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Tacit Teaching and the Educative Context: Bringing Intentionality to the Hidden Curriculum

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Tacit Teaching and the Educative Context:
Bringing Intentionality to the Hidden Curriculum

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

Education, as conventionally practiced and colloquially understood, focuses on students' learning of knowledge and skills. Yet the ambitions of most educational programs also include deeper aspects of learning and development—those related to students' character, attitudes, and dispositions. This is particularly the case in specialized programs with goals related to social development (democracy education, environmental education etc.). This type of learning is associated with the “hidden curriculum,” which refers to the tacit learning that takes place through students' daily immersion in the schooling context. However, the hidden curriculum is usually characterized negatively, as a hegemonic force. Literature on the hidden curriculum tends to focus on un-hiding it, and offers little guidance on how to counteract or reorient it. To partially address this, the idea of “tacit teaching” has been introduced as a way of discussing how non-explicit activities of the teacher can contribute to students' deep learning.

This research attempts determine a more comprehensive and systematic approach to bringing intentionality to the hidden curriculum, by expanding the notion of tacit teaching to include a broader range of factors that contribute to students' daily experiences. The research introduces the term "educative context" to refer to these factors collectively, as the mechanism by which the hidden curriculum is taught and learned. The research draws on data generated in three alternative schools with strong philosophies related, respectively, to: democracy and autonomy; sustainability and sense of place; and bioregionalism. The methodology blends critical ethnographic and case study approaches, and included approximately 200 hours of immersion across the three sites, interviews with 33 students and staff, and a review of documents and artifacts from the schools. The data analysis identifies 110 different contextual factors across the

three schools. These factors are clustered to develop a model for the educative context consisting of four categories: social, physical, institutional, and content-related. The factors are further classified according to the level of the education system they are associated with. The research concludes with an argument in favor of a broad conceptualization of teaching and learning that takes full account of the educative context.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

The research presented in this dissertation pertains to the interrelated topics of education, enculturation, and the hidden curriculum. More specifically, this inquiry pursues the idea of teaching and learning in the tacit domain, through implicit aspects of the educational context such as school norms and the physical environment, as the mechanism by which the hidden curriculum is imparted to students. The inquiry was conducted through a blend of critical ethnographic and case study approaches, with data generated in three different alternative school contexts. The analysis of this data contributed to the development of a new construct, termed the “educative context,” as the modality by which tacit teaching and learning take place, and its elaboration through the identification of numerous contextual factors that appear prominent in the daily experiences of students in these schools.

This dissertation is presented in five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the topic, and the background of my own interest in this area as a researcher and educators. The second chapter provides a review of related literature, drawn from a number of fields, as well as initial discussion and development of the constructs that drove the research. The third chapter presents a description of the methodology used to conduct the research, including an introduction to the three schools where data was generated. The fourth chapter is a lengthy one, as it details the findings of the study, and provides a full description of the many factors in each school which showed prominence in structuring and informing students’ daily experiences. The fifth and final chapter presents a discussion of the findings, including a reconstructive analysis that brings together the data from the three schools to address the initial research questions.

Prologue

The starting point for this study goes back a long ways. I decided to become a teacher primarily because I felt like it was a good position from which to work towards positive social change. I was concerned mostly about environmental issues at the time, but I had a vague sense of their connection to other social and political issues, and to deeper philosophical issues as well, about how we conceive of our selves in the world, and in relation to one another.

During my first few years as a teacher, my major focus was on honing my more immediate pedagogical skills—those necessary to survive and thrive in the classroom. But I always kept my eye on the more fundamental goals of social change that led me to the profession in the first place. I became adept as a facilitator and a classroom manager. I assembled a good range of instructional strategies and assessment practices. And I tried earnestly, in all the ways I knew how, to put bring my ideas about sustainability into the classroom.

However, as I became more competent and comfortable in the classroom, I also became increasingly dissatisfied with what I was doing. I was doing what I thought were all the right things, but I didn't feel like I was making a meaningful impact on my students' development as environmental citizens. I was doing things that seemed appropriate: teaching curriculum units on waste and plants and integrating related content into other subjects; organizing fieldtrips for environmental learning off site; helping out with a schoolyard naturalization project; organizing school-wide composting; running an environment club; using reusable/ recycled/ repurposed materials wherever I could; and consciously avoiding token activities like drawing up posters to save endangered species. In addition, I was consciously trying to be an environmental role model of sorts, bringing waste-free lunches, and riding my bike to school every day for more than four years, even in the harsh Calgary winters. But it all felt piecemeal. And when talking with friends,

I was embarrassed by my inability to articulate, in any coherent manner, how I thought what I was doing was really making a difference.

After seven years in the trenches, I made a transition out of teaching, and into the world of international development. Working first as a teacher trainer, and then later as a project manager and technical specialist, I gained experience through projects in number of different regions and contexts. I first became attuned to the idea of aligning message (the content of instruction) and method (the teaching strategy) when working on a project supporting the introduction of student centered teaching and learning methods in rural China. Approaches such as inquiry and collaborative learning are, of course, difficult to teach effectively through lecture-based instruction, and I learned to think carefully about how my teaching strategies would complement or contradict the message I was trying to deliver. This idea of alignment resonated with me, but I did not realize at that time how relevant it was to my frustration in teaching sustainability.

Over time, as I became increasingly attuned to the issue of alignment between medium and message, I began to see how it applied to other areas of my work. In one project I worked with a minority rights specialist who regularly stereotyped the minority groups with which we were working. In another project, I worked in a context where there was a major government effort to improve gender equality, and teachers would dutifully lecture on the topic, but the classes themselves were entirely segregated by gender, with no interaction between boys and girls, and the textbooks were full of traditional gender stereotypes. In a third project, my role was to support improved judicial education by teaching judicial educators new instructional methods related to critical thinking, debate, and ethical reasoning, but yet there was strong resistance to any corresponding changes in the assessment system, which was fixated on closed questions and right answers—even in the context of complex legal cases.

Slowly, these experiences began to coalesce into a new perspective on education in general—one in which learning is unavoidably experiential, and where the many different aspects of that experience have pedagogical implications. I came to see the learning process as being more akin to acculturation or socialization, than education in the conventional sense, with its focus on knowledge and skills. In recent years, I've had the chance to develop these ideas further, through work in the fields of education for democracy and education for sustainable development. I've also had a chance to gain new insight into education as a process of induction into a subculture, through observations and experiences with a number of other education and training programs, such as my wife's experiences as a law school student (see O'Brien, 2011 for discussion on this topic).

Inspiration

This research has drawn on insights from a number of fields. These will be discussed at length in Chapter Two, but at this stage it is worth presenting a brief overview of some of the ideas that have inspired and guided the inquiry. Most central to the research has been the notion of the hidden curriculum—the idea that what is explicitly taught in school is not all that is learned, and that this additional learning constitutes a kind of curriculum of its own which has a meaningful impact on the way in which students develop. As a teacher, I was quite satisfied with my results teaching the explicit curriculum. It was the hidden curriculum, the "everything else" students were learning (or not learning), that I was dissatisfied with. My dissatisfaction grew as I came to realize that the kind of development I was hoping to see in my students had far more to do with their attitudes and behaviours than their knowledge and skills, and yet, all I really knew how to do in the classroom pertained to the latter.

In colloquial terms, our concept of education relates to teaching conceived of as an explicit process of imparting knowledge and skills. This claim is hardly contentious, but nonetheless warrants some discussion. Perhaps the best evidence for this is in our formal curricula, where we codify our educational goals. Most formal curricula will fall into one of two categories: those framed around specific texts or content to be taught; and those organized around learner outcomes. Content-oriented curricula inherently position teaching as an explicit activity, with the content to be taught being entirely explicit in the form of textbooks or other media. Outcome-oriented curricula focus on actual learning, but still tend to define this in terms of knowledge and skills. The underlying concept of what is being taught and learned, and the implications for how the teaching process takes place, are very similar in both cases. In the words of Burbules, "teaching is normally seen as an intentional activity directed toward the achievement of particular, explicit learning outcomes (and as noted is being pressed even further in this direction)" (Burbules, 2008, p. 666).

Of course, many outcome-oriented curricula do include reference to attitudes, which, it is hoped, students will develop. However, the way attitudes develop is clearly different from the way knowledge and skills are learned. Linguistically, English speakers use "teaching" as a dynamic, transitive verb—one party imparts something to another party. This structure implies direct instruction, and is compatible with the colloquial conception of teaching knowledge and skills (even if it does not fit with constructivist thinking). However, this structure conflicts with colloquial understandings of what attitudes are and how they develop. While one may comfortably refer to attitudes as being "learned," we nonetheless tend to think of them as things which develop over time, more closely related to personality and character than to other, more concrete kinds of "learning" that take place at school. If we look deeper than attitudes, into underlying values, assumptions, heuristics, and importantly, dispositions, the linguistic issue

becomes even more pronounced. These are things that cannot be directly imparted. We can think of them as the result of cultivation, conditioning, acclimatization, or enculturation, but not teaching.

And yet, what we want our education systems to be doing—indeed what they claim to be doing—is to prepare the citizens of tomorrow. We set lofty goals related to autonomy, lifelong learning, justice, civic engagement, and so on, but frame the learning around knowledge and skills. The problem, of course, is that those lofty goals relate far more to dispositions and other deep learning than to explicit knowledge and skills. Where curricula do include reference to attitudes or dispositions, there is a breakdown in implementation, because the process for "teaching" these things is not well understood. Burbules (2008) presents tacit teaching as a possible way forward, specifically mentioning dispositions among the things "passed along" (p. 666) through tacit teaching.

Conceptual Approach

I embarked on my doctoral research with a general goal of gaining insight into this deeper layer of learning and development that includes things like attitudes, dispositions, assumptions, and behavioural habits. My entry point into this inquiry was through the idea of the hidden curriculum, but ultimately, it grew well beyond this, taking on characteristics of a study about the enculturation process. This came with the realization that what I was seeking to understand fell more into the domain of socialization than education. It was more about children's development than their learning, and more about what was being cultivated than what was being taught. Therefore, while the study takes place in the school setting, it far more focused on cultural acquisition than knowledge and skills.

I have approached this research from the perspective that there is a close connection between an individual's internal cognitive processes, their external environment, the interactions

between the two, and the resulting behaviors. This perspective implies that individual autonomy, learning, and development are all constrained or guided by factors in that external environment. This, in turn, suggests, that whether intentional or not, the development of educational environments constitutes a kind of social engineering project.

Therefore, in framing this study, I have drawn on the work of others who have taken a similarly broad view of learning and development, and the importance of the physical and social environment in those processes. In particular, I draw heavily on the work of John Dewey, which informs not only the philosophical foundations for this research, but also the concepts in question and the general methodological approach.

Assumptions

This research begins with a number of assumptions that are worth acknowledging. First, I work from the assumption that tacit phenomena such as the hidden curriculum, the school climate, and tacit teaching, are indeed real phenomena affecting the learning and development of students. While this study contributes to the evidence base for these phenomena, the objective has not been to prove their existence. With the broad base of literature already supporting these constructs (see Brint, Contreras, & Matthews, 2001; Goodlad, 2004; Jackson, 1968; Reber, 1993), this study has focused on moving forward from the existing foundation.

Second, I make the assumption that these tacit phenomena are very important to students' learning and development. Although these constructs are not discussed at length in much of the mainstream educational literature, the significance of the tacit domain in learning and development is already discussed at length in the works of Dewey (1916, 1938), Postman and Weingartner (1969), Montessori (1967a, 1967b), Steiner (1927, 1997), Apple (1990), and Freire (1993) among many others. As such, I treat these phenomena, and their sister construct which I introduce in this study—the educative context—as important from the start. If one accepts the

importance of these phenomena, and the tenet that everything is political, then the rationale for this study is sufficiently obvious.

Third, I take it as a given that most educational institutions are primarily focused, in reality, on the explicit learning of a narrow range of knowledge and skills—those that are easy to teach and test. One need only to glance over a sample of curriculum documents and educational resources to reveal a heavy emphasis on content knowledge and skills. My own interest is much more weighted towards the development of students' dispositions, attitudes, perspectives, habits, and so on, and I believe that these are very much neglected, and treated informally at best, in most educational programs. I feel strongly that the emphasis on testing and accountability, STEM programming, and computer-based courseware in recent years has contributed to a distortion and narrowing of the colloquial understanding of education, and the exclusion of important considerations related to students' comprehensive development. While some of these points are discussed in Chapter Two, and again in Chapter Five, the objective of this study has been to learn more about how this deeper level of learning takes place, rather than trying to prove an institutionalized bias in educational objectives.

In summary, I have undertaken this study with the assumptions that tacit phenomena are real and important, but are neglected by most educational institutions, in favor of learning that is more easily taught and tested. Recognizing these assumptions has allowed me to narrow the scope of my thinking in order to frame a manageable study. By not setting out to prove or disprove any of these assumptions, I have been able to focus concerted on the phenomena of most interest, namely, the tacit teaching and learning of the hidden curriculum, as articulated in my research questions.

Research Questions

This research was guided by a set of interrelated questions revolving around the general theme of the hidden curriculum, and how educators might be able to reorient it to support progressive goals related to sustainability, democratic citizenship, and social justice. Throughout the study, I grew increasingly critical of my preoccupation with the hidden curriculum, and came to view the concept as somewhat problematic for inquiry. As I progressed, I shifted my focus to the ideas of tacit teaching and the educative context, leading to a fruitful set of questions which evolved alongside the study and guided it through to its completion.

Drawing on the ideas of Dewey (1938) and Carspecken (1996), I undertook the study with the perspective that it would be advantageous to establish my initial topic of inquiry in broad terms, and to allow the topic to be refined iteratively throughout the research process. While my initial set of questions concerning the hidden curriculum continue to be useful in positioning this research within the literature, they lost some of their initial value as the research progressed and my understanding of the topic increased. The final set of research questions presented below has a lot in common with the initial question set, but is reflective of the understanding gained through the research process, and better represents the research which is presented in the remainder of this document. This final set of questions is as follows:

1. How can we understand the influence that that school and classroom have on students?
 - a. What are the main factors that comprise the educative context in some specific schooling contexts?
 - b. In what ways can the effects of different educative contexts be observed?
 - c. How can the educative context be designed or adjusted intentionally?
2. How can these factors be described in the context of specific schools?

- a. How do students perceive, characterize, and respond to the different factors in their educative context?
 - b. How do these factors relate to the stated goals of the schools?
 - c. What happens when there are conflicting influences or messages being sent to students in a given situation? How do students clarify, respond to, or ignore this?
 - d. In what ways can the various factors that comprise the educative context support or undermine specific progressive educational goals?
 - e. In what ways does the educative context shape student behavior and development?
 - f. What is actually expected of students, and what creates those expectations?
3. What insight might be gained from these specific examples to help educators become more intentional about what is being learned and cultivated in their schools?

Before discussing a methodology suitable for conducting research into these questions, it is important to first clarify the relevant terms, and determine what insights can be gained from the existing body of literature. The next chapter provides a thorough review of the relevant literature, including the philosophical underpinnings of the relevant constructs, complementary perspectives, as well as key educational thinkers and approaches that resonate strongly with these constructs.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The first chapter of this dissertation provided a personal introduction to this study, including my own background and interest in the hidden curriculum, and related ideas about teaching and learning in the tacit domain. It culminated with the presentation of a fairly broad set of research questions about how tacit teaching and learning occur in the school context. While this introduction was necessary for positioning and contextualizing the study, it is also important to provide a more formal, systematic review of the relevant constructs, and existing research in this area, before going further into the research itself. This chapter provides the necessary formal introduction to the research topics, including philosophical underpinnings, as well as a review of the available literature on related constructs, and examples of educational projects that provide insight into the mechanics of tacit teaching and learning.

Education is a formative activity, not just an informative one. However, education systems tend focus heavily explicit aspects of teaching and learning (Burbules, 2008), such as knowledge and skills that are easily tested. In so doing, they tend to neglect the more profound ways in which education shapes and cultivates young citizens (Gatto, 2005; Ollman, 2001). This research explores these deeper, formative aspects of education. This research began with the concept of a hidden curriculum in formal schooling—an idea associated with this deeper aspect of learning and character development. However, the hidden curriculum construct proved to be somewhat limiting, as the inquiry itself aims to go beyond un-hiding the hidden curriculum, to explore ways in which it might be reoriented and taught with more intentionality. It quickly becomes awkward and cumbersome to discuss ways of actively, systematically, and intentionally teaching something that is generally understood to be hidden, inadvertent, and informal (see Giroux, & Purpel, 1983; Margolis, 2001).

A more constructive perspective on this deeper aspect of learning and development is provided by the idea of tacit teaching—a concept which is complementary to that of the hidden curriculum, and which already has some basis in the educational literature (see Burbules, 2008; Peters, Burbules, & Smeyers, 2010). This literature review develops a case for consideration of tacit teaching as a fundamental aspect of education. Through discussion of related constructs, it also builds towards a systematic approach to understanding the possibilities for teaching in the tacit domain. As part of this, I propose a complementary construct, the educative context, as the tangible mechanism by which tacit teaching occurs, and by which the hidden curriculum is imparted. Together, these ideas comprise the basic conceptual framework from which this research is approached.

The idea that teaching and learning are not purely explicit activities is nothing new. Educators dating at least as far back as Socrates have demonstrated an appreciation for the idea that the method of education contains a message of its own. Tacit teaching, as a construct, has been most thoroughly developed by Burbules (2008). Below, I build on that foundation to describe a much broader concept of tacit teaching, and one with important implications in mainstream education.

Philosophical Foundations

The interrelated ideas of tacit teaching and the hidden curriculum are rooted epistemologically in a view of knowledge that accepts that things can be learned tacitly without ever becoming explicitly articulated. The implications of this point are important. The notion of learning through experience (rather than just words or conscious thought) closely binds the knower to the world around them, with knowledge resulting from their interactions. The knower is intimately involved in the process of knowledge construction, and therefore, interpretations come into play in all knowledge that results (Rorty, 1979). This fundamentally impacts what we

consider to be the nature of knowledge, and has ontological implications. In this view, reality as we can understand it, is not something immutable and external to the knowing mind—the very idea of knowledge is mind-dependent (Rorty, 1979). Put somewhat differently, this is to say that knowledge is something that develops through interactions between people and the world around them, and reflection on those interactions (Dewey, 1929). In the context of schools, this suggests that knowledge is not simply *acquired* by students. Instead, students must be understood to be active in the process of constructing their own knowledge (Dewey, 1929), and as such, what they learn is *influenced but not dictated* by what is explicitly taught by teachers and textbooks. Students construct knowledge in relation to this explicit content, and also in relation to the rest of their experience.

Philosophical pragmatism implicitly assumes the existence of agents and an environment in which they act; however, these remain vague and unstructured. For Dewey (1929), the external environment, just like the mind, is formless—all structures and properties of objects are created through action and inquiry. Meaning is developed only through practical action, as a relation between signs (real or abstract) and behaviours (Dewey, 1929). These ideas sidestep many basic epistemological questions because they reject, at a fundamental level, the dualism of mind and matter, or agent and environment (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Rorty, 1979). Furthermore, Dewey (1929) asserts that while knowledge is a construction, it is not a construction of the mind. Rather, it is a construction located in the agent-environment interaction itself (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Dewey, 1929), with the environment being understood as both social and physical. This perspective on the nature of reality and knowledge is helpful in gaining insight into the hidden curriculum, socialization, and related ideas.

Education and the Tacit Domain

The idea of "tacit or hidden teaching" has been used in discussion about deep learning and character development at least as far back as 1990 (see Apple, 1990, p. 84); however, Burbules (2008) provided the first elaboration on the idea of tacit pedagogy in a reflection on Wittgenstein's practices as a teacher of philosophy. His essay relates a number of idiosyncrasies in Wittgenstein's teaching style to the practice of philosophy, and demonstrates their pedagogic value in helping students to take up the task of 'doing' philosophy themselves. Burbules defines tacit teaching as, "the many forms of informal instruction—some intentional, some unintentional, and some difficult to categorize simply as one or the other—by which skills, capacities, and dispositions are passed along within a domain of practice" (Burbules, 2008, p. 666).

In this context of this research, the idea of tacit teaching differs Burbules's (2008) usage in three respects. The first is in the scope of learning that is associated with tacit teaching. While Burbules (2008) acknowledges dispositions in his discussion of what can be learned tacitly, he draws heavily on Polanyi's (1966) seminal work on tacit knowledge, which focuses primarily on procedural knowledge, thereby situating tacit teaching within a domain of practice. Tacit knowledge, Burbules states, "is often related to practical intelligence, 'know-how,' common sense, 'street smarts' or what Bourdieu calls *habitus*—the experientially grounded capacities that allow us to navigate the choices and activities of everyday life" (Burbules, 2008, p. 666). However, the idea of *habitus* goes far deeper than capacities (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), and discussion elsewhere (see Apple, 1990; Gatto, 2009; Postman & Weingartner, 1969) emphasizes deeper learning of dispositions, assumptions, and perspectives in the tacit domain. In the context of this research, tacit teaching should be understood as relevant to these deeper aspects of learning, and relevant to many aspects of development beyond mere capabilities.

A second difference between Burbules's (2008) usage of the term tacit teaching, and the usage here, is in the range of activities associated with it. Burbules limits discussion of tacit teaching to teachers' in-class performance, and refers to tacit teaching strategies such as the use of questions, use of silence, showing how (demonstrations), modeling, and the subtle transmission of heuristics and rules of thumb. However, the tacit dimensions of teaching and learning go well beyond the teacher's performance, and include many additional factors such as the physical arrangement of the classroom, the way in which peer interactions are structured, classroom routines and procedures, discipline systems, and so on (see Bergstedt, Herbert, Kraus, & Wulf, 2012; Gatto, 2009). The factors affecting students' experiences and contributing to tacit learning are tremendously varied (Martin, 1983), and many of these are within a teacher's control—indeed, part of their job to manage. In the context of this research, tacit teaching therefore refers to the broad range of teachers' activities that impact student experiences, including the way in which they establish and manage the various aspects of classroom life.

A third difference from Burbule's (2008) usage is in the extent to which tacit teaching is considered to be formalizable, systematizable, and intentional. Burbules acknowledges that some aspects of tacit teaching may be undertaken with intentionality, but focuses on the unintentional and inadvertent dimensions of teaching. Although he is correct in stating that, “the tacit dimension to teaching ... suggests a strict limit to one's ability to recognize and direct all that one is doing” (Burbules, 2008, p. 667), careful analysis can certainly reveal previously unnoticed subtleties with some degree of clarity (see Reh & Berdelmann, 2012; Hackl & Hummel, 2012), providing scope for teachers to bring systematic intentionality to *many* of their tacit teaching practices. The idea of tacit teaching developed in this literature review builds a case that there is a sufficient basis on which to begin systematically articulating and bringing intentionality to a wide range of teacher activities that impact tacit learning.

Relevant Perspectives and Constructs

Tacit knowledge. In discussing tacit teaching, it is natural to draw from the literature around tacit knowledge. Foundational work on the concept of tacit knowledge is attributed to Polanyi (1966), who demonstrated that much of what we know—particularly within a field of procedural knowledge—is tacit in nature. However, more recent literature has broadened the scope of what can be included within the concept of tacit knowledge (see Collins, 2010; Reber, 1993). For instance, Collins (2010) discusses three phases or levels of tacit knowledge—relational, somatic, and collective—through which the construct is extended to include types of knowledge that are clearly not simply procedural. Collective tacit knowledge, for example, is discussed as having to do with "the way society is constituted" (Collins, 2010, Chapter 4, paragraph 1). Getting into the constitutive layers of our knowledge goes far deeper than procedural knowledge, and far broader than any particular domain of practice. At this level, the term "knowledge" itself is somewhat insufficient because the idea points to our assumptions, foundational perspectives, and the constitutive frameworks by which we can know.

The hidden curriculum. The term “hidden curriculum” refers to the tacit, indirect, and often unintended learning that takes place in the school setting (Anderson, 2002). In most literature, the term tends to be used in a critical sense, related to social reproduction and the maintenance of social injustices (see Apple, 1990; Giroux & Purpel, 1983). It can be understood as the negative outcome of an educational context that has been left to chance or market forces, thereby reinforcing the status quo and, therefore, mis-educative from the standpoint of goals such as social justice, environmental sustainability, gender equality, democracy, and so on.

The notion of hegemony implies that fundamental patterns and power relations in society are maintained in large part by tacit ideological assumptions that are not usually conscious (Apple, 1990; Kellner, Lewis, Pierce, & Cho, 2009). These assumptions serve to organize and

legitimize our activities and interactions, and as they relate to our constitutive frameworks and preferences, they can be difficult to bring to our level of conscious awareness (Apple, 1990; Kellner, Lewis, Pierce, & Cho, 2009). It is at this level, being incorporated into the fabric of our thoughts, that the hidden curriculum gains its potency (Apple, 1990; Burbules, 2008). The incidental learning associated with the hidden curriculum, "contributes more to the political socialization of a student than do, say, civics classes or other forms of deliberate teaching of specific value orientations" (Apple, 1990, p.84).

Ordnung. An interesting analogue to the hidden curriculum concept is the Anabaptist concept of "Ordnung," which can be understood as a system of unwritten rules and expectations that provide a blueprint for social life in Amish and Mennonite communities (Kraybill, 1989). Much like a hidden curriculum, the Ordnung is not written down. "The people just know it, that's all. Rather than a packet of rules to memorize, the Ordnung is the understood behavior by which the Amish are expected to live. In the same way that the rules of grammar are learned by children, so the Ordnung, the grammar of order, is learned by Amish youth" (Kraybill, 1989, p. 1989).

While the similarities between Ordnung and hidden curriculum are striking, the concepts differ in the extent to which they are hidden, and the intentionality with which they are imparted. Unlike the hidden curriculum, the Ordnung is well known to members of an Anabaptist community, and is discussed openly within that community. Moreover, whereas hidden curriculum is usually characterized as being imparted unintentionally, the passing on of the Ordnung is a responsibility taken seriously in Anabaptist communities because of its importance in preserving traditions and valuable social relations (Wetmore, 2007).

Literature on the Anabaptist traditions makes little reference to how the Ordnung is imparted; however, the learning of the Ordnung is depicted as being part of the enculturation

process (Kraybill, 1989). The close connection drawn in this case between the enculturation in general, and the learning of the Ordnung, reinforces the perspective that it may be fruitful to conceptualize the learning of a hidden curriculum as a process of culture acquisition—socialization rather than education. It is worth noting in this regard that one of the distinctive features of Anabaptist communities is the extent to which the different aspects of members' daily lives are mutually reinforcing and coherently organized. With their relative insulation from the outside world over centuries, all aspects of community life have evolved to be in line with the accepted interpretation of the Christian scripture (Kraybill, 1989). Just as this coherence and consistency is likely part of the reason for the effective transmission of the Ordnung, it is very plausible that the degree of coherence and consistency in students' schooling experiences is equally important in reinforcing a hidden curriculum. One might apply this insight to the task of tacit teaching, by working to establish coherent and consistent experiences for students around a particular set of educational goals.

School climate. The concept of school climate is related to discussion of the hidden curriculum because of an overlapping view that students' immersion in the school context is important. While the hidden curriculum posits that this immersion results in learning of its own, the idea of school climate focuses on how this immersive experience may impact other (academic) learning, and the child's experience in general. School climate refers to the feelings and attitudes elicited by the school environment (National School Climate Center, 2012). It is a multidimensional construct including physical, social, and academic dimensions (Loukas, 2007), but is typically associated with affective domains of students' schooling experiences (Freiberg & Stein, 1999), or experiential aspects such as an academic or athletic focus in the school (Loukas, 2007). Thus, while school climate is not discussed as resulting in learning of its own, it is clearly related to the schooling experience, and this experience, as well as students' adaptation to the

climate, are very much related to the kind of learning and development discussed above with the hidden curriculum.

What is noteworthy here is that the literature on school climate tends to be quite systematic in the way it operationalizes the construct. Unlike the hidden curriculum, definitions of school climate regularly parse the construct down into a number of clear dimensions, with a systematic organization of factors involved (see Creemers & Reezigt, 1999; Freiberg, 1999). Although on the surface it would seem that school climate would be as difficult to operationalize as the hidden curriculum, the literature on school climate presents evidence that the many related factors may indeed be laid out systematically and worked with intentionally (see Creemers & Reezigt, 1999; Freiberg, 1999). By extension, the same should be true for factors related to tacit learning and the hidden curriculum, and therefore, tacit teaching. We may not be able to identify *all* of the factors involved, and we may disagree as to *how* to systematize them, but there appears to be good potential to bring intentionality and a systematic approach to the broad range of factors associated with these interrelated concepts.

Habitus and field. As noted by Burbules (2008), the idea of tacit knowledge is often related to practical intelligence, which is in turn related to Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). However, habitus is not just about practical intelligence or know-how. Rather, it refers to the deeply embedded capacities, perspectives, tastes, unconscious beliefs, and dispositions that allow us to effectively work our way through the decisions and activities of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1977). This goes well beyond the concept of tacit knowledge as discussed by Polanyi (1966) and Burbules (2008), which emphasizes its procedural qualities. Notably, Bourdieu's work emphasizes the development of dispositions in particular, and this term points to a whole range of values, perspectives, preferences, tendencies, and assumptions that are not procedural at all in their nature.

With the idea of habitus, we have a comprehensive term for what is learned (or otherwise developed) not only within the hidden curriculum, but also through the acculturation process more generally. Bourdieu wrote extensively about education, and important here is the mounting evidence for education as a special case of socialization or a kind of enculturation, rather than a more restricted set of formalized activities related only to a teacher's physical performance. Much has been written about the socializing effects of schooling (Dreeben, 1968; Goodlad, 2004), and summing up those effects with the idea of habitus, rather than the negative label of hidden curriculum, may prove to be a more constructive approach. The hidden curriculum, it appears, need not be hidden, and need not be negative.

However, perhaps even more important than habitus to a discussion of tacit teaching is Bourdieu's complementary concept of field. Bourdieu uses the interplay between habitus and field to explain the kind of adaptation that takes place in the acculturation process. Habitus represents a system of dispositions and other deep (often tacit) learning that the individual develops in relation to their external (though co-constructed) contexts, or fields. Fields themselves are characterized as structured social spaces with their own norms, dominance hierarchies, legitimate options for behavior etc. Habitus is adopted within a field in order to maximize an individual's chances for success within that field.

These terms are very suitable for describing a school or classroom setting. Tacit teaching and field sit on the same side of the educational equation, opposite from tacit learning, the hidden curriculum, and habitus. However, it is worth noting just how far removed the idea of field is from our colloquial concept of teaching, or even Burbule's (2008) description of tacit teaching. While Bourdieu does not provide a detailed anatomy of what constitutes a field, it can be inferred that he is referring to a broad range of structures and arrangements within a given social setting that give rise to certain dynamics between social agents. This is very similar to the kinds of

factors associated with both the hidden curriculum (Martin, 1983) and the school climate (Frieberg, 1999).

However, to understand field, it is important to note that it is not taken to be an objective external structure. Rather, Bourdieu (1977) notes that habitus and field are created in relation to one another—field is constituted by interacting social agents who possess dispositions and perceptual schemata, while habitus reflects the transposition of external structures of the field into the internal/personal thoughts and actions of the agent (Schwartz, 1997). Habitus is an adaptation to field, and field is the product of habitus. This suggests the malleability of fields, and the potential for bringing more intentionality to both habitus and field through our actions as social agents. Taking the special case of education, and the unique role of teachers as extremely influential social agents in their classrooms, it would seem that there is a tremendous potential for bringing more intentionality to both.

Situated cognition. The blurring of boundaries between social agents and their environments is taken a step further in the thinking of situativity theorists. The theory of situated cognition suggests that cognition itself is not limited to the mind as commonly understood, but rather, that cognition can only be understood as a co-creation of the agent and their social and physical context (Masciortra, Roth & Morel, 2007; Robins & Aydede 2009). In this view, perception, thought and action are presented as being co-constituted, which is to say that they are not only causally related, but that they are constitutively interdependent (Robbins & Aydede, 2009; Wilson & Clark 2009). Accordingly, “the actual local operations that realize certain forms of human cognizing include inextricable tangles of feedback, feedforward, and feed-around loops: loops that promiscuously criss-cross the boundaries of brain, body, and world” (Clark, 2008, p. 28). This perspective resonates strongly with a broad range of others, including pragmatists like Dewey (1929) who emphasized agent-environment interactions as the basis for

thought, and recent work in the field of hermeneutic phenomenology (see for instance Hackl & Hummel, 2012; Wulf, 2012) which underscores mimetic and corporal factors in students' experience.

Situated cognition provides some useful insights into the interactions between agents and their environments, and how these may be applied in educational contexts for the design of learning experiences. These insights contribute to a strong case for experiential learning activities, and practical learning programs such as apprenticeships (Lave & Wenger, 1991). One concept highlighted in the situativity literature, is that of affordances—the limited possibilities for legitimate action within a given context. This idea resonates strongly with the educational practices of Maria Montessori, discussed below, and underscores the importance of structuring the environment in a manner that supports the intended learning and development—teachers as environmental designers (Jonassen & Land, 2000).

Tacit teaching and the educative context. The preceding sections were intended to enrich the discussion of tacit teaching by looking at students' tacit learning and development through the lenses of other relevant constructs. However, before continuing on to the next section that looks at relevant educational practices, it is worth pausing to revisit some key terms. In particular, the use of the term "teaching" has grown increasingly uncomfortable. The discomfort was already noticeable in the discussion of how attitudes and dispositions are "taught," but increased as we waded through the murky waters of how the hidden curriculum is imparted and how culture is transmitted. The discomfort is even more apparent when beginning to associate the idea of teaching with the establishment of field within the classroom context. Since fields are comprised of complex systems of factors that contribute to students' experiences (and tacit learning), and since teachers are instrumental in establishing fields within their classrooms, it would appear that the idea of tacit teaching should be extended include the management of these factors. However,

this goes well beyond the scope of what we colloquially consider as teaching, and starts to resemble the idea of an environmental designer or social engineer. Yet this is exactly what is implied by literature grounded in the idea of situated cognition (Jonassen & Land, 2000). All of this puts some strain on the term tacit teaching, because of the narrow colloquial definition of what teaching is, and because of ambiguities around the scope of what we are referring to.

To alleviate some of this strain, I propose the concept of an “educative context” to refer to the collection of factors, physical, social, and otherwise, which contribute to students' learning and deeper development at school. These factors would include aspects of the teacher's performance, such as those noted by Burbules (2008), as well as other factors (physical, social, institutional etc.) associated with the development of the school climate and the hidden curriculum, and those associated with habitus and field. Tacit teaching, then, would refer to the teacher's activities in managing these factors.

The idea of an educative context suggests that context (the environment or milieu in which explicit education takes place) is not just a backdrop to explicit education (as suggested with the concept of school climate), but that this context is itself infused with meaning, values, assumptions, and so on, and is therefore, itself, educative. There are two main ways in which the schooling context can be considered educative. The first is in the sense of a contextual backdrop against which students understand and interpret explicit content from their teachers or textbooks. This backdrop may or may not frame explicit content as relevant or important, or may even undermine explicit content by providing mixed messages (Jickling & Wals, 2007; Kahn, 2010). Following McLuhan's (1964) notion that the medium is the message, and Postman and Weingartner's (1969) extension of this notion into the education field, we cannot overlook the irony of learning about democracy in an autocratic classroom, or learning about conservation in a wasteful school. The second way in which the schooling context can be educative is on its own,

apart from explicit content. Aspects of students' schooling experience, such as school discipline systems, assessment practices, or classroom routines may have no substantive relationship to the explicit content of instruction, but serve to impart subtle messages and habituate students to patterns of thinking and behavior that are gradually internalized as part of the hidden curriculum (Snyder, 1970).

It should be noted that the idea of educative context suggests that the context is always "teaching" something. The two educative aspects of a context noted above are ever-present. It is from this basic idea that we get the assertions that education is inherently political (Freire, 1993; Shor, 1992), and that all education is environmental education (Orr, 2004). This inescapable educative quality does not, however, imply any kind of intentionality. The context may very well be mis-educative from any number of standpoints, and it often is. Because we understand teaching to be an intentional activity, tacit teaching should be understood as the intentional act of designing and implementing an educative context that is aligned with the deep learning and developmental goals we have for our students.

Pioneers of Tacit Teaching

Early tacit teaching. With this view of tacit teaching, we can look back at prominent educational thinkers of the past with a fresh lens. While Burbules (2008) discusses Wittgenstein as an example of a pedagogue who taught in many tacit ways, we can go at least as far back as Plato or Socrates—whom we can thank for the "Socratic method"—for evidence of historic teachers who acknowledged that the method of teaching contains educational consequences of its own.

Jumping forward, there are many examples of educators structuring students' physical environments, instructional strategies, and other aspects of the educational experience to support specific developmental goals. Friedrich Froebel developed an educational approach involving

physical manipulatives with tacit learning embedded in them. He staged his “Froebel’s gifts” at specific developmental levels as part of his educational theory (Froebel, 1887). Working on a much larger scale, but with similar recognition of tacit learning in the physical realm, was Thomas Jefferson, who designed and structured the campus of the University of Virginia to reflect and support the principles of democracy (Wills, 2002).

Montessori. Montessori (1967a, 1967b) took these types of ideas a significant step forward, not only in terms of embedding learning tasks into physical objects, but also, through the careful preparation of the entire physical environment, all of which was intentionally structured to support the development of student autonomy. Montessori’s contributions to tacit teaching were not confined to the physical environment, however. She developed a corresponding approach to teaching, wherein teachers would initiate children into different activities, first demonstrating, then coaching them until they could work independently (Kramer, 1976; Montessori, 1967a). Moreover, she conceived curriculum in an integrated manner, focusing on domains of development rather than on specific content, and structuring the school day around large and uninterrupted blocks of time for children to work on the activities that interest them. Her very approach to teaching emphasized the design of the learning environment, much in the same way as we have been talking about tacit teaching.

In Montessori’s view, children construct their understanding through interaction with their environment. She believed that young children have an innate drive towards development, and that freedom within a carefully prepared environment would allow them to maximize their developmental potential while cultivating their intrinsic drives (Kramer, 1976; Standing, 1957). Montessori observed that free choice played an important role in children’s intrinsic motivation, and that different choices resulted in different degrees of learning and engagement. This observation led to a reformulation of the role of the teacher as an observer and director of

children's innate drive toward cognitive, moral, and physical development (Montessori, 1967a). The ultimate aim of this approach was the cultivation of children's independence and intrinsic capacities (Kramer, 1976).

The prepared environment in Montessori education. One of the hallmarks of the "Montessori method" is a carefully prepared learning environment. A well-prepared environment can allow children to have free choice of activities, while helping to ensure that those choices will result in meaningful learning (Montessori, 1967a). To Montessori, this environment is the "sum total of the objects which the child can freely choose and use as he pleases" (Montessori, 1967a, p. 63). Montessori did not, however, overstate the importance of the environment, positioning it in a dialogical relationship to the child's own internal nature. Thus, the environment is seen as having a powerful influence over the child's development, one that can either foster, channel, or limit that development through the provision of different experiences (Montessori, 1967a).

Montessori also saw the integral role of the body, motor skills, and sensory organs in cognitive development (Montessori, 1967a). In order to appropriately channel children's focus, she designed a range of physical, practical, and sensorial learning materials, each isolating certain skills, and with feedback mechanisms built into them (Montessori, 1967a). Montessori also ensured other aspects of the environment, like furniture, were proportioned in order for children to move about intelligently and develop a degree of mastery over their environment, and thus empowering them.

The social environment, likewise, was intentionally established. Children, while free to make choices, were taught routines and procedures for undertaking those choices, caring for materials, and respecting the learning of peers. The notion of care was also extended to care for living things, such as classroom pets, and plants. "When [a child] knows that animals have need of him, that little plants will dry up if he does not water them, he binds together with a new thread

of love connecting today's passing moments with those of tomorrow" (Montessori, 1967a, p. 71). In this sense, Montessori made an important connection between the learning environment, moral development, and basic understandings about nature.

Teacher, pedagogy, curriculum, and freedom in Montessori education. The Montessori method frames an approach to pedagogy that positions the teacher in the background, carefully observing, supporting, and guiding children, rather than *instructing* them. Teachers initiate children into different activities, first demonstrating, then coaching children until they can work independently (Kramer, 1976; Montessori, 1967a). Curriculum is conceived in an integrated manner, focusing on domains of development rather than on content to be taught. The de-emphasis of instruction, and the nature of this “curriculum,” are related to the structured learning environment—which usually contains designated areas for different developmental domains such as sensory-motor (sensorial) activities, language activities, practical life activities, and so on (Kramer, 1976; Standing, 1957). Rather than structuring the child's day according to a subject-based schedule, relatively large and uninterrupted blocks of time are provided for children to work on the activities that interest them.

Montessori linked this approach not only to children's development of practical and cognitive skills, but also to their moral development. "Children learning to do things for themselves, become truly independent and free, and in so doing become morally superior to those who are treated as helpless and incapable, they become interested in their own conquests, and less interested in many small external temptations" (Montessori, 1967a, p. 59). Whereas much of the work on the hidden curriculum views schooling as a kind of external conditioning (Jackson, 1968), Montessori takes a more intrinsic and constructive view, looking at what can be cultivated inside children through the careful structuring of their environment.

Summary comments on Montessori education. In relation to the research topic, one of the most striking features of Montessori's approach was her de-emphasis of actual instruction, and the increased emphasis on the preparation of the environment so that free choice would result in optimal development. This creates a situation in which the *intended* learning is *tacit* in nature. The learning is built into the materials and the rest of the environment, and is discovered by the children through increasingly sophisticated experimentation and use. In this sense, the curriculum in the Montessori classroom is largely "hidden," and the environment is preprogrammed in order to provide children with the necessary learning experiences. Montessori's approach challenges us to think of the many ways in which existing school environments are also programmed. While Montessori brought a sophisticated degree of intentionality to her learning environments, few schools can claim such care.

Steiner and Waldorf education. Similarly, Rudolf Steiner brought intentionality to a very wide range of factors affecting students' daily experiences, as articulated in his prolific writing on Waldorf education (Steiner, 1927; 1997; 2003a; 2003b). His work, like that of Montessori, questioned and critiqued the established practices of mainstream education at the time, and proposed a model that differs across a wide range of factors. His intentionality is reflected distinctive approaches to, *inter alia*, curriculum and pedagogy, pedagogical relationships, school governance, and all aspects of the physical environment, including the learning materials—all designed to reflect his philosophy of Anthroposophy.

Anthroposophy is focused on the development of human potential and the broad evolution of human consciousness (Steiner, 2003a). Steiner believed that humanity had come to rely too heavily on intellectual abstraction, resulting in a loss of contact with intuitive and perceptual faculties, and stifling our comprehensive and spiritual development. He developed Waldorf

education in response to this, and it remains perhaps, one of the most comprehensive and detailed attempts to shape the educative context according to a single philosophy.

In general terms, Steiner's educational philosophy, aims to reintegrate and cultivate the child's cognitive, emotional, and sensory faculties in order to foster their comprehensive and spiritual development (Steiner, 1927). While Anthroposophy itself has a mystical tone, Waldorf schools do not generally teach religious doctrine (Petrash, 2002), and the main spiritual guidance offered in the Waldorf schools is aimed at awakening the child's natural reverence for the wonder and beauty of life (Steiner, 2003a).

Developmental stages in Waldorf education. Steiner articulated children's developmental path in terms of three stages, punctuated by the changing of the child's teeth (around age seven), and the onset of puberty (around age 14) (Petrash, 2002; Steiner, 2003a). Waldorf schools often follow a practice called "looping" in which their teacher accompanies children as they progress through these stages (Petrash, 2002).

In the first stage of development, associated with Waldorf kindergartens, children are understood to learn primarily based on imitation (Petrash, 2002; Steiner, 1997). Imitation of adults and the natural world is fostered by the provision of natural materials and plaything. At this stage, there is little formal teaching, but play is enriched through stories, artistic activities, and songs, aimed collectively at cultivating the child's innate characteristics of trust and reverence for the world (Steiner, 1997, 2003a).

In the second stage, associated with the elementary grades, education focuses on the development of capacities to express and imagine (Petrash, 2002; Steiner, 2003a). Artistic expression is intended as method of relating to and communicating about the world, and takes many forms, including movement, recitation, music, visual arts, as well as learning to write (Petrash, 2002). Children are gradually introduced to academic work, usually with a concrete to

abstract progression (Petrash, 2002; Steiner, 2003a). During this age period, it is seen as particularly important for children to learn to act upon authority and compliance with social structure, as respect for structure and authority form the basis for their developing concepts of justice (Steiner, 1997).

In the third stage, associated with secondary school, the focus becomes more rigorously academic (Petrash, 2002; Steiner, 2003a). While artistic expression remains important, there is an emphasis on balanced learning across all subject areas, as well as original thought and personal expression (Petrash, 2002). During this period, Steiner felt that in addition to the awakening of emotional impulses associated with adolescence, children also begin to form concepts of fraternal love, or love of humanity, which should be cultivated as they provide the foundation for social and economic relations in adult life (Steiner, 1997).

Curriculum and pedagogy in Waldorf education. While there is no prescribed Waldorf curriculum per se, a generative approach is used in conjunction with general guidelines associated with the developmental stages (Petrash, 2002). Steiner felt that schools should be free from state involvement, and not required to follow a state-prescribed curriculum (Steiner, 1997).

The guiding principle of Steiner's approach is that children should learn in a pace and time consistent with their own experiences (Steiner, 2003a). Practically, this means that lesson contents should resonate with the child's internal experiences, related to their developmental age, and their external experiences, related to life, the seasons, and so on. Children are taught in integrated blocks of time, organized around relevant themes, and incorporating conceptual matter as well as practical skills and artistic work.

Pedagogically, while practical and concrete experiences are an important part of Waldorf education, instruction relies substantially on the authority and expertise of the teacher—particularly in the middle years (Petrash, 2002; Steiner, 1997). Because much of what is taught

comes from the teacher, the distinction between content and pedagogy is not prominent in the Waldorf literature. Instead, there is a focus on the style of delivery, through movement and voice, and reflective practice (Petrash, 2002). In lieu of commercial resources, children develop hand-made "textbooks" throughout a thematic unit (Petrash, 2002). Experiential and artistic aspects of learning are integrated through a variety of art forms including visual arts, music, recitation, and eurythmy—an expressive form of dance. Steiner's emphasis on artistic and aesthetic cultivation was intended to help integrate and enhance children's manual, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual capacities, resulting in comprehensive growth and the development of their unique individuality (Petrash, 2002).

While the Waldorf approach appears quite traditional, consideration has been given to the activities of students and the subtle learning that takes place through them. As an example, while the teaching of handwriting may seem outdated, it remains important in Waldorf education. Steiner strongly associated writing with moral development, stating that, "Many persons who, later in life, appear lacking in a sense of responsibility – lacking in loving devotion to the surrounding world – would have been helped if they had been taught writing in the right way" (Steiner, 2003a, p. 39). Steiner felt that in learning to write well, children develop a sense of care and love for what surrounds them, and an aesthetic relationship with the world strengthened through their personal capacities (Steiner, 2003a).

Governance in Waldorf education. As mentioned, Steiner felt that school, and in fact all cultural institutions, should be free from the state, and hence free from the compulsory requirements of the state. Steiner also granted teachers a high degree of autonomy within the school, based on the conviction that an education striving to support the development of free individuals can only be successful when it is based on a school form that expresses these same principles (Flynn, Olmstead, & Pewtherer, 2005). As such, most Waldorf schools are run by

groups or committees of staff, rather than a head teacher or principal (Flynn, Olmstead, & Pewtherer, 2005).

Physical environments in Waldorf education. Steiner felt that the buildings we spend time in, and the objects we work with, have a profound effect on our moral life, and he therefore developed an approach to design and architecture which reflected his principles of human development (Iannaccone, 2001; Steiner, 2003b). The resulting aesthetic is recognizable in its use of natural materials and organic forms, as well as a distinctive use of colour and texture (Steiner, 2003b).

Steiner believed that full comprehension of the world and realization of self was possible through total harmony of the senses, which could partly be brought about by the use of an expressive organic architectural form (Dudek, 2000). He felt the emotional, moral, psychological, and spiritual needs of human users could be nourished by organic forms which implied dynamism; whereas static geometrical forms were "psychologically opaque" and would result in semiconscious feelings of alienation in their users (Steiner, 2003b). Applying this perspective to school buildings, Steiner envisaged an architectural form that would complement children's developmental stages. The progression begins with simple, whole, rounded forms for the kindergarten (including the rooms, as well as fixtures and objects within them), which he felt reflected and welcomed children's experiences during those years (Adams, 2005). He felt that through the progression to older grades, the soft, rounded forms should give way to more articulated and angular forms (Adams, 2005). He also outlined criteria for classroom decor, including the colour patterns and content criteria for classroom murals at different grade levels (Adams, 2005; Iannaccone, 2001).

Summary comments on Waldorf Education. Anthroposophy is an elaborate spiritual philosophy, which has found expression in fields as diverse as agriculture and medicine in

addition to education and architecture. Steiner's broad scope of thinking and activity allowed him to develop an educational approach that is thoroughly and coherently permeated by this philosophy. The Waldorf approach provides a rich example of how the educative context can be arranged in relation to a single comprehensive worldview. There is little in the hidden curriculum of Waldorf education that is left to chance. Instead, a great deal of consideration goes into the many details of students' daily experiences, in order to make those experiences coherent and appropriate in relation to the philosophy itself.

Waldorf education is also striking for its emphasis on developmental appropriateness. From pedagogical approaches to physical classroom structure, Steiner accounted for a wide range of contextual factors that would collectively serve to give children in the younger years a much different immersive experience than that of older children. While this alone is not remarkable, it is the systematic way in which all aspects of schooling are linked to the Anthroposophic narrative that makes Waldorf schooling different.

Democratic free schooling. Around the same time as the first Waldorf school was opened, A.S. Neill founded the Summerhill School. Summerhill was established on the basis of a very different educational philosophy, fundamentally reflecting freedom and personal autonomy, non-coercion, equality, and democratic principles. Giving practical expression to this philosophy, Neill emphasized the direct involvement of students in school governance, and extreme freedom of choice around curriculum and daily activities. Summerhill has been followed by many similar educational experiments under the umbrella of democratic free schooling. While these schools do not have a single ideological or theoretical base (Gribble, 1998), they tend to share a belief that the mainstream school system is unfit to meet the needs of children and society, or is even harmful to them (Graubard, 1972; Greenberg, 1995; Gribble, 1998), along with an earnest faith in the innate developmental potential of children (Greenberg, 1995; Gribble, 1998; Neill, 1992).

In general, free schools seek to remove what they consider to be artificial barriers to the natural development of children, and to provide children with opportunities for active control over their own learning and development (Graubard, 1972; Gribble, 1998). This perspective resonates with the ideas of both Dewey (1916) and Montessori (1967a); however, the resulting educational approach is quite different.

Another characteristic feature of free schools is that they tend to espouse democratic ideals (Graubard, 1972; Gribble, 1998). Although these schools may have the appearance of anarchy, the literature explains this in terms of providing the necessary freedom for children to develop autonomously, as a requirement for effective participation in a democratic community (Greenberg, 1995; Holt, 1974; Neill, 1992). This character finds expression in the schools' participatory governance, as well as their minimal reliance on adult authority and coercion.

While this section discusses the free school movement in general, most of the examples are drawn from two of the longest running free schools, about which the most has been written—Summerhill School mentioned above, and the Sudbury Valley School, established in 1968 by a small group including the prolific Dan Greenberg. While Neill and Greenberg have distinct philosophies, their commonalities reflect the general ideals of the free school movement, namely, that a free, participatory, and non-coercive approach will lead to an improved experience for children and improved developmental outcomes (Gribble, 1998). Literature from Summerhill reflects these ideals. "We feel that Summerhill pupils are better prepared for the outside world than most other young people. [They] are used to being in control of their own lives and making decision for themselves – just as all adults do" (Readhead, 2009, para. 1). While the school literature also suggests that many alumni go on to complete degrees (Greenberg & Sadofsky, 1992) and succeed in professional careers (Greenberg, Sadofsky, & Lempka, 2005; Readhead, 2009), a counter-cultural attitude is also reflected, downplaying these conventional measures of

educational success, and instead focusing on the success of graduates in pursuing a life of fulfillment and satisfaction (see Greenberg, 1996; Greenberg, Sadofsky, & Lempka, 2005; Gribble, 1998). It is worth noting at this point that one of the three schools that were the subjects of this research fits closely with the general description of a democratic free school.

Teaching, learning, and curriculum in democratic free schools. One of the most striking features of the free school movement is minimalism with respect to formal structures for student learning. While some free schools may offer or even schedule classes, most lack a pre-defined course structure (Gribble, 1998). Most commonly, classes are provided in response to children's requests rather than adult initiative (Greenberg, 1995; Gribble, 1998).

In terms of teaching, the emphasis is on guiding and supporting children in their own initiatives, rather than on course-based instruction (Graubard, 1972; Greenberg, 1995; Gribble, 1998). Given the nature of this kind of programming, much of the pedagogical activity in free schools is shifted into an informal domain, and much of it is conducted by other students, rather than by adults. Students in free schools learn subject matter, but much of that learning is incidental, and results from other activities which children are engaged in (Graubard, 1972; Greenberg, 2002; Neill, 1992).

Not surprisingly, children in free schools have limited external accountability, and examinations are few. Some schools offer students the opportunity to write state graduation exams, and many students choose to (Readhead, 2009), but these tend not to be compulsory. The schools may also offer an alternative accountability mechanism in lieu of exams. At the Sudbury Valley School, for instance, students wishing to receive a diploma must write and defend a thesis in front of their peers, outlining their learning, contributions, and achievements, and demonstrating that they are ready to become a productive member of the adult society (Gribble, 1998; Greenberg, 2002).

School governance and discipline in democratic free schools. In terms of the stated democratic ideals, one of the distinctive commonalities of free schools is the meaningful way in which they involve students in school management and governance. While free schools may appear somewhat chaotic, most are highly organized, with sophisticated governance structures and elaborate procedures for addressing concerns. While each school is managed in its own way, most have some type of regular school meeting attended by all, children and adults alike. These meetings provide an opportunity to keep everyone abreast of school news, and to discuss governance issues (Graubard, 1972). Typically these meetings are chaired by students, and follow a formal procedure. Items are discussed and voted on without distinction between the authority of children or adults (Gribble, 1998; Neill, 1995).

In addition to regular meetings, most schools also have a number of other governance structures such as committees or councils, often with well-developed institutional structures of their own. The schools may also have a number of policies that provide structure to student life. At Summerhill, for example, “There is a regular framework to the day with mealtimes, getting-up times, bedtimes and lesson times (though the latter are optional). There are also rules, and those who break rules may well be punished” (Gribble, 1998, p. 19). However, the common theme among these schools is that the authority is emphatically not in the hands of adults (Greenberg, 1995; Neill, 1992). While the schools may have hundreds of rules, changes to the rules, and enforcement of those rules, are in the hands of the collective, and overwhelmingly controlled by the children (Readhead, 2009).

In addition to such formal procedures and institutionalized governance structures, it is clear that successful free schools also have their own well-developed informal structures. The literature from longstanding free schools describes a distinctive culture and identity to each, along with a variety of routines and traditions which may not be articulated in formal policy, but which

contribute to the social cohesion and long-term viability of the school (see Greenberg, 1995; Gribble, 1998; Neill, 1995). The extent of student involvement in school life creates a theoretically fluid structure, but an entrenched culture and broad-based democratic participation provide a sort of stability of their own.

Summary comments on democratic free schooling. The democratic free school movement challenges basic assumptions about what schooling is and could be, and about the needs of children. The fact that some free schools have been operating for many decades suggests that the basic approach can be viable. And the fact that students from these schools have gone on to live happy lives, complete degrees, and succeed in professional life (Greenberg, Sadofsky, & Lempka, 2005) suggests that such an approach can fulfill the basic educational requirements of preparing students for these things. Having demonstrated this basic potential, these schools push the boundaries of what can be considered “negotiable” in the school setting, and provoke new questions about the malleability of school forms and their tacit impacts on children.

Free schools also provoke a deeper question about the extent to which it is truly possible (let alone desirable) to free children from coercive forces. The Summerhill and Sudbury examples illustrate that while adult coercion and authority has been all but eliminated, other socializing agents—formal and informal—have developed in their place. School life necessarily involves imposing certain expectations on children and shaping their behaviour, even if only through peer pressure. Consequences, whether peer-imposed, adult-imposed, or simply natural, are unavoidable. Such forces are inescapable, and the question in the case of free schools is who should determine the nature of them.

Mainstream schooling in a pluralist democracy. While there is a great deal of insight to be gained from examining non-mainstream education programs, a full survey of literature related to how the hidden curriculum functions cannot overlook education in the mainstream. Indeed, a

good deal has been written about how the compulsory schooling movement in North America was purpose-built for the task of social engineering, assimilation, and ordering society for the purposes of economic specialization and class stratification (Gatto, 2001; Gatto, 2009; Niezen, 2013; Ollman, 2001). This section of the literature review will consider education in pluralist democracies generally, but will draw examples from Alberta and British Columbia in particular, as these are the education systems with which I am most familiar.

Education systems reflect the institutionalized beliefs and values of the societies in which they are established. Those beliefs and values frame the debate around educational policy and practice, eventually becoming institutionalized as formal policy or law, and subsequently being transmitted to the next generation through the ensuing education processes (Illich, 1970). Sometimes taken for granted aspects of education in Canada, such as compulsory schooling, bilingual and Catholic offerings, and even the provincial authority over education, are all policy decisions that embody certain social and political values. The very fact that such things can be taken for granted speaks to the profound manner in which institutionalized values are transmitted. More contemporary issues such as school choice, charters, public funding for private schools, and inner city school closures evoke stronger feelings (see Brighouse, 2000; Ravich, 2010) as they related to more current and more hotly debated political issues; however, the related policy decisions may well be taken for granted by the next generation. Such debates reflect the pluralist nature of our society, and the expression of liberal democratic ideals in which the values and rights of different groups are justified through moral dialogue (Gutmann, 1999).

While much of the democratic interface of our education systems is at the system level, through elected representatives, this research is focused primarily at the school and classroom levels. Proponents of liberal democratic ideals such as rights and justice argue that schools themselves must be further democratized to better express these values (Apple & Beane, 2007;

Becker & Couto, 1996). Their claim is two-fold. First, that this democratization is an important part children's civic education, in order to give them experiences *with*, as well as understandings *of*, democracy (Apple & Beane, 2007; Becker & Couto, 1996). Second, that teachers as well as students have an inherent right to participatory engagement in school life (Apple & Beane, 2007). The school-based practice of democracy involves opening up governance structures to broader-based participatory processes involving teachers, students, and parents (Apple & Beane, 2007; Becker & Couto, 1996). However, recent literature takes a more civically engaged perspective, arguing that students should have opportunities to engage with social justice issues, even becoming actively involved in their communities, as part of the practice of democracy which starts in school (Apple & Beane, 2007; Becker & Couto, 1996; Lund & Carr, 2008).

Pedagogy, autonomy, and civic virtues in mainstream schooling. While pedagogy at the classroom level depends heavily on the teacher, and education in our pluralist society is subject to a great many influences, the general ideal of student-centered pedagogy has been widely embraced by mainstream education. This approach has strong relevance to liberalism and civic education because of its emphasis on the development of each child's capacities, and therefore, autonomy.

One of the theorists who has been most influential in this area is John Dewey. Dewey (1897) saw the importance of autonomy, and sought to articulate an educational approach which would best cultivate it—he felt that one of the primary goals of education was to prepare the child for their future life, meaning, "to give him command of himself ... to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities" (Dewey, 1897, p. 6). While Dewey is strongly associated with child-centered approaches, he was also critical of extremes in this regard (Dewey, 1938), seeing the child and the curriculum as two aspects of the same educational process

(Dewey, 1902). He sought their unity through his approach to experiential education—learning by doing—which he elaborated through his concept of inquiry (Dewey, 1929).

Dewey foreshadowed the ideas of tacit teaching and the educative context in his discussion of experiential learning writing, "A primary responsibility of educators is that they... be aware of the general principle of shaping of actual experience by environing conditions.... Above all, they should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while" (Dewey, 1938, p. 40). Despite the influence of some of Dewey's ideas around experiential learning, this particular view of the teacher's role has not proliferated.

The idea of experiential learning is simple, but when taken to its conclusion, its implications are profound. It is rooted epistemologically in a view that accepts that important aspects of learning take place tacitly without ever becoming explicitly articulated. The notion of learning through experience intimately binds the knower to the world around them, with knowledge developing through interactions between people and their physical and social environment, and reflection on those interactions (Dewey, 1929). This alone forms the basis for constructivist theory, but Dewey takes the point even further, placing a greater emphasis on the external physical and social context by asserting that knowledge is not a construction of the mind, but rather, a construction located in the interactions between an agent and their environment (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Dewey, 1929)—a position that resonates strongly with contemporary perspectives like situated cognition.

Building on this position, Dewey writes, "The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences" (Dewey, 1897, p. 9). This quote underscores the teacher's active role in relation to

these "influences," while maintaining the teacher's dialogic role in relation to the students. Dewey related traditional teacher-centered classrooms to autocratic societies, and outlined the importance of providing students opportunities to grow and learn within a context that prepares them for adult life in democratic society. Thus, he claimed, an important role of the teacher is in the careful preparation of such a learning context (Dewey, 1938)—the preparation of the physical and social educative context. This resonates with Montessori's approach to pedagogy, but whereas Montessori places significant emphasis on the physical environment, Dewey makes strong reference to the social environment as well. In addition, whereas Montessori focuses more on individual development, Dewey has a much stronger political orientation, positioning both the physical and social context in relation to broader goals for the development of society.

What is most relevant to this study is the connection between these pedagogical approaches and the underlying liberal, pluralist, and democratic ideals. Dewey's idea that education should prepare the child for adult life in a democratic society is consistent with the ideals of an autonomy-facilitating education, in that it focuses on the development of individual capacities in a non-abstract manner and in relation to personal experiences; and it is relevant to other civic virtues in that it positions learning in relation to participation in a relevant social context.

Curriculum and content in mainstream schooling. While this study is concerned primarily with the hidden curriculum, the contents of explicit/formal curricula warrant some discussion in this context. There is a tacit side to any curriculum, which relates to what contents are included, what is omitted, how the selected contents are structured and presented (Apple, 1990).

The liberal argument for public schooling holds that while education delivers public goods, it is the importance of education to living a good life that compels societies to educate their citizens (Brighouse, 2000; Callan, 1997). In addition, however, the provision of a common educational foundation is intended to provide citizens with the shared understandings required for

democratic and deliberative processes (Callan, 1997; Gutmann, 1999). While the scope of this common core creates a tension between groups, there is relative consensus about the basic requirement (Gutmann, 1999).

Looking beyond autonomy to democracy, an obvious requirement for this common core would be that children develop a basic understanding of democratic institutions and their role in them. However, this in turn suggests that children need to develop the capacities to effectively and intelligently participate in those institutions. The Alberta curriculum illustrates these points. It provides a broad common foundation for students, compatible with the development of autonomy; and the social studies curriculum is infused with democratic rhetoric such as, "social participation as a democratic practice" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 9) and "age-appropriate behaviour for social involvement as responsible citizens contributing to their community" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 5).

However, the requirements for effective participation in a pluralist democracy go well beyond rhetoric. "Since democracy involves the informed consent of people, a democratic curriculum [needs to emphasize] access to a wide range of information and the right of those of varied opinion to have their viewpoints heard" (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 14). This then raises the question of what viewpoints are necessary, reasonable, and tolerable within this core. Defining any core necessarily excludes some viewpoints and favours others, leading to the legitimization of a narrow range of "high status" knowledge (Apple, 1990), and marginalizing voices from outside the dominant culture or perspectives (Apple & Buras, 2006). While not all viewpoints would meet the criteria of reasonableness (Callan, 1997), the tension around what should be included needs to be mitigated and regularly revisited through ongoing processes of dialogue and justification (Gutmann, 1999).

The common core debate underscores the inherent political-ness of education (see Shor, 1992), and challenges teachers to accept their own role as a political one. In order to help students to overcome ethical servility (in this case, to the state), it therefore becomes necessary for teachers to help students develop the capacity to critically analyze mandated content through the teaching of critical thinking skills and media literacy (Chomsky, 2003; Kuehn, 2002), as a form of intellectual self defense for children (Chomsky, 2003). Progressive work in the field of civic education calls for teachers and students to go further, and confront social justice issues in their classrooms and communities (Apple and Beane, 2007; Lund & Carr, 2008), not only as a means of learning about these issues, but as the practice of democracy itself. Moreover, democratic ideals are no longer simply domestic (national) issues (Ichilov, 1998; Noddings, 2005). As the concept of citizenship continues to evolve with the rapid growth of global and online identities, and as social justice and environmental issues are increasingly acknowledged to operate on a global scale (Kahn, 2010; Morin, 2000), the contents of an acceptable common core to civic education continue to need redefinition (Gutmann, 1999; Morin, 2000; Noddings, 2005).

Testing and accountability in mainstream education. Student assessment is seldom discussed as an expression of liberal or pluralist ideals. Rather, it is frequently critiqued as being practiced in a manner quite contrary to those ideals through the distortion of taught curricula (Ravich, 2010) and their reinforcement of artificial hierarchies (Illich, 1970; Ollman, 2001). While these accusations may be justifiable, a fairer analysis would also need to consider other uses and forms of assessment. The Alberta Assessment Consortium, for example, supports increased emphasis on formative assessment, including a range of methods that actively involve students. While in practice, some teachers may not live up to such ideals (see Webber, Aitken, Lupart, & Scott, 2009), there are a number of initiatives which reflect the interest of educational leaders in using assessment to support student autonomy. For example, the Calgary Board of

Education's advocacy of student portfolios and student-led conferences (Calgary Board of Education, 2009, 2012) certainly resonates more strongly with idea of nurturing autonomy than it does with a punitive filtering mechanism.

As with other areas of practice, student assessment is subject to a variety of influences. Some of these are reflective of liberal democratic ideals, focused on child development. Others may reflect a more conservative agenda, emphasizing accountability for a narrowly defined core or basic skills (Ravich, 2010). Still others may be devised to obscure a covert political agenda—as with the characterization of the “No Child Left Behind” policy as a Trojan Horse for the charter/ privatization movement (Miner, 2003).

Summary comments on mainstream schooling in a pluralist democracy. The preceding discussion explored several aspects of mainstream educational practice in an attempt relate those practices to the liberal democratic ideals that underpin our society. Many relevant aspects of this are discussed critically in the literature on the hidden curriculum. While this literature tends to work backwards from unintended (negative) consequences and then comparing them to political ideals, I have tried to work in the other direction, to see where those ideals are reflected (encoded) in educational practice.

For myself as a researcher, this discussion relates to my own personal experiences as a student and teacher in mainstream schools, growing up in British Columbia, and teaching in Alberta. This insider perspective makes it somewhat challenging to fully recognize all that is operating in the tacit domain of mainstream schooling (see Burbules, 2008; Polanyi, 1966). What is most clear from the literature surveyed in this section is that students' tacit experiences at school are informed by a network of norms, policies, laws, and deeply rooted institutional structures, which guide and direct the development of our education systems, and the schools, classrooms, and individual practices inside of them. In a thorough analysis of any hidden

curriculum, this deep layer of taken-for-granted structures must also be given strong consideration.

Education for sustainable development. Sustainable development can be understood as, "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, Conclusion, para. 1). While modernist or "weak" sustainability argues that sustainability is primarily a matter of technological innovation, "strong" sustainability accepts ecological limits, and holds that in addition to technological innovations, societies themselves must also develop, focusing attention on the cultural, psychological, and behavioral aspects of societies which lead them to continually push ecological limits (Ayeres, van den Bergh & Gowdy, 1998; Douthwaite, 1999; Sachs, 1997). This latter, stronger vision is reflected in the Earth Charter (Earth Charter Commission, 2000), which provides a reformulation of how people should maintain sustainable cultural relations with nature and between each other, thereby casting environmental, socioeconomic, and political problems together in one light, and demanding lasting, integrated responses to global issues (Gruenewald, 2004; Kahn, 2010). Contemporary perspectives on education for sustainable development (ESD) build on a strong formulation of sustainability that frames concept as a cultural issue rather than a simple knowledge deficit (see Hiebert, 2013; MacPherson, 2011; Sandell, Ohman, & Ostman, 2008). It is worth noting that two of the schools that are subjects of this research share many features of what is described here as ESD.

Education for, in, and about sustainability. While ESD has a lot in common with earlier movements such as environmental or global education, the literature on ESD distinguishes it from "adjectival education" by placing the emphasis on its preposition—education *for* sustainable development (McKeown & Hopkins, 2007). As a result, much of the ESD rhetoric focuses on how sustainability-related values and issues can be incorporated more deeply into

education, rather than just being something which students learn about in abstract terms (see Sterling, 2001). This involves incorporating sustainability not only into classroom content, but also into the broader system of policies, structures, perspectives, processes, and goals, each of which contributes its own (tacit) educational outcomes (Qualifications & Curriculum Authority, 2004; Sterling, 2001). Orr (2004a) stresses that all education contributes to the development of environmental values, good or bad, meaning that schools and their teachers are continuously and unavoidably teaching children about their relationship to the natural world. As a consequence of this kind of thinking, ESD aims to work systemically, by fundamentally reworking the kind of educational experience that students receive.

Despite this ambitious perspective, ESD as practiced has been criticized for its failure to critically engage students in sustainability issues (Kahn, 2010). There is a trend within ESD to simply propagate experts' ideas about sustainability, rather than working for the participatory engagement of students (Jickling & Wals, 2007). Thus, despite loftier goals, the slide back towards modernist thinking and conventional approaches to education is apparent in many ESD programs. Nonetheless, ESD is a term that retains some traction, and with the UN Decade of ESD (2005-2014) still fresh, it remains relevant for concerned educators.

The learning environment in ESD. With its emphasis on going beyond teaching *about* sustainability, one of the prominent trends in ESD is the greening of schools themselves. In addition to simply reducing the burden of schools on the environment, this is understood to help increase children's awareness and experiential learning related to conservation (Destination Conservation, 2004), local ecology (Evergreen, 2012), and other sustainability issues (Taylor, 2008).

The field of architecture, which has long been concerned with psychological aspects of human-building interaction (Walden, 2009), has also made important contributions to the practice

of ESD. Taylor (2008) asserts that school buildings and the objects in them represent human ideas, actions, and beliefs, and that these objects strongly influence students' developing minds. This line of thinking leads Taylor to characterize school buildings as three-dimensional textbooks, which, together with the objects in them, comprise a silent curriculum. School environments can therefore be architecturally programmed, and sustainability (or other perspectives) can be tangibly incorporated into students' experiences (Taylor, 2008).

Taylor's ideas resonate strongly with those of Orr (2004a), who refers to architecture as a form of pedagogy. Orr places the emphasis on the interactions between people and the buildings they occupy, which he sees as forming a basis for the more general relationship between humankind and the environment. In Orr's vision, when buildings incorporate sustainable energy and waste management, and students are involved in the monitoring and management of those systems, the building can contribute to a more active and engaged perspective on the relationship between the students and the world around them (Orr, 2006).

While ESD literature on the physical environment has largely focused on environmental aspects of building design, it is worth noting that other aspects of sustainability, such as cultural elements and sense of place, are also receiving attention. Gelfand (2010) references numerous examples of "sustainable schools" that have been designed to reflect aspects of local cultures, along with considerations of local building traditions, and the fit of the building within the local landscape. Such schools illustrate a well-rounded view of sustainability that goes beyond environmental issues.

Policy and governance in ESD. The literature on ESD recognizes that a systemic approach requires more than a green building (Henderson & Tilbury, 2004). Increasingly, sustainability principles are also being incorporated into system and school policies (see International Institute of Sustainable Development, 2012). These policies call for the infusion of ESD into formal

curricula, environmental considerations in procurement, the reorientation of teacher training towards ESD, as well as more general educational development which is pre- or co-requisite to ESD (UNESCO, 2005, 2009). The challenge appears to be the effective implementation of such policies (Hiebert, 2013). The 2009 ESD Global Report (UNESCO, 2009) outlines extensive work which has been done in the areas of policy development, indicator development, implementation frameworks, and so on, with almost no reference to what could be considered ground-level results—ESD which is impacting students.

Pedagogy in ESD. Unlike earlier movements such as global education, relatively few ESD resources outline classroom activities. While the literature quietly embraces participatory and experiential approaches (see UNESCO, 2010), the clearest pedagogical trend in ESD is away from an emphasis on activities and instruction, towards a more comprehensive or systemic approach to teaching and learning (see McKeown, 2002; UNESCO, 2009; UNESCO IBE, 2009), including immersion in contexts that are themselves sustainable (Hiebert, 2012; Sterling, 2002) or which manifest the values and principles of sustainability (MacPherson, 2011).

UNESCO's International Bureau for Education (IBE) provides recommendations for implementing ESD that are representative of this systemic approach. They outline four different modes of teaching ESD: values-based approaches (such as self-reflection and critical inquiry); learning to transform (related to thinking and conceptual skills for ESD); whole school approaches (aimed at developing a school culture committed to ESD, rather than a curricular focus); and community-based learning (in which schools act as social agents, working with communities) (UNESCO IBE, 2009). While the first two modes have some relation to pedagogy in the traditional sense, the latter two exemplify a reconceptualization of pedagogy as being grounded in students' comprehensive experiences, and implying a large degree of tacit learning.

This systemic approach to pedagogy also resonates with a renewed interest in critical pedagogy. Critical eco-pedagogy builds on the work of Freire (1993, 2004), Giroux (2011), McLaren (1994) and others, applying concepts of conscientization to sustainability, and broadening concepts of political literacy to include ecological justice (Kahn, 2010; McLaren & Houston, 2005). This new offshoot from ESD expands on the proposition that social and ecological injustices are intimately interrelated and stem from a common root in human identity (Bookchin, 1996; Kellner, Lewis, Piere, & Cho, 2009).

Curriculum and content in ESD. Given both the systemic approach to ESD, and the locally specific nature of sustainable development, there is no broad consensus on the contents of an ESD curriculum, or even how one should be formulated. While conventional curricula are often developed around KSAs—knowledge, skills, and attitudes—ESD aims at a deeper and more powerful learning that would result in behavioral and dispositional change. UNESCO IBE (2009) has proposed five dimensions in lieu of KSAs: knowledge; issues; skills; perspectives; and values. This reformulation emphasizes the deeper learning necessary to educate *for* rather than *about* sustainability. In terms of curriculum contents, a number of organizations have developed curriculum frameworks that include relevant content areas such as "sustainable economics" and a "strong sense of place" (Cloud, 2011). While such standards could theoretically be integrated into formal curricula, most current approaches focus on the mainstreaming of sustainability into classroom and school practices, merging the ideas of content and context into a more unified approach (Henderson & Tilbury, 2004).

Summary comments on ESD. In relation to this study, ESD provides rich material for discussion. In its “strong” formulation, incorporating liberal concepts of rights and civic engagement, cultural traditions, socioeconomic development, and environmental concerns, it provides many entry points for discussing the ways in which ESD might be expressed/ encoded

in any aspect of schooling. The prominent systemic approach of incorporating ESD into education is consistent with the idea of reorienting the hidden curriculum by adjusting the educative context.

ESD is somewhat unique in its lack of a tangible formulation or canonical texts. There is no prescribed approach to ESD, and it is generally accepted that its manifestations should depend on the local context where it is being implemented (Environs Australia, 1999; Raumolin, 2001). This location-dependent aspect is of relevance to the design of this research, and suggests the need to consider the context in which schools themselves are situated, and not just what is taking place within the schools.

Systematizing the Sources

Combing through the broad range of literature related to the hidden curriculum, one can pull together a long list of factors that are understood as contributing tacitly to students' learning. The list spans the range of conceivable factors from the very tangible (desk arrangements, class scheduling) to the very intangible (unspoken classroom norms, subtle differences in the way that the teacher interacts with different students). The list of factors could very well be infinite (Martin, 1983), but such a conclusion is not constructive from the standpoint of empowering teachers to take a more active role as tacit teachers—to bring more intentionality to the educative context of their schools and classrooms. Identifying *everything* as a source of tacit learning outcomes tends to dilute the issue, rather than clarifying it.

To provide some structure to the concept of the educative context, the various factors can be grouped together. In exploring this issue from the standpoint of school architecture, Taylor (2009), developed a model of students' experiences at school based on three different groups of factors, those related to the physical environment, those related to learning processes, and those related to the content of learning. This provides some rudimentary structure for considering

contextual factors alongside the explicit content of instruction, but it does not provide sufficient structure for a systematic analysis of the many factors associated with the hidden curriculum.

Four points are worth consideration in order to work towards a more comprehensive and systematic model of the educative context. First, in Taylor's discussion, the physical context is focused primarily on the built environment, including landscape and architecture, but students' activities throughout the day involve interaction with a much broader range of physical objects such as learning materials, which also seem to be important. Second, while Taylor underscores the importance of learning processes, and these are social phenomena, there are also many other important social factors, such as role modeling, peer relations, and language usage, which are not accounted for in Taylor's model. Third, there is also another large category of factors unaccounted for by Taylor that relate to the institutional arrangements of schooling and classroom life, and these also clearly structure and impact students' experiences. Fourth and finally, Taylor's model includes educational content, because it aims to be comprehensive, but the current research is focused only on the tacit, contextual aspects of learning, and is not concerned with explicit content *per se*.

Taking these points into consideration, a new model is proposed to guide this research, based on three broad categories of factors dealing specifically with the educative context. First, an expanded category of physical or material factors can include everything from classroom décor and learning materials, to school architecture and location. Second, Taylor's idea of learning processes can be expanded to a broader category of social or inter-subjective factors that would include the full range of student-teacher and student-student interactions, as well as those related to parental and community involvement. And third, a new category of institutional or policy-related factors could be introduced to include things like classroom procedures, school rules, grading and reporting practices, scheduling, and curriculum priorities.

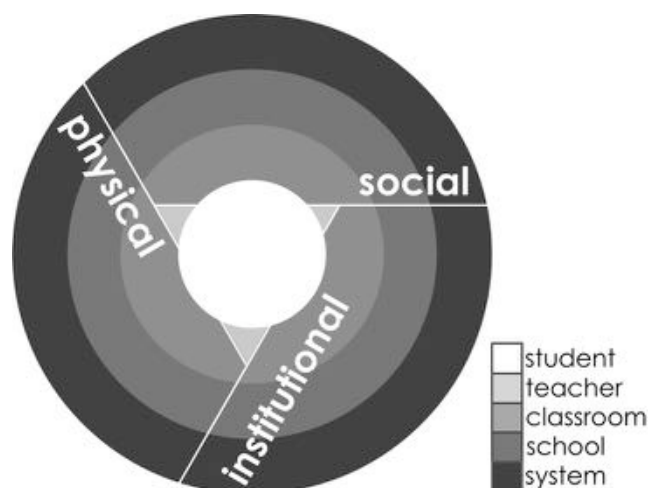
While the three categories in this conception of the educative context—physical, social, and institutional—are interrelated, and their boundaries are permeable, each has a distinct center of gravity that should make it relatively easy to classify most of the associated factors. Together, the three categories provide some structure to the concept of an educative context. It is important, however, to consider interaction effects, and in particular, interaction between explicit content and tacit messages. When explicit and tacit messages are at odds, as with the example of teaching about freedom and autonomy in an autocratic or repressive classroom, learning outcomes will be confused or frustrated. Very likely, the context will trump the content in such cases. By this point in the analysis, there should be little doubt that the most powerful educational outcomes will be achieved when there is an alignment between medium and message.

Describing the educative context in terms of these three categories of factors provides some clarity on the topic of how the hidden curriculum is taught and learned, and provides a first step towards making the process of tacit teaching more systematic. However, thinking through the various factors within each of these categories, it immediately becomes clear that there are some additional differences between them. For example, while provincial legislation and classroom rules might both fall into the category of institutional factors, they are very different kinds of factors, and affect students in very different ways. Moreover, the process for going about changing these factors would be very different—some are directly within the control of teachers, while others are not.

With this in mind, a second method of classifying the factors that comprise the educative context comes to light, based on their relative proximity to the student, and working outwards through the layers of the education system. Teachers are very much in control of their own behaviors and speech, as well as the instructional strategies they use, and many of the other elements within the classroom. But there are other social agents in the classroom and, as such,

while the teacher mediates the students' experiences, the classroom context is not entirely within their control. Beyond the classroom, there are school-wide factors that to some extent govern or guide what the teacher can/ must do, and over which the teacher has only limited or indirect control. Reaching out even further, there are factors at the system level such as board policies, curricula, and community demographics, over which teachers have little or no control, but which nonetheless contribute to the experiences of students in their class. Essentially, this can be viewed as a nested system, with the student and their experience at the center. By superimposing these two classification schemes, a preliminary framework for looking at the educative context and its component elements can be developed.

Figure 1. Preliminary framework for structuring the educative context. This figure shows the elements of an initial model of the educative context, based on different types and levels of factors.



Summary

This literature review has explored the topic of the hidden curriculum through an analysis of related constructs, and the contributions of significant theorists and related education

movements that have a close connection to these constructs. The analysis has demonstrated the very broad range of contextual factors that need to be considered when attempting to understand the mechanism by which a hidden curriculum is imparted. At the same time, it provided evidence of a variety of educational programs in which hidden curricula have been intentionally established around particular educational goals.

The analysis resulted in a conceptual framework for understanding the nature and transmission of the hidden curriculum through the complementary ideas of tacit teaching and the educative context. By consolidating and categorizing the various contextual factors mentioned throughout the review as being related to the transmission of the hidden curriculum, a preliminary model for understanding the educative context was developed. The model is based on three categories of factors, and three nested levels from which these factors are generated. The model serves as an initial conceptual framework for approaching the questions posed in Chapter One, and provides a lens that can be used for systematic data collection. The next chapter discusses the methodology used in this inquiry, and elaborates on the data generation process and the sites where data generation took place, as well as providing some discussion of the approach used for analyzing this data.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Inquiry in the Tacit Domain

The preceding literature review discussed the concept of the hidden curriculum, and provided some analysis of related concepts, and educational approaches that reflect an acknowledgement of the role of tacit contextual factors in the transmission of the hidden curriculum. This led to the development of an initial model for understanding how the hidden curriculum is taught and learned by mapping the contextual factors associated with it. The basic premise behind this research is that if one can identify and understand the factors associated with this kind of tacit learning, then one can begin to understand the nature of the hidden curriculum that is being taught, and in turn, take steps towards a more active and intentional approach to managing these hidden learning outcomes—the process I refer to as tacit teaching.

A key challenge in undertaking research into tacit phenomena is that they are, by their nature, somewhat elusive and hard to pin down. Naturally, much of the related research and literature has aimed at finding or “outing” the hidden curriculum in a given educational setting (see Giroux & Purpel, 1983; Lempp & Seale, 2004; Margolis, 2001; O’Brien, 2011). These studies often employ what could be described as ethnographic techniques, drawing on evidence from a wide range of sources, including observed social interactions, analysis of the visual environment, explicit messages, teaching styles, and structural arrangements. However, this research seeks to go beyond the un-hiding of the hidden curriculum, to determine a more systematic approach for understanding teaching and learning in the tacit domain. In order to develop a suitable research methodology, and in the interests of general coherence, I have taken a long step back to the philosophical foundations of these concepts.

The literature review identified a connection between tacit phenomena like the hidden curriculum, the situated nature of cognition, and the school of philosophical pragmatism. In

particular, the review emphasized Dewey's (1910; 1929) conception of the relationship between an agent and their environment (the knower and the known). This basic epistemological position can be extended into a more general understanding of how thinking takes place, and knowledge can be developed and refined (Dewey, 1910; Dewey & Bentley, 1949), which is a good general description of the research process itself. For Dewey (1929), the external environment, just like the mind, is formless—all structures and properties of objects are created through action and inquiry. Meaning, and therefore knowledge, are developed only through practical action, as a relation between signs (real or abstract) and behaviors (Dewey, 1929; Dewey & Bentley, 1949).

This particular view of knowledge places a significant emphasis on the context in which learning takes place, and as such, creates a meaningful space within which to discuss the educative context and related phenomena. For Dewey (1922), knowing and acting are necessarily related. Knowing is not outside of the process of agent-environment interaction, but rather, is a part of it. The development and refinement of knowledge come from reflection on these interactions, which is facilitated by language (Dewey, 1922; Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Rorty, 1979). Dewey (1922) articulates this process systematically, and describes knowledge acquisition as a process of inquiry in which experience is reflected upon by means of language.

Dewey's theory of inquiry was not developed as a prescriptive approach for how knowledge generating acts such as research should proceed, but rather, as "a reconstructive theory, an attempt to articulate the logic of the cognitive mode of experience, the way in which the cognitive model actually operates" (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 56). This is to say, the theory seeks to structure our understanding of what is actually going on as we develop and refine our understandings of a given topic or process, and in so doing, provides a logical model on which to base related activities such as teaching, learning, and research.

Dewey articulated the inquiry process in terms of stages: “(i) The occurrence of a problem; (ii) its specification; (iii) occurrence of a solving suggestion or supposition, hypothesis; (iv) elaboration of suggestions, or reasoning; (v) experimental testing” (1922, p. 29). It is worth noting, however, that this sequence is not rigid, and that the stages need not take place in this particular order (Dewey, 1922). This general model of the inquiry process provides the basic framework within which the methodology for this research has been established.

While this inquiry process does not prescribe a specific research methodology, it does provide some general guidance around the posing of problems and the role of experience and reflection in the knowledge generating process. Problems, in this context, emerge as a result of a situation being problematic or otherwise indeterminate—being in need of inquiry in order to better understand it and act within it. This description resonates with my experiences in observing various educational settings within which explicit messages seemed to conflict with tacit ones. This situation caused me to look for an explanation, to seek an understanding of how the contextual factors were affecting students, and how teachers might better align them to support their explicit teaching goals.

Another important aspect of the inquiry approach is the notion that the inquiry process is iterative and transformative, such that the acquisition of new knowledge begins from prior experiences and ultimately delivers us to a new situation, allowing inquiry to begin again (Dewey, 1922). As such, the process is cyclical, with knowledge developing continually through experience and reflection, with no absolute end (Dewey, 1922). Prior knowledge is therefore significant in articulating research questions and beginning to seek their answers; “the use of “old” knowledge is one way in which our inquiry—and hence our action more generally—can become more intelligent” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 61). This has some implication for the proposed research, since—as noted above—the proposed research will take its point of departure

from the already partially articulated construct of the educative context, and will further elaborate it and explore its applications.

Critical Ethnography, Comparison, and Inquiry

In terms of articulating a more tangible methodology, it makes sense to once again begin by looking at the nature of the concepts towards which this inquiry is directed. The educative context, like the hidden curriculum, is a deeply social construct, and therefore points towards a research methodology that is rooted in naturalistic observations. The meaning of the educative context, and its impact on the development of children, are culturally dependent, as well as personal. These things depends on each individual's frame of reference, and only exist as a function of the many agent-environment interactions in the school and classroom settings. Therefore, the isolation of discrete variables for analysis would rob them of the meaning that makes them interesting topics of study. Moreover, the educative context itself is so multifaceted, and its component elements so many, that the only reasonable way of studying it would seem to be to immerse oneself in it. Immersive approaches such as ethnography—in which the researcher is embedded in the research setting—are well suited to the process of making the implicit explicit, through careful observation and critical reflection (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland & Lofland, 2001; Walsh, 2004).

In light of these considerations, the study seems well suited to an ethnographic approach; however, the study itself is not neutral in its orientation. I am not aiming to simply describe the hidden curriculum, nor to simply understand how it is learned. Rather, this inquiry is guided by a strong value orientation that drives me to better understand these phenomena for the purpose of supporting positive social change related to sustainability and democracy. Rather than undermining the objectivity of the research, this value orientation can in fact be an asset in the research process, as it can help to reveal underlying issues that may otherwise go unnoticed if the

research were undertaken without this critical edge. This is consistent with the general approach to social critique used in critical theory. Critical theory has its own epistemological perspective, which holds that “all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted” (Kinchloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 139). Because a hidden curriculum cannot be neutral (Freire, 1993; Shor, 1992), the application of a critical perspective to a given educational setting can help with the identification of factors involved. In addition, it is worth noting that, “critical epistemology borrows extensively from the American pragmatist school of philosophy, which defined truth in terms of consensus to truth claims” (Carspecken, 1996, p.56). Therefore, as a researcher, I can be confident in the alignment of a critical ethnographic approach with the general philosophical approach underpinning this study.

However, while a critical perspective may help with identifying some of the factors involved in imparting the hidden curriculum, it is important to recognize that because of their tacit nature, many of the factors may remain taken for granted. The educative context is what students and teachers are immersed in each day, and it is natural that parts of that context become transparent to observers that are accustomed to such contexts. It can be challenging to reflect critically on what one has internalized as normal, or even to see it at all. It is in this sense that the hidden curriculum is considered hidden—it is “hiding in plain sight” (Gair & Mullins, 2001).

One means of overcoming this challenge is to approach the study comparatively, looking at very different schooling contexts. The contrasts and similarities between the schools may help bring into view aspects of the experience that might otherwise go unnoticed. As such, three very different schooling settings were identified as sites for the study. While the critical ethnographic approach, as described by Carspecken (1996), is particularly in-depth, and focused on a single site, this study incorporates elements of a case study approach to data collection and analysis. As outlined by Yin (2009), and Merriam (1998), the general case study approach is very much

compatible with the methodological stages of critical ethnography as suggested by Carspecken. For this study, the two approaches have been layered such that each of the case studies are developed as rudimentary critical ethnographies, consistent with the general approach (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2012; Thomas, 1993), but more focused than would be the case if the research had been undertaken at a single site. This focus is facilitated by the use of initial model outlined in Figure 1 as a lens for inquiring into the topic. This lens, in turn, supports the comparative aspect of this study, as it provides a systematic basis on which to compare the three case studies.

Situating Myself as a Researcher

In a naturalistic study, it is important to be aware of one's own perspective and potential biases, as these can affect what is observed. This is particularly the case in the context of a critical epistemology, where it is understood that, "facts can never be isolated from the domain of values" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 139). These biases influence not only the way in which research is carried out, and hence the findings, but also, at a more fundamental level, what topics get taken up by the researcher and what is viewed as researchable in the first place (Carspecken, 1996; Pollner, 1991; Thomas, 1993).

This is highly relevant to the present study, as I have a strong interest in better understanding the relationship between the educative context and student development, for the purpose of enhancing the ways in which education can foster specific socio-political goals—those related to sustainability, democratization, and social justice. I have a clear, critical value orientation, which has guided each step of the research process. My critical orientation is aligned with the canonical description of the critical researcher provided by Kincheloe and McLaren (1994), who outline list a number of values and principles that are shared among most critical researchers, including such things as opposition to inequality and the belief that research should

be directed to support change. I identify strongly with this list, but take a somewhat broader view of oppression to include aspects of environmental justice. While critical researchers tend to be interested in social justice and the promotion of equality, literature on critical research tends to make little mention of other aspects of desirable change (see Carspecken, 1996; Kinchloe & McLaren, 1994; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996; Madison, 2004; McLaren, 1994; Thomas, 1993). The focus is principally on the social world (and related political and economic concerns). However, environmental degradation and the resulting impacts on human health, food/water supply, and so on, are among the key challenges facing societies today (Economy, 2004; Orr, 2002; Orr, 2004; Sandell, Ohman, & Ostman, 2005), and are closely connected with other issues in social development (MacPherson, 2011; Redclift, 2002; Zachariah & Sooryamoorthy, 1994). Furthermore, there is some basis in the literature to support the premise that there is a close relationship between human forms of oppression and the human exploitation of nature, as both are founded in the same fundamental system of beliefs (Biehl, 1997; Bookchin, 1996; Kahn, 2010). Situating myself as a researcher, I include a strong commitment to environmental sustainability in addition to issues related to social justice and democracy.

My own background, and how I came to be interested in the topic of the hidden curriculum was already described in Chapter One, but at this stage, some additional background on my own experiences in schools is warranted. My history as a student is relatively uncomplicated. I grew up in public schools, first in British Columbia, and later in Alberta. I had the benefit of some additional insight on the topic of schooling, with a mother who was a teacher and later a principal, and a father who was also a teacher and principal, and later, a professor of education. To my surprise, I decided in my second year of university to pursue a career in education myself. Upon graduation, I taught internationally for two years, and then in Canada for five, all in relatively mainstream schools. However, I always had a fascination with alternative schooling,

and a strong interest in outdoor and environmental education, as well as activism and advocacy work, leading me to be somewhat maladjusted as a teacher in a mainstream private school.

I volunteered throughout this period with a number of alternative schools and non-profit organizations, and was excited to see alternatives to the taken-for-granted ways of doing things in the mainstream. Things like consensus-based decision-making, participatory approaches, and the alignment between policies and principles (for example, the refusal by one organization to accept funding from the private sector, casinos, or other conventional avenues) opened my eyes to alternative ways of thinking and operating. I observed that in many alternative schools, there tended to be a relatively strong and obvious effort to manifest the philosophy of the school in the various aspects of school life, making them a natural fit for my research topic.

As noted in Chapter Two, two of the school sites where I have conducted this research fall into the broad category of education for sustainable development, and the third can be considered as a democratic free school. I had no previous experiences in these types of school environments specifically, though in recent years, I have had the opportunity to work on a number of projects in the fields of ESD and education for democracy. This work, however, has been with organizations doing upstream or normative work—more theoretical than practical. In this work I was often self-conscious because of my lack of direct experience in democratic and sustainable classrooms, and as such, was eager to gain some relevant experience through this research. In several of the projects I have worked on, I have made use of a model similar to the one outlined in Figure 1 as a conceptual framework for my work, in order to help structure my thinking. The model has proven useful and has received good feedback, and I therefore need to acknowledge that I have become somewhat invested in it. I have taken some steps to mitigate this bias, and in particular, made a point of collecting data without reference to the model, particularly in the initial visits to each school, and not referring to the model at all or relying on its structure as I carried out participant

interviews. While this model was developed during the process of designing the research, the goal of the research was not to validate it, but rather, to further develop and elaborate on it, and as such, I have been kept a very open mind with respect to the limitations of the model.

Research Sites and Participants

The selection of sites and participants for this research was highly intentional, as recommended by Flyvbjerg (2006) and Merriam (2009) for case study approaches. In selecting sites, I wanted to choose schools in which there were already concerted attempts to align the educative context, in some way, with social development goals, or a clearly formulated school mandate. This would enable me to conduct an analysis of the contextual factors I observed in relation to the explicit mandate that the schools are attempting to manifest. I also wanted to select schools whose mandates were aligned with my own critical values as an educator and researcher, and my interest in sustainability and democratization. This was primarily because I wanted to learn from their efforts in organizing their schools around such principles, as examples of how educators can work towards reorienting the hidden curriculum.

In addition, to help overcome potential biases or skewed observations, and support the generalizability of findings, I wanted to identify schools that were sufficiently different from one another that the educative context of each would be highly distinct. The three schools that participated in this research each have their own strong educational philosophies that are intended to permeate students' experiences in order to help cultivate certain character traits and developmental outcomes. All three of the schools are situated in British Columbia, although this was simply a matter of chance. I will refer to them as School Aspen (a democratic school), School Birch (an environmental school), and School Cedar (a bioregional school). Brief notes pertaining to the three schools and the participants who contributed to the research are presented below. Additional pertinent details related to things like the schools' missions, physical

structures, and curricula, are presented in the context of the data and analysis—Chapters Four and Five.

School Aