "being engaged actively in interpreting the world and in shaping whatever one is doing... draw[ing] on the whole personality... [T]hrough this the individual gains a sense of self" (p. 12; see also Winnicott, 1971). Creativity, therefore, is fostered by protective conditions and positive relationships, and protects against alienation. In contrast, "estrangement of the individual student from their own creative and autonomous self as a learner" occurs because "a compliant self [is] unable to access the vitality of their creative self" (p. 13). Through a protective environment and promotion of the arts, the data indicate, NCA aims to promote students' engagement with creativity and prevent estrangement that leads to a mode of compliance.

**Solidarity.** In regard to solidarity, Mann (2001) says that teachers "can empathize with, and open up conversations about, the conditions we – lecturers and students – find ourselves



in: our current postmodern performative condition, our negotiation of reality and identity, our positionings into particular subject positions through discourse.” Specifically about the relationship between teachers and students, she says “we can attempt to dissolve the estrangement we experience through the separation we make between ‘them’, the students, and ‘us’, the academics” (p. 17).

This latter dimension is reflected in the data indicating that students and teachers at NCA tend to have positive and close relationships. Frequently, participants use familial terminology to describe these relationships. From the teachers’ perspective, many of them express a close interest in students’ development, especially those away from home. Teachers’ willingness to “make myself available to [the students] in any way they might need” and the sense that “a true teacher is a healer” represent reduced barriers between teachers and students, in keeping with Mann’s (2001) description of solidarity.

The other dimension of solidarity she describes pertains to teachers’ willingness to engage with students on questions of sociocultural conditions of western society and the impacts of postmodern performativity on teachers and students alike. Although these themes are largely beyond the scope of this work, the principal’s description of preventing second class citizenship in students’ spiritual search provides some indication that solidarity is promoted by acknowledging that the spiritual path is wide, and every person will have their own experiences and struggles. At a Bahá’í-inspired school like NCA, the path of least resistance is to adopt the underlying values system wholesale, or to simply avoid questions of belief, as Gina and Amelia describe seeing in other schools. By recognizing that spiritual search is a life-long process and encouraging teachers to draw out diverse belief systems and experiences, NCA reduces barriers to students and teachers sharing and exploring diverse spiritual experiences. Similarly, by acknowledging the societal-historical forces at work in society, NCA creates space for conversations that foster comprehensive thinking and analysis of the global condition, including the role of privilege. Nurturing such conversations about belief systems, privilege,

and the state of the world is consistent with Mann's (2001) description of solidarity.

**Redistribution of power.** Because Mann (2001) rejects any premise that suggests alienation is inevitable to the human experience, she argues that educators should "consider carefully our own role in the potentially alienated experience of learning of our students" (p. 17). Perspectives on the origins and effects of alienation, she suggests,

draw our attention to the current context of our teaching and learning processes; to the nature of our discourse; to the images, experiences and voices we may repress through it; to the nature of our relationship with students, to the possibilities we give for play, and to the capacity and power we have through our own knowledge and expertise to reduce and exclude the student's capacity for creative engagement; to the potential heavy hand of our assessment practices in the delicate world of the student's self; and to the complexity, uncertainty and threat of the learning process itself. (p. 17)

In light of these dimensions of school structure, "we need to examine where in our current practice we make decisions that inhibit the student's own control of their learning process, and where and how... we exert power over the developing selves of our students" (p. 17).

Redistribution of power in education settings, therefore, should create conditions in which "students can exercise power over their own learning and development" (p. 17).

The level of consciousness that Mann (2001) describes implies that NCA teachers must also develop their awareness of the life-world relationship, the same as students. According to Critical Psychology, it is only through this awareness that individuals can engage their epistemic distance to critique the effects of the status quo and consider alternative modes of being and doing. At NCA, this critical consciousness in teachers is cultivated through the school's learning mode. First, the principal explains, it is vital to recognize that teachers and administrators hold power that students do not, and that with this power comes responsibility to listen and to look to the environment to address problems in behaviour or culture, rather than blaming the students for problems. In light of this recognition of power, "tuning" of the

environment must become a deliberately inclusive process if students are to be meaningfully engaged. The principal recognizes that this process requires humility on the part of the school to acknowledge that learning is ongoing and that the administration does not always know what is best for the environment. Power is distributed in part by protecting students and teachers from fear of risk-taking to contribute to the environment: “they’re not wondering whether or not they should step out here or [take] risks here because they know that that’s what is going to make [the school] richer and better.” Open channels of communication are a further dimension of power redistribution at NCA, either through one-on-one connections between teachers and students, or through whole-school consultations where issues are brought to the collective to be examined and addressed. In these efforts, the principal is mindful that the role of the administration is “very active... but it must not be an oppressive role. It’s a very delicate balance to make sure that you don’t slide into one: not do enough, or do too much.” Balancing power is not static; it shifts and moves in response to exigencies in any given moment, while being guided by the unshifting principles at the core of NCA’s approach.

Although these comments are all from the perspective of the principal, they are reflected in students’ comments about the spaces available to them to shape their learning experiences and personal development. Freedom of choice, for example – discussed several times in this chapter – is a challenging yet central dynamic of students’ engagement in the school environment. It provides the most direct indication that students have control over their own lives, even as they are encouraged to become aware of the impacts of their choices on others. Within mandatory activities, there is room for lateral movement in response to students’ interests and choices. Various service activities and roles are available, for example, although more could be done to enable students to originate novel ideas for service within and beyond the school. In classes, Gina described that NCA opens opportunities for students to work alongside teachers to create the type of learning experience they desire. These structures and practices for the redistribution of power reduce alienation of students from the school, of

students from teachers, and of students from their own selves as they are enabled to determine and enact their goals and plans. More could be learned about how this experience varies across students and what individual and institutional factors are conducive to each student's ability to access opportunities to exercise power over their learning and wellbeing.

**Criticality.** The role of comprehensive thinking in redistributing power at NCA relates also to Mann's (2001) fifth response to alienation: criticality. She describes criticality as an individual-level capacity of both students and teachers that is enabled by the confluence of hospitality, safety, solidarity, and redistribution of power in a school setting. "It seems to me," she says,

that a crucial way out of the experience of alienation, both for ourselves and for our students, is the development of the capacity to become aware of the conditions in which we work and of the responses we make to them. Such awareness, and the capacity to act on that awareness, must arise out of criticality – the capacity and opportunity to question, examine, uncover, reframe, make visible and interpret. (p. 17-18)

The "will to criticality" (Mann, 2001, p. 18) or "critical energy" (Barnett, 1997, p. 171) on the part of the students drives willingness to "invest themselves in their engagement with thinking, self, and action" and is the capacity that schools need to inspire. This view is closely related to consciousness of the life-world relationship, which I have discussed extensively in this chapter and in Chapter 2. Through a generalized mode of thought and action, students heighten their understanding of the societal-historical forces at work in their lives and environments, and build critical capacity to resist and respond to these forces to promote personal and collective wellbeing. Likewise, this view is closely related to the process of spiritual development entailed by transcendent engagement that "propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution" (Benson, 2008, p. viii). Through the confluence of the five responses to described by Mann (2001), therefore, structures and relationships conducive to students' growing capacity for critical and transcendent engagement counteract forces of alienation to

promote individual and relational wellbeing in the school.

**Summary: Research question three.** My third research question asks what qualities of the NCA environment impact the strength of the relationship between school structures and capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. In this section's discussion, I have considered the impacts of alienation on NCA's relationship with students and how certain qualities of the environment address and prevent alienation. Mann's (2001) five responses to alienation – hospitality, safety, solidarity, redistribution of power, and criticality – contribute to an environment that strengthens the bonds among members of the NCA community and strengthens the connections between school structure and student capacity-building.

As I have explored throughout this chapter, NCA's efforts to inspire and build capacity for spiritual development, wisdom, and a world-embracing vision are the core of its approach to nurturing this critical energy. In its approach, NCA's utilization of Mann's (2001) five responses to alienation "shift the teaching/learning relationship" in a way that "move[s] to the criterion of justice as a value in education, rather than the criteria of either truth or performativity" (Mann, 2001, p. 18). If, as Hatcher (2002) argues, justice is the necessary condition for love and happiness – relational and individual wellbeing – the structural dynamics of reducing alienation described in this chapter are key to strengthening relationships and student development at NCA.

Dimensions of spiritual development, wisdom, and a world-embracing vision are woven throughout NCA's application of Mann's (2001) five responses to alienation. Hospitality and safety, for example, prioritize spaces and relationships in the school that preserve students' spiritual search, even when it differs from the dominant paradigm of the school, and even when it is difficult and requires creativity and psychological risk-taking. Solidarity promotes mutual respect and unity in diversity, fostering authentic relationships that challenge shallow approaches to student and teacher interactions. Finally, redistribution of power and criticality build students' and teachers' capacity to surface, critique, and reshape social conditions of the

school environment to promote justice. In the interweaving of these concepts in structure and experience, NCA's responses to alienation create an environment conducive to a strong relationship between school structures and capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. The ability of NCA to help students develop capacity for both critical engagement and transcendent engagement is key to its ability to release the potential of young people.

### **Considering Critical and Transcendent Engagement and the Three Protagonists**

In Chapter 2, I highlighted hazards of critical and transcendent engagement. Critical engagement, I said, risks pitting various groups against each other, instrumentalizing diversity in the pursuit of justice by prioritizing short-term gains in group autonomy over long-term interests of humanity as a whole. Transcendent engagement, in contrast, risks sacrificing pursuit of justice through structural change by assuaging guilt and fear with expressions of noble sentiment and solidarity with individuals and groups experiencing oppression. Because of these limitations, I argue that neither of these capacities can, alone, engage young people in the twofold purpose I described in Chapter 1, through which both personal and collective wellbeing are pursued at individual, relational, and structural levels. Across my three research questions lies the more abstract matter of how critical and transcendent engagement are fostered by NCA in a manner that compensates for these hazards by advancing capacity for both in concert. I now briefly discuss underlying principles of individual, relational, and institutional capacity required for this approach in the context of NCA. I argue that NCA cultivates both critical and transcendent engagement in a values-laden framework that emphasizes living a meaningful life.

Since its inception in the 1990s, positive psychology has largely focused on happiness and its impacts on living a good life (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). Despite proliferation of happiness discourse, however, society has not reached new heights of happiness, instead sinking even lower into depression and anxiety in some ways as negative social forces accelerate (Smith, 2017). In response, a second narrative of the good life has

emerged in positive psychology, emphasizing meaning over happiness. In an empirical comparison of the two constructs, Baumeister and colleagues (2013) suggest that “happiness is mainly about getting what one wants and needs” whereas meaningfulness is “linked to doing things that express and reflect the self and in particular to doing positive things for others” (p. 515). “Whereas happiness [is] focused on feeling good in the present,” these authors explain, “meaningfulness integrate[s] past, present, and future, and it sometimes [means] feeling bad” (p. 515). They also highlight that what is considered meaningful is a cultural effect, influenced by habits of thought, modes of expression, and patterns of behaviour in one’s social milieu. In the context of the present discussion, both the importance of meaningfulness for a good life and the cultural element of meaningfulness are pertinent to the role of the three protagonists in cultivating critical and transcendent engagement.

If perceptions of meaning are culturally generated, the data presented in this work suggest that NCA promotes a school culture in which wisdom, spiritual development, and a world-embracing vision are fundamental to a meaningful life. To varying degrees, each of these dimensions can involve diminished happiness, either temporarily or in the long-term. Efforts to balance academics and service, for example, can lead to anxiety, confusion, and making mistakes in the pursuit of two valued aims. Likewise, spiritual search can lead to difficult experiences of branching away from parents’ beliefs, questioning one’s own history and future, and engaging in challenging conversations with others. Of course, happiness itself is also an aim of NCA’s approach, but, in line with Baumeister and colleagues’ (2013) analysis, the dimensions of meaning promoted by NCA mediate this relationship, such that an increased sense of meaningfulness contributes to happiness when valued needs and wants are satisfied. As students’ increase their capacity for wisdom, spiritual development, and a world-embracing vision, they derive meaning both from their critical perception of the pitfalls and possibilities of social justice, and from their enlightenment and humbling through transcendence of personal and temporary concerns. Either of these dimensions alone, I argue, would be insufficient to

cultivate a meaningful life as it is framed in NCA culture. Future research could examine this claim further. Together, critical and transcendent engagement as dimensions of a meaningful life are conducive to students' development as active agents of the twofold purpose.

This example of the importance of meaning in NCA's approach is a helpful framework within which to consider the tripartite matrix of institution, community, and individual in the school. As the three protagonists of the setting, this chapter's discussion has revealed that each has a role to play in building the capacity of the others to promote and benefit from the culture of meaningfulness NCA espouses: capacity of the individual to participate and grow in the setting contributes to and is fostered in accordance with the capacity of the institution to channel individual and relational powers that generate a community distinguished by a culture conducive to agency and cooperation. In the context of NCA, this tripartite matrix defies categorization as either "top-down" or "bottom-up", characterized instead by reciprocity, interconnectedness, and convergence.

Central to NCA's approach, therefore, is an intriguing relationship of flow and exchange. Through the three research questions examined in this work, I have revealed certain dynamics of this relationship in regard to NCA's ability to cultivate young people's capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. In this chapter, I have synthesized my three key findings to identify elements of the student-school relationship conducive to this capacity, identifying a tripartite matrix of institution, community, and individual as protagonists of the school setting. In the process of establishing a meaningful life, I have argued, NCA students develop patterns of thought, emotion-motivation, and behaviour that orient them toward a critical view of justice and a transcendent sense of connection to something larger than themselves. This orientation is nurtured by institutional and community capacities that influence the quality of the school structures that shape students' experiences. Students' own agency and patterns of thought and action in these structures is the third ingredient that influences NCA's impact in critical and transcendent engagement. Based on these conclusions, in the following and final chapter I



identify key principles of schooling gleaned from this case study that could be adapted for other contexts to pursue these aims. I also discuss limitations and future opportunities for implementation and research, within and beyond NCA.

## Chapter 6 – Conclusions

Based on the previous chapters' findings, synthesis, and discussion, in this chapter I highlight the key conclusions of this work and identify implications for theory, school reform, and further research. I then discuss strengths and limitations of this research and conclude with some final thoughts on this work.

### Principal Findings

This research has identified several key characteristics of how the interplay of structure and agency at NCA contributes to students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement. Two principal areas of learning emerge from this analysis: (a) young people's developing capacity to contribute to a twofold purpose of individual and collective wellbeing and progress, and (b) the nature of schools as sites of personal and societal transformation. In short, NCA's ability to cultivate the strength of the setting's three protagonists – the institution, the community, and the individual – in relationship to each other generated an arena in which students developed personal and collective patterns of thought, action, and expression that reflect capacity for critical and transcendent engagement in a twofold purpose. Figure 6.1 illustrates this relationship. Beyond this impact on its students, NCA contributes to a broader

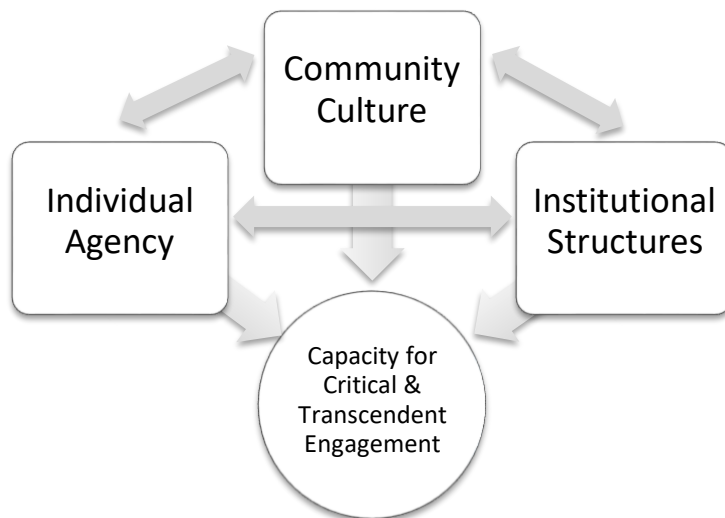


Figure 6.1. Simplified Model of the Tripartite Matrix and its Impacts on Capacity for Critical and Transcendent Engagement

movement of school reform by constructing alternatives to the dominant system, attracting teachers and families to this alternative, and thereby contributing to attrition from the currently dominant mode. In this section, I identify principal findings in each of these areas.

**Capacity building.** NCA emphasizes wisdom, spiritual development, and a world-embracing vision as educational imperatives at the centre of its effort to release the potential of youth. Although any of these capacities alone could orient a student toward self-serving aims, together they cultivate an outward orientation guided by a critical lens and a moral framework for NCA students. These capacities and their complementarity are parallel to the constructs of critical and transcendent capacity I theorized in Chapter 2 (see Appendix B). NCA accompanies students to cultivate a belief system, standard for judgment, and pattern of action that systematize this orientation in a life of service. As students come to see the ways in which NCA's goals converge with their personal goals, they become more invested and engaged in school structures, taking initiative to shape and enrich them for personal and collective benefit. In enabling this dynamic relationship between the school and the student body, NCA responds to Sarason (2001) by "helping students understand why learning to live with each other is both an individual and group obligation" (p. 604; see Chapter 2). This understanding is founded in students' capacity for both critical and transcendent engagement. I argue that the arena provided by NCA offers opportunities for students to develop capacity for critical and transcendent engagement in complementary ways, such that each compensates for the hazards of the other. Several patterns of this opportunity structure are evident in the data.

The school community, for example, which is experienced as protective and is designed by the administration to reduce alienation, is central to students' growing capacity to develop a sense of embeddedness in the world and to appreciate diversity. First, by "learning to live in community" (hooks, 2003, p. 163), students' sense of "otherness" is bridged; in the face of their diversity, they come to identify the common personhood that connects them to each other and, by extension, to all of humanity. Likewise, their critical consciousness of the life-world

relationship enables students to analyze their own opportunities for action, and to better appreciate the reasons others have for action in their own life-world relationships, contributing to an intersubjective understanding of diversity, in line with the comprehensive mode of thought described by Critical Psychology (Holzkamp, 2013; Tolman, 1994) as well as the self-transcendence inherent in transcendent engagement. Second, having experienced an institutional setting that challenges a culture of domination and alienation, students are “transformed by love” (Palmer, 1993) and become capable of contributing to and recreating this culture, as is seen in the role of “veteran” students who “carry the DNA” of the school, from year to year. Students’ consciousness of the field of possibility typically offered to adolescents in neoliberal society is raised and opportunities are opened to extend these possibilities to transform personal, relational, and institutional patterns. Finally, having applied their consciousness of these dimensions of spiritual and social reality in service, students gain confidence in their ability to advance not only their own wellbeing and development, but also the wellbeing and progress of others, of their communities, and of society. In this realization and action lies their engagement in the twofold purpose.

**Transformation.** One challenge of school reform is how to achieve a transformation of neoliberal values and practices without resorting to neoliberal strategies of competition and divisiveness in the process. Karlberg (2004) identifies a movement of construction, attraction, and attrition as a means of social change that “reconciles the means of social change with the ends of social change” (p. 180). This case study provides an example of how this model of societal change can be advanced through a school setting. Several principles characterize NCA’s effort to construct an alternative school that attracts teachers and families. Again, the tripartite matrix provides a helpful framework to consider these principles. As is evident in Table 6.1, these principles are perhaps best expressed as ongoing processes (i.e., “-ing” words) that emerge and advance in response to complex relationships among the three protagonists,

Table 6.1.

*Processes that Contribute to the Construction of NCA as a Transformative School Setting*

<b>Protagonist</b>	<b>Underlying Processes</b>
Institution	<p>Holding a high vision of the capacities of youth</p> <p>Adhering to the core goal of releasing potential</p> <p>Offering structures and spaces to advance wisdom, spiritual development, and a world-embracing vision</p> <p>Responding to the developmental imperatives of adolescence (e.g., spiritual individuation, reshaping relationships, identifying a standard for judgment)</p> <p>Maintaining a critical lens regarding the social forces affecting students, the relational environment, and the institution</p> <p>Operating in a learning mode to continually refine structures in light of experience, in keeping with core values &amp; goals</p> <p>Guiding the school through empowering leadership</p>
Community	<p>Nurturing mutual trust</p> <p>Promoting unity in diversity</p> <p>Reducing alienation</p> <p>Providing role modeling among peers and teachers</p> <p>Offering positive relationships among students and between students and teachers</p> <p>Protecting students' psychological and social wellbeing as they develop through the tumult of adolescence</p> <p>Cultivating shared responsibility for the school environment</p> <p>Accompanying each other on a path of service</p>
Individual	<p>Developing critical thinking and open-mindedness</p> <p>Identifying a belief system of "that which gives meaning"</p> <p>Elaborating a standard for judgment to guide decision-making</p> <p>Learning through service to refine knowledge and action</p> <p>Critiquing teen culture to extend possibilities for action</p> <p>Reshaping relationships with friends, family, and communities</p> <p>Encountering and appreciating diversity</p> <p>Acknowledging privilege and responsibility for choices</p> <p>Cultivating happiness, gratitude, empathy, &amp; sacrifice</p>

described in Chapter 5. This research identified the impact of these processes and principles on the day-to-day operation of the school environment, and highlighted the ways in which this

environment attracts teachers who seek a peaceful and productive learning environment, families who seek protective yet challenging opportunities for their children to harness the powers of emerging adulthood, and young people who seek a space in which they can learn to translate their passions and interests into action in the present and in the future. Attraction to this environment – and proliferation of similar schools – would, according to Karlberg (2004), contribute to attrition from the mode of schooling that currently dominates in the West.

### **Limitations, Transferability, and Implications**

In addition to the methodological limitations of this work, mentioned in Chapter 3, there are limitations to the interpretations and transferability of this case study. I describe these limitations and then further address the possibility of transferability. Finally, I discuss the implications of this research for NCA and for future research.

**Limitations.** As a case study, this work favoured depth over breadth in an effort to respond to the research questions. In pursuit of depth, the amount of data I collected necessitated countless decisions along the way that undoubtedly have influenced the end result; another researcher might have drawn out different threads or emphasized alternative explanations that were less evident to my eyes. Likewise, alternative methodological approaches would have yielded different data and highlighted other dimensions of the setting. Mindful of this fact, I used triangulation and member checking to compensate for research bias, building as strong links as possible between the data and the setting to validate my findings.

The data and resulting interpretations were significantly influenced by the fact that all research participants were active participants and stakeholders in the school at the time of the research. As a result, they had a vested interest in both their own positive perception of the school – to avoid cognitive dissonance given their investment in and reliance on the setting – and my positive perception of the school. This could have been counteracted by including participants from other groups less presently invested in the school, such as alumni and previous teachers. Future research could draw on these groups. In the current research, I

attempted to attenuate this problem through the construction of interview guides that encouraged both positive and negative comments, by highlighting negative or conflicting accounts in the data during coding and analysis, and by bringing up in interviews issues I had observed (e.g., Box 4.3 regarding the separation of Chinese and non-Chinese students).

Another limitation is that the data collected represent a snapshot of NCA's operations; research collected the year before or the year after might have yielded variations in themes and outcomes generated through my analysis. I attempted to account for this challenge of case-study research by collecting data throughout the school year to allow for temporal dynamics to become evident, by using the life history interviews with students to intentionally incorporate their reflections of previous school years, and by exploring the history of the school with the principal to consider what has changed and what has remained the same over time.

**Transferability.** As I described in Chapters 2 and 3, the case-study approach provided a strong tool for examining my research questions in the context of NCA. As Entwistle (1990) argues, a “notable gap” in education research is “the lack of attention to issues such as the effect adolescents have on their schools... We need more studies on the dialectic of development, in which notice is taken of how students and schools reciprocally influence each other” (p 221). It was in response to this need that I approached this research. On the other hand, however, NCA has several unique features that limit the transferability of this case to other schools. Most notable in my view is the fact that it is independent of school boards and can therefore question many aspects of the dominant model of education in Ontario when defining and revising its structures. With the exception of certain aspects of curricular requirements, this independence frees NCA to construct its own approach to the dynamics and methods of educating young people. This is not a freedom enjoyed by public schools. A second unique feature of NCA that notably limits transferability of its approach is its small size. Although evidence of the benefits of small schools is mixed (e.g., Saarento, Garandau, & Salmivalli, 2015), it is undeniably impactful at NCA, contributing to several dimensions of school life and to students' capacity

building. It arises repeatedly in Chapter 4, both as a contributor to wellbeing and as a challenge when frictions arise. Approaches to mimicking smallness in large schools have yielded such efforts as “school-within-a-school” (SWAS) plans (see Cotton, 1996), which attempt to organize students into smaller groups. The major challenge of this model, according to Raywid (1985) is “obtaining sufficient separateness and autonomy to permit staff members to generate a distinctive environment and to carry out their own vision of schooling” (quoted in Cotton, 1996). In this regard, the tripartite matrix identified in the present research could contribute to inquiry into SWAS plans by identifying patterns of institutional structure, community culture, and individual agency that manifest within and across school levels. In terms of transferability, however, the practices of NCA must be considered in light of its small student population.

For other schools aiming to promote similar goals as NCA, this research highlights the importance of a group-based belief system (Maton, 2008) that is translated into structure and environment to guide students toward wise decision-making and an outward orientation that transcends immediate concerns. By broadening students’ horizons to consider world issues in a manner that cultivates a sense of personal responsibility to act, NCA contributes to collective effort for a better world without sacrificing the wellbeing and progress of individual students. Its emphasis on service as a central component of individual capacity building and on the role of spiritual search in adolescent development is core to NCA’s ability in this regard. This work also highlights the importance of designing school structures to maximize convergence with developmental imperatives of adolescence, and to create space for students to pursue valued personal and collective goals. This case study reveals the importance of intentionally orienting institutional planning toward this convergence in the very foundations and vision of a school, such that emerging questions and challenges can be resolved by adherence to basic principles and maintaining core values. Opportunities that facilitate student participation in co-creation of the school environment can reciprocally support convergence between structure and development and should be carefully considered and implemented as an ongoing dimension of



administration. This recommendation speaks to the tripartite matrix of setting protagonists and how schools can transcend the dichotomy of “bottom up” and “top down” in favour of reciprocity, interconnectedness, and convergence. Efforts to promote positive relational environments in schools, for example, would benefit from considering not only the characteristics of interpersonal relationships themselves, but also the institution-level structures that shape and influence these relationships. Exclusive focus on individual, relational, or collective levels is unlikely to yield the structural supports this research indicates are necessary to promote a high-quality environment for capacity building.

**Implications for NCA.** Based on these findings, there are several opportunities for NCA to continue to refine its environment. Regarding students’ capacity for critical and transcendent engagement, NCA can continue to learn about bringing elements of its guiding principles – such as the Moral Capabilities Framework – into the forefront of students’ minds as they develop their belief systems and frameworks for judgment. As the students suggested, increasing the influence of these principles on students’ daily lives could provide valuable opportunities for learning at the individual and community levels. The data also indicate that NCA would benefit from enhancing the critical dimensions of students’ learning about broad social issues beyond the school environment, using existing theory and research on critical-consciousness raising. For example, the WCC-12 course could further contribute to students’ ability to analyze contextual features and root causes of global problems in a way that deliberately builds consciousness of the life-world relationship experienced by diverse others. Finally, NCA could continue strengthening the dimensions of empowerment and engagement identified by Maton (2008) and discussed in Chapter 5, especially addressing the question of the pros and cons of chaos in activities and opportunity-role structures, paying attention to the impacts on the wellbeing and retention of teachers.

In relation to the three protagonists, I suggest that their strength depends in large part on NCA’s mindfulness of the societal forces that influence students and the school environment

(e.g., teen culture). Such mindfulness requires spaces where unity of vision can be built to understand these forces, the history of the school's response to these forces can be articulated, and next steps for continual refinement of the environment can be determined. The whole-school consultation described in this research (Box 4.1) is an example of one such space at NCA. Mindfulness of societal forces can also help identify students whose goals and needs differ from the majority and to identify adaptations and new structures that can arise to support emerging needs. Although this research did not yield any clear cases of students falling through the cracks, it is worth analyzing the environment each year to assess whether any students need other forms of support in order to find convergence between their aims and NCA's approach.

**Implications for future research.** Considering this contrast between NCA and dominant models of schooling in the West, other non-traditional education settings would provide opportunities to explore these findings in circumstances where neoliberal forces are less dominant. Community schools and other alternative school environments in Nepal (Sharma, 2014), El Salvador (Jimenez & Sawada, 2014), and across Africa (e.g., Cashen et al., 2001; Glassman, Naidoo, Wood, Helmore, & O'Gara, 2007; Hoppers, 2005), for example, demonstrate how models of schooling can be constructed to advance the progress and wellbeing of families and communities where they live. Future research could compare the conceptual frameworks of a variety of such alternative schools to identify and evaluate key elements of effective approaches to cultivating critical and transcendent engagement. Such research could compare NCA and other schools to identify ways schools can support developmental imperatives of youth through mutual accompaniment among institution, community, and students. The tripartite matrix could be substantiated and elaborated in this way. The connections between this approach and the pattern of construction, attraction, and attrition mentioned above could also be further examined as a means of school reform.

Specific to NCA, it would be interesting to examine its long-term impacts on students' capacity for critical and transcendent engagement after they graduate and move on from

adolescence to other stages of life. Future research could consider the dynamics of NCA's relational environment in relation to major issues in typical school environment, such as bullying. Although several features of NCA stand in stark contrast to typical school environments, such as its small size, research could examine whether the core characteristics of low alienation, unity in diversity, and mutual support could contribute to a framework for prevention of bullying and backbiting. Another area for inquiry is the relationship between engagement and alienation. Although Mann (2001) describes alienation as the opposite of engagement, my reading of the literature indicates that this assumption has little verification. How these experiences manifest in school settings in relation to each other could inform efforts to prevent problems in schools' relational environments.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This research has captured an instance of NCA and its students as they learned together how to release the potential of young people through the mutual flourishing of individual, community, and institution in the school setting. The reciprocal dynamics among these three protagonists generated conditions and opportunities conducive to students' development and wellbeing. In their growing capacity for critical engagement, students learned to operate in the comprehensive-generalized mode of thought and action described in Critical Psychology, integrating emotion and motivation with cognition and action to pursue valued goals conducive to personal, relational, and collective wellbeing. Through cooperative support, the school and its community life attenuated the risks inherent in challenging entrenched societal-historical modes of being and relating, expanding the field of possibility to overcome negative social forces. At the same time, by providing structural supports to extend the possibility space, NCA also contributed to students' growing capacity for transcendent engagement. Learning to harness their burgeoning cognitive, emotional, and behavioural powers as emerging adults, these young people developed a sense of empathy and responsibility for the experience of diverse others, near and far. Creating and recreating links between "my life" and "all life"

through a search for truth and attraction to lofty ideals fed the process of spiritual individuation that proceeds as they challenged taken-for-granted assumptions and developed an evolving belief system to guide thought and action. By actively preventing an environment in which students who are not Bahá'í feel a sense of second-class citizenship, NCA widened the path of spiritual search, guided by its conviction in the power of unity in diversity. Through the leadership of the principal and others, the vision of a school community distinguished by its service orientation, unity of purpose, and uplifting spirit, became a vision shared by teachers and students. A variety of structures, activities, and relationships were woven together in the ongoing conduct of daily life in the school to generate these and other characteristics and processes, as described throughout this dissertation.

Clarity around the roles and interactions of the individual, the community, and the institution as three mutually-reinforcing protagonists is central to NCA's learning process and its ability to effectively build students' capacity for critical and transformative engagement in a twofold purpose. Through this dissertation, I have attempted to document and describe these roles and interactions, while acknowledging their dynamic and evolving nature. I look forward to working further with NCA to translate these findings into training materials and resources that can be used to enhance the impact, growth, and longevity of the school as it expands to new campuses. At the very heart of this school is its high vision of the potential of young people to contribute to the wellbeing and progress of society. Much could be gained if we as a society also reclaimed this vision.

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## 19 Moral Capabilities

### **Transcending ego toward *Self* and selflessness**

- Evaluating one's own strengths and weaknesses without involving ego.
- Transcending one's lower passions by focusing on higher purposes and capabilities.
- Forming a common vision of a desirable future based on shared values and principles, and articulating this in a way that inspires us to work towards its realization.
- Serving in societal institutions so as to facilitate the expression of the talents of others that are affected by these institutions.

### **Living a life of rectitude & discipline**

- Managing one's affairs and responsibilities with rectitude of conduct based on moral and ethical principles.
- Taking initiative in a creative and a disciplined way.
- Sustaining effort, persevering, and overcoming obstacles.

### **Reflecting consistently toward *Truth***

- Learning from systematic reflection upon action within a consistent framework.
- Participating effectively in consultation.
- Thinking systemically and strategically in search for solutions.
- Perceiving and interpreting the significance of current events and trends in light of an appropriate historical perspective.

### **Loving yourself to *Love* others**

- Imbuing one's actions and thoughts with love.
- Encouraging others and bringing happiness in their hearts.
- Building unity in diversity.
- Being a responsible and loving family member as a child, spouse, or parent.

### **Contributing a sense of *Justice & Beauty***

- Contributing to the establishment of justice.
- Cultivating and creating a sense of beauty in every endeavour.
- Recognizing relationships of domination and contributing to their transformation into relationships based on interconnectedness, reciprocity, and co-operation.
- Committing oneself to empowering educational activities as a student and as a teacher.

## Appendix B. Dimensions of Engagement: Overview of Theoretical and Empirical Constructs

	<b>Critical Engagement</b>	<b>Transcendent Engagement</b>	<b>Wisdom</b>	<b>Spiritual Development</b>	<b>World-Embracing Vision</b>
<b>Cognition</b>	Comprehensive thinking Intersubjectivity Consciousness of life-world relationship Epistemic distance Creativity & imagination	Sense of embeddedness in something larger Abstract thinking & symbolism Spiritual perception beyond immediate experiences & material reality Concern for world issues Relationship between knower & known	Critical thinking Openness Consciousness of problems Analysis of context and root causes Able to deal with ambiguity Discernment – weighing options	Intelligence and idealism Determining what is of benefit to humanity and society Inspiration Transcendence of immediate life circumstances and concerns	Awareness of privilege Elimination of “us and them” thinking Eradication of prejudice Global vision of justice Perception of connections between local & global
<b>Emotion-Motivation</b>	Subjective assessment Feedback on life situation Determining grounds for action Evaluating features of available goals Collective sense of purpose	Felt connection to others Love of life Qualities and values of being & relating Sense of responsibility Spiritual individuation Humility Empathy	Values & moral beliefs – a moral “bottom line” Refining behaviour in light of values Connecting emotions to moral dilemmas – guide choice & action Sense of control over choices Confidence & courage	Determining that which gives meaning to life Vision of the future Happiness & optimism Sense of wholeness Gratitude Empathy & love	Personhood identity – unity in diversity Sense of deep purpose Sense of (collective) responsibility Appreciation for diversity Humility Belief in others’ capacity
<b>Action</b>	Generalized action potency Innovation Risk Cooperative support Collective volition & action Structural supports to extend possibility space	Fulfillment of spiritual needs Search for sacred Exploration of inner space Self-improvement Create & re-create links between “my life” and “all life” Search for truth Mutual support & guidance Recall & recreate loving environments Contribute to society via patterns of meaning-making	Mutual support Accountability for effects of behaviours Questioning & learning Applying methods & tools for problem-solving Excellence & follow-through Speaking up for yourself Service Teamwork & leadership Persistence through challenges Structural supports & opportunities	Spiritual search – exploring beliefs Applying skills and talents Working for the common good Determination Learning through tests Service Sacrifice Spiritual fellowship Servant leadership	Achieving higher purposes Speaking up for others Service Meaningful conversations Balance of personal & collective development Individual effort in collective work Contribute to a world-wide impulse for change

### Appendix C. Analytic Theme Development Tool\*

Research Question	Finding	Descriptive Themes	Outcome/Research Problem	Analytic Theme
1. What changes in students' thought-action patterns impact their capacity for critical and transcendent engagement?	Students encounter wisdom, a world-embracing vision, and spiritual development as key capacities targeted by NCA	NCA structures target wisdom through raising consciousness, fostering a standard for judgement, and encouraging action	Students' capacity to engage in a twofold purpose advances as they enter into a relationship with the school setting, which promotes through thought-action patterns conducive to critical and transcendent engagement.	Reciprocally building capacity across individual, relational, and institutional levels through school structures and their characteristics
		A world-embracing vision is interwoven with wisdom-building at NCA		
		Students' capacity building for wisdom and world-embracing vision has a reciprocal relationship with relational and institutional characteristics of the school		
2. By what mechanisms do school structures and their underlying vision become represented in students' patterns of thought and action?  3. What qualities of the NCA environment impact the strength of the relationship between school structures, students' thought-action patterns, and their capacity for critical and transcendent engagement.	Releasing young people's potential is a goal and experience of both the school and the students	The transformative centre of the school is focused on releasing potential and building an orientation toward social justice.	Students need to see the convergence between the school's approach and their own wellbeing and development - evidenced primarily in their relationships with friends, family, and society - to come into close connection with school structures.	Acknowledging the effect of school and students sharing common goals
		Students want to branch out from their parents and overcome negative teen culture		
		As students see changes in their patterns and relationships, they become more involved in co-creating the school environment		
	Relational qualities of day-to-day living at NCA interact with students' development	A protective environment provides a needed arena for development and engagement	Students' development and engagement depend on the quality of relationships in the school environment, which provide psychological safety and preserve space for vulnerable aspects of development like spiritual search	Promoting student engagement by preventing alienation
		The quality of relationships in the school interacts with the safety of the environment		
		Healthy development is promoted by providing space for spiritual search		

\* (adapted from Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012)

## Appendix D. Interview Guides

### **Interview Guide – NCA Students, Time 1 (Fall Semester)**

Thanks for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of our conversation today is to 1) for me to get a sense of who you are, where you come from, and what history you bring with you as a Nancy Campbell students; and 2) for us to talk about what social action means to you and what experience you've had with social action or service. I'm interested in your whole life, not just your time at the school. As a teen you are at an important age when you can start reflecting on your past and its influence on your present; I'm interested in learning about those reflections.

This interview is not meant to be stressful in any way and it might be better to think of it as a relaxed conversation. There are no right or wrong answers; just let me know your thoughts and I'll ask follow up questions if I need to better understand something. If you need a minute to think about something feel free. If you want me to repeat something or explain it differently I'm happy to. If you want to skip a question that's totally fine too.

I'll let you know when I start and stop recording. If you want me to pause the recorder at any time just let me know. Do you have any questions or comments before we start?

*[Wait for response and answer any questions] I'll turn on the recorder now. [Turn on recorder]*

### **Section 1: Background concepts**

1. As you know, this research is really interested in social action. You might also use the word "service" to describe social action. What does the word service mean to you?
  - a. Characteristics of service
  - b. Importance of service
  - c. Levels of service (e.g., individual-level; interpersonal; systemic)
  - d. Value/meaning of service
2. What is a social issue that you feel particularly strongly about?
  - a. What feelings does this issue provoke
  - b. Reasons why it's important
  - c. Relevance to own life experiences
  - d. Influence on your life

### **Section 2: Establishing the timeline & history of service**

3. We'll return to this subject of social action in a few minutes but the next thing we'll do is create a timeline of your life so far. As a researcher it's important for me to understand some of your history so that I can understand your life now in context. This helps me avoid making assumptions about why you do what you do. I have drawn a line on this paper starting with when you were born, leading up to today. We can use this to identify the major events and people in your life that have shaped who you are now. Let's start by putting in some key dates *[write on timeline]*:

- a. Birth date
  - b. Siblings' birth dates
  - c. Started school
  - d. Any times you moved
  - e. When you came to NCWA
  - f. Other important events
4. Now let's add some of the key people in your life *[use sticky notes to add to timeline]*:
    - a. Parents (names, jobs, education level, where they live now)
    - b. Siblings (names, jobs, education level, where they live now)
    - c. Friends and family friends
    - d. Clubs
    - e. Memorable teachers
    - f. Other important people
  5. Thinking about your parents again, what do you think they would say are your most important life tasks right now?
    - a. Academic, service, family, etc.
    - b. What do you think are your most important life tasks?
  6. Now let's think again about the social issue you mentioned that is important to you. *[Review some key points from that answer]*. When did you first start thinking about this issue?
    - a. When did it become important to you? *[add to timeline]*
    - b. When did it start affecting your actions (if at all)? *[add to timeline]*
    - c. What experiences have you had acting on that issue?
    - d. Are there any people that have influenced your reactions to this issue?
    - e. What do you think your parents would say about this issue?
  7. Let's think about where you grew up. In your home community is service a normal activity?
    - a. Your country
    - b. Your religious community
    - c. Your neighbourhood
    - d. Your school
    - e. Other communities
  8. Let's think back to your childhood again. When you were a kid, were your parents involved in any service activities?
    - a. In the community? At your school? Sports teams? Other types of service?
    - b. Were you involved too?
    - c. Why do you think they chose to do this service?
    - d. If not, why do you think they didn't serve?

### **Section 3: Values & assumptions**

9. Now I want to switch gears a bit. Tell me about something that inspires you.
  - a. Person



- b. Action
  - c. Value/belief
  - d. Why?
  - e. How does it influence your life?
10. Imagine that there is a new service project starting that you think is important but it requires that you do something new and challenging. How would you motivate yourself to do it?

#### **Section 4: Closing**

11. Thinking about what we've talked about so far, have I missed anything important about your history and experience with social action?
12. We will meet again next semester for another interview when we'll focus more on your time at Nancy Campbell. I'll bring back the timeline so you can add anything new that comes to mind. Do you have any feedback about this interview that I should think about when I plan that interview?

Thanks again for meeting with me. I'll turn off the recorder now.

*[Turn off the recorder]*

#### **Interview Guide – NCA Students, Time 2 (Spring Semester)**

Thanks for meeting with me again for this second interview. You might remember that our first interview focused on your life before you came to Nancy Campbell. This helped me understand who you are and where you're coming from as an individual.

The purpose of today's interview is to focus on your time as a Nancy Campbell student. This will help me understand how the school's approach and vision has impacted you, both positively and negatively. I'm especially interested in continuing our conversation about service, and also in talking about world citizenship and what it means to you. We might not spend as much time drawing on the physical timeline that we started last time, but we'll add things when they come up.

Just like last time, this interview is not meant to be stressful and will hopefully feel more like a conversation. As you know, I am doing several things to protect your identity and to make sure that what you say in the interviews stays anonymous. I hope that you feel comfortable to share your thoughts freely, including things that are good about the school and your experience, as well as things that need improvement or have been negative for you. Do you have any questions or concerns before we get started?

*[Wait for response. Answer any questions.] I'll turn on the recorder now. [Turn on recorder]*

#### **Section 1: Spirituality and Spiritual Engagement**

In our first conversation I asked you to define service. Talking to you and other students about what that word means helped me better understand what you're learning about service at the school. This time I'd like to focus more on the word spirituality.



1. What does spirituality mean to you?
  - Beliefs, belief systems
  - Religion (Inclusive? Separate?)
  - Feelings
  - Relationships (family, God, friends, church or whatever)
  - Sense of connection, transcendence
  - Behaviours, routines, activities
  - Good and bad elements and/or effects
  
2. How does your own spirituality impact your life?
  - Choices
  - Actions
  - Interpersonal relationships
  - Plans for the future
  - Sense of connection to others, to the world
  
3. Thinking back to before you came to Nancy Campbell, do you think your ideas about spirituality have changed from then to now?
  - Individual vs. collective spiritual experiences
  - Building on previous ideas vs. brand new ideas
  - More important to you vs. less important
  - Impacts of spirituality on your own life, on the school, on the world
  - The place of spirituality in school life
  
4. [If described changes in response to Q #2] What is it about your time at Nancy Campbell that has changed your ideas about spirituality?
  - Moral Capabilities framework
  - Independent investigation of truth
  - Spiritual activities
  - Arts
  - Peers, teachers, admins, etc. – Role of individuals and community
  - Conversations
  - Any key turning points??
  
5. How does Nancy Campbell's inclusion of spirituality make it different than other schools that don't include spirituality?
  - Impact on learning
  - Impact on service-focus (individual service, collective service, motivations to serve, types of service)

- Impacts on relationships (student-student, student-teacher, etc.)
- Inclusive versus exclusive impacts
- Use of the arts
- School climate

## **Section 2: World Citizenship**

So I'd like to switch gears a bit now. Keeping in mind everything we just discussed about spirituality, I want to focus now on the idea of world citizenship. As you know, this is a major focus of the school: helping students become world citizens.

6. What does the term "world citizen" mean to you?
  - Identity, self-concept, sense of connection
  - Wisdom
  - Vision of a better world? Desire to make a difference?
  - Actions, behaviours (leadership?)
  - Travel (req'd for world cit'ship? enough?)
  - Values – how should change happen
  - Other characteristics of a world citizen
7. Do you feel like you're a world citizen?
  - Currently vs. becoming vs. no
  - Your relationship to the rest of the world
  - Responsibilities to other people, including people you don't know?
  - Vision of how the world should be
  - Action to make the world a better place
  - Sense of power/ability to make a difference
  - Impact on your sense of national citizenship
8. Has being a Nancy Campbell student changed the way you think about your relationship with the rest of the world?
  - Role models – principal, teachers, other students
  - School culture
  - Student body diversity
  - Spirituality – links between spiritual connection and citizenship connection?
  - Service experiences (esp. grade 11 service trip)
  - WCC
  - Moral capabilities framework
9. Tying this back to our earlier conversation about spirituality, what do you think are the connections or overlaps between your spirituality and your sense of world citizenship?

### **Section 3: Closing**

10. Okay, we're almost done, but I want to ask you one more question, focusing on your future. Based on your vision of how to make the world a better place, what is one major thing you want to do before you die?

- Social action? Family life? Career? Travel? Spiritual/religious experiences?
- Perceived importance
- Perceived impact

10A. Do you think Nancy Campbell helps prepare you to accomplish that thing? Will you be better equipped to do that by the time you graduate?

11. This is our last interview, although you can always feel free to chat with me when I'm around the school. Before we finish, is there anything else you want to mention?

Thanks again for meeting with me. I'll turn off the recorder now. *[Turn off the recorder]*

### **Interview Guide – Principal/Founder T1**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. As you know, I am aiming to learn about the ways in which Nancy Campbell students experience spiritual engagement in their education and the impacts of this engagement on their capacity for social action. Through this interview I am hoping to learn from your experience as the school's founder and principal, particularly about your vision of students' engagement and what school structures and processes are put in place to bring about this vision. You'll notice in the questions that I'm focusing mostly on your vision or intentions, rather than your experiences or observations. Feel free to share those as well, but there will be more opportunity for that in our second interview later in the year.

This interview will be recorded in order to transcribe it to text. Feel free to ask me any questions at any point during the interview. We can also pause the recording if you would like to clarify anything off the record. I will let you know at the end of the interview when I have stopped recording.

This interview is not meant to be stressful. There are no right or wrong answers. If you need some time to think before you answer any questions feel free to pause. Also if you want me to repeat any questions just let me know. If you don't feel comfortable answering a specific question, just let me know and we will skip it.

Do you have any questions or comments before I start recording?

*[Wait for response and respond to any questions]*

I'm going to turn on the recorder now.

## SECTION 1: VISION OF WISE WORLD CITIZENS & SPIRITUAL ENGAGEMENT

1. A few times over the last couple of weeks I've heard you talk about the purpose of the school. One thing you've said is that the purpose is to help the students become wise world citizens. Can you describe for me what this means to you? What is your vision of the wise world citizens that Nancy Campbell grads are supposed to become?

*Probes:*

- a. How would they think, speak, feel, and act?
  - b. What does it mean that they would be "wise"?
  - c. What does it mean that they would be "world citizens"?
  - d. How is this vision influenced by the Bahá'í teachings?
2. Keeping that vision in mind, what is your vision of how future wise world citizens would be during their time at Nancy Campbell?

*Probes:*

- a. How would they think, speak, feel, and act?
3. As you know from your experience so far with this research, I'm looking at how spiritual engagement can build capacity for young people to become agents of change. I've defined spiritual engagement in terms of several factors that roughly fit under the headings of emotion, cognition, and behaviour. [Provide a copy of the list] What are your reactions to this list?

*Probes:*

- a. Is there anything missing?
  - b. How does it relate to your vision of NCWA students' engagement?
4. What is your vision of how spiritual engagement helps build students' capacity for social action?

## SECTION 2A: STRUCTURES (ROLES)

5. Now I want to get into the ways in which Nancy Campbell creates structures that support students' development toward the vision you've just described. Structures can be many things, but let's start with the roles of different actors at the school. What do you envision your role to be as the principal, in terms of how it supports students' spiritual engagement?

*Probes:*

- a. How does information flow between you and the students?
- b. How does information flow between you and the teachers?
- c. What delays and/or barriers affect these flows?
- d. What types of information motivate you to act? What types of action?

6. What about teachers? What is your vision of their role in fostering students' spiritual engagement?

*Probes:*

- a. How do they relate to students in and out of the classroom?
  - b. What do you expect their vision of the students to be?
7. What about students? What is your vision of their role in their spiritual engagement?

*Probes:*

- a. Their own spiritual engagement?
- b. Each other's spiritual engagement?

## SECTION 2B: STRUCTURES (ACTIVITIES)

8. Another type of structure that could have an impact on students' spiritual engagement is the different activities that they are involved in at school. A few examples would be filling out the moral capabilities self report card, the moral dilemma exercises, service projects and trips, and morning assemblies. We can talk about each of these individually, but first I'm wondering how you decide what activities should take place at the school. What guides your decision making when determining what types of activities the students should participate in?

*Probes:*

- a. Are there other activities that you think are central to the school's approach to nurture wise citizens?
  - b. Do these activities foster students' spiritual engagement? If so, in what way?
9. You have morning assemblies every day whereas many schools have them only periodically. What is the purpose of the daily morning assemblies?

*Probes:*

- a. How does it influence the culture of the school?
  - b. How does it influence the rhythm of the day?
  - c. Sub-activities: devotions, announcements, others?
  - d. How does it relate to spiritual engagement?
10. What is the purpose of having 50 hours of service required each year?

*Probes:*

- a. How does it influence the culture of the school?
  - b. Are there different impacts of different types of service?
  - c. How does the grade 11 service trip relate to this service requirement?
  - d. What is the balance between service for the purpose of education/training and service for the purpose of making an impact in the community? Which do you see as the primary purpose?
11. What about the world citizenship curriculum. What is its purpose?

*Probes:*

- a. You use Ministry course codes for these courses. How is the curriculum you deliver the same and different from the Ministry's requirements?
12. Dance workshop and the 1nes project are other activities that many Nancy Campbell students become involved in. What is your vision of how these types of creative activities foster spiritual engagement?

*Probes:*

- a. What proportion of students are involved in these activities?
- b. How do these activities relate to students' capacity for social action?
13. Some other major school activities, like the student council election, I've been able to learn about through my observations. Before we go on to other topics, are there other major activities that you think impact students' spiritual engagement?

### SECTION 3: EXTERNAL REQUIREMENT

14. One thing I noticed at the student orientation at Wildfire is that spaces are created for critical thought and respectful dialogue. The moral dilemma exercise and the conversation about the power of language are examples. My understanding is that Nancy Campbell faces some of the same external requirements as any school in Ontario and yet it is able to include many more of these types of activities, which take substantial time. What is it that allows Nancy Campbell the freedom to create these spaces?
15. Why does Nancy Campbell prioritize the creation of these types of spaces?
16. What challenges does Nancy Campbell face in its efforts to nurture wise world citizens?

*Probes:*

- a. What allows it to persist through these challenges?
- b. What helps protect the school from challenges?
- c. How do these challenges impact students' day-to-day lives?

### SECTION 4: CLOSING

17. Thinking about what we've talked about so far, have I missed anything important about spiritual engagement and the structures and processes at the school that support it?
18. Is there anything else that would be good for me to know to see the full picture?
19. We will be meeting for interviews a few more times through the year and also informally now and then while I'm visiting the school. Do you have any feedback on this interview experience that I should take into account for those future conversations?

*Probes:*

- a. How did this compare to your expectations for the interview?

Just a reminder too that we'll be meeting for about half an hour next week. This will be a chance for you to mention anything that comes to mind after today and for me to ask any clarifying questions that come up. I'll integrate your feedback into my prep for that meeting.

Thanks again for meeting with me. I'll turn off the recorder now.

*[Turn off the recorder]*

## **Interview Guide – Principal/Founder T2**

As you might remember, our first interview was focused on your vision of the school and what approaches are used to realize that vision. Just as a reminder, in terms of the students' development, we discussed what it means to be a wise world citizen, what spiritual engagement is, and students' capacity for social action. We also talked about activities and structures of the school that influence students' development in these areas.

For today's interview, I want to revisit a few of those topics, delving more deeply into some of the things I've learned over the course of the school year. Primarily we'll focus on world citizenship and spiritual engagement, as before. Overall, I'm trying to learn about the roles of and relationships among the three protagonists in the school and how these influence students' development as world citizens. I also want to talk about a couple of the challenges faced by the school and how these impact the three protagonists.

Do you have any questions or concerns before I start recording?

*[Wait for response and respond]* I'm going to turn on the recorder now. *[Turn on recorder]*

### SECTION 1: Follow-up

1. Yesterday during assembly you spoke briefly about the role of schools in generating knowledge, not just teaching and reproducing what is already known. You talked about how this is important to raise the standard of education. What is the standard of education you are trying to uphold at Nancy Campbell?
  - How is this different from other standards?
2. Yesterday we also spoke briefly about how important it is to you that this be a Baha'i-inspired school, even though this has also posed a challenge to the sustainability of the school because people can be turned off by its religious basis. Why is it so important to you that you maintain this as an explicit influence on the school?

### SECTION 2: World Citizenship

3. In my recent interviews with students I've been asking them to describe what it means to be a world citizen. We've also talked about what experiences at Nancy Campbell have contributed to their development as world citizens. In general, I'm interested in what have you observed this year about students' development in this area. Do you see signs that they are building their capacity for world citizenship?
4. What are the critical aspects of Nancy Campbell's approach and activities that impact students' development as world citizens?
  - Service hours and opportunities
  - Student body diversity
  - Sense of purpose/responsibility to make change
  - Moral Capabilities Framework
5. World citizenship is becoming a hot topic and many schools seem to be trying to develop a world citizenship education strategy. What distinguishes Nancy Campbell's approach to world citizenship education from other schools' approaches?
  - Relationship between world citizenship and students' identities
  - Relationship between world citizenship and career preparation
6. One aspect of capacity for social action I'm looking at is creating a vision of a different future that would be better than how the world is now. How does Nancy Campbell help students develop a vision of a different, better world that they can work toward?
7. What does moral leadership have to do with world citizenship?
8. WCC is a central aspect of Nancy Campbell's approach to building students' capacity for world citizenship. Over the year, though, (and you can tell me whether this is a fair assessment) I've seen and heard that this course is not always consistent and at times seems to be without clear, intentional content. What are some of the challenges involved in delivering this course?
  - What needs to be in place or to occur for WCC to accomplish what it needs to accomplish?
  - What is your ideal vision of how this course would go? (content, delivery, etc.)

### SECTION 3: Spiritual Engagement

9. How do students' spiritual experiences at the school shape their development as world citizens?
  - Character development



- Determining one's beliefs

10. What does moral leadership have to do with spiritual engagement?

11. I've noticed that there seem to be aspects of the school that are more explicitly spiritual – like morning devotions – and others than students might not recognize as being spiritual, but do contribute to their beliefs, their values, and their character. One strength of this approach seems to be that different students get what they need from different aspects of the school experience. Would you say that this is an intentional strategy of the school?

- Influence of institutional structures
- Influence of the school community
- Influence of individual students

### CLOSING

12. If you had to choose only one thing to describe Nancy Campbell's mission, what would it be?

13. If you had to choose only one thing to describe why Nancy Campbell is successful in its mission, what would it be?

14. That was my last question. Before we finish do you have any other thoughts or comments that you want to mention?

Thanks again for meeting with me. I'll turn off the recorder now.

*[Turn off recorder]*

### **Focus Group Guide – Students**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. As you know, my purpose in conducting this research is to learn about how Nancy Campbell impacts students' capacity for social action. As Nancy Campbell students you know first hand what it's like to be part of this community and I'm hoping you can share some of your experiences and thoughts with me.

This focus group will be recorded in order to transcribe it to text. Feel free to ask me any questions that might arise during the interview. We can also pause the recording if you would like to clarify anything off the record. This conversation is not meant to be stressful. There are no right or wrong answers. If you want me to repeat or reword any questions just let me know.

Because this is a focus group, rather than a one-on-one interview, it is vital that we respect each other's contributions, both during and after the session. I have created this agreement that I'll ask everyone to sign showing that you agree to six principles. *[Pass around the sheet]*. These principles are:

1. Only one person speaks at a time
2. We must all protect each other's privacy and confidentiality - What is shared in the room stays in the room
3. There are no right or wrong answers to questions, just ideas, experiences, and opinions, which are all valuable and must be treated with respect
4. If you disagree with someone you are welcome to share your thoughts with the group in a respectful manner
5. It is important to hear all sides of an issue - both the positive and negative
6. It is important to hear all sides of an issues - from men and women, Canadians and those from other countries, younger and older, new to Nancy Campbell and those returning, etc.

Do you have any questions or comments before I start recording?

*[Wait for response and respond to any questions] I'm going to turn on the recorder now. [Turn on recorder]*

1. I was with you at Wildfire in January and got to see you doing the moral dilemma activity about the refugee issue England and France are facing. Many of you were also at Wildfire in September when you did another moral dilemma activity about cheap human labour. I'm interested to hear what you think of that activity. Tell me about what it's like to have to pick a side on these difficult issues.

*Probes:*

- Do you feel pressured to pick the side your friends pick? Or what you think Mr. Naylor wants you to pick?
- Once you've picked a side, what helps you figure out your opinion on the issue?
  - Discussions with others on that side
  - Hearing the other side's perspective
  - Reflection
  - Remembering what you've learned in classes (e.g., WCC)
  - Looking up facts
- Do you find it to be an emotional experience? How do those emotions affect you?
  - Emotions grow over time
  - More attachment to the side you've picked – hard to see the other side?

- What do you think are the learning benefits of doing the moral dilemma activity?

2. Part of the mission of Nancy Campbell is to help all of you develop skills for service. Tell me about what it's like to go to a school with such a big focus on service.

*Probes:*

- Did you expect this when you came to the school?
- Benefits
  - Skills
  - Learning
  - Time with friends
  - Make a difference
  - Time to be creative
  - Learn about the world
  - Learn about the self
  - Maturity
  - Make parents proud
- Drawbacks
  - Time commitment
  - Doing challenging things
  - Balancing different activities

3. Let's talk about WCC. Tell me about what it's like to do a WCC class.

*Probes:*

- How is it different from other classes?
- How is it not different from other classes?
- Is it a valuable contribution to your education?

4. The moral capabilities framework is something that Nancy Campbell uses, that most other schools don't use. How much does that framework influence your Nancy Campbell experience?

*Probes:*

- Your classes
- Solving problems
  - Individually
  - Between friends
  - As a school
- Your mentorship
- Plans for the future

5. You all come to Nancy Campbell from different places and different backgrounds. Tell me about a time when you really felt like you belonged here, that you were part of the Nancy Campbell community.

*Probes:*

- What contributed to this feeling?
    - A person
    - An activity
  - How does it feel to be a Nancy Campbeller?
6. Thinking about what we've talked about so far, have I missed anything important. Is there anything else that would be good for me to know to see the full picture?
  7. Are there any reflections on this focus group experience you'd like to share that I should keep in mind for other focus groups?

Thanks again for meeting with me. I'll turn off the recorder now.

*[Turn off the recorder]*

### **Focus Group Guide – Teachers**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. As you know, my purpose in conducting this research is to learn about how Nancy Campbell impacts students' capacity for social action. As the teachers who work with these students every day, you play an important role in their development and see things from a very important perspective. I'm hoping that our conversation today is an opportunity for us to reflect a little bit on your experiences and, in doing so, analyze how the school's efforts interact with the students' efforts to help them mature and develop.

This focus group will be recorded in order to transcribe it to text. Feel free to ask me any questions that might arise during the interview. We can also pause the recording if you would like to clarify anything off the record. This conversation is not meant to be stressful. There are no right or wrong answers. If you want me to repeat or reword any questions just let me know.

Because this is a focus group, rather than a one-on-one interview, it is vital that we respect each other's contributions, both during and after the session. I have created this agreement that I'll ask everyone to sign showing that you agree to six principles. *[Pass around the sheet]*. These principles are:

7. Only one person speaks at a time

8. We must all protect each other's privacy and confidentiality - What is shared in the room stays in the room
9. There are no right or wrong answers to questions, just ideas, experiences, and opinions, which are all valuable and must be treated with respect
10. If you disagree with someone you are welcome to share your thoughts with the group in a respectful manner
11. It is important to hear all sides of an issue - both the positive and negative
12. It is important to hear all sides of an issues - from men and women, Canadians and those from other countries, younger and older, new to Nancy Campbell and those returning, etc.

Do you have any questions or comments before I start recording?

*[Wait for response and respond to any questions]*

I'm going to turn on the recorder now.

*[Turn on recorder]*

1. We can think about the students as individuals, but we can also think of them as a collective, as a community. There is a Nancy Campbell community that forms each year and an environment that is created. In your own opinions, what does that environment look like? Tell me the brief story of the Nancy Campbell environment.

*Probes:*

- Positives and negatives
- Quality of relationships and interactions
  - Student-teacher
  - Student-student
  - Teacher-administration
- Learning environment
- Service environment
- Day-to-day life
- This year vs. other years

2. So we've described some positive and negative characteristics of the school community. Whose responsibility is it to maintain a positive school environment?

*Probes:*

- The respective roles of:
  - The school as an institution
  - The teachers

- The students
  - What about maintaining it through challenges?
3. Tell me about a time when you really noticed a positive environment at the school. What happened that caused that experience?

*Probes:*

- What supports a positive environment?
    - External structures
      - RMT
      - Moral capabilities framework
    - Individual efforts
    - Collective efforts
      - Space for spirituality and religion
4. Tell me about a time when barriers have made it difficult to maintain a positive school environment?

*Probes:*

- Time conflicts between service and academics
- Flows of information

5. How do you think the school environment impacts the students' capacity to engage in social action as they enter adulthood?

*Probes:*

- Tell me about a time when you noticed a student had really changed
- Different effects on different students
  - Benefitting from different activities or structures
  - Different backgrounds/experiences (capital)
- Holistic engagement of students
- Impacts of the moral capabilities framework
- From logic model:
  - Perceived and actual power
    - Self-efficacy
    - Collective efficacy
    - Skills
    - Access to resources
    - Possession of capital
  - Adequate knowledge
    - Ability to assess available needs & opportunities ("read social reality")
    - Knowledge of potential courses of action

- Wisdom
  - Critical distance
    - Awareness of privilege
    - Meta-cognition
    - Ability to analyze conditions of action
  - Desire for change
6. Tell me about when you first started to feel like you were part of the Nancy Campbell community.
  7. Thinking about what we've talked about so far, have I missed anything important. Is there anything else that would be good for me to know to see the full picture?
  8. Are there any reflections on this focus group experience you'd like to share that I should keep in mind for other focus groups?

Thanks again for meeting with me. I'll turn off the recorder now.

*[Turn off the recorder]*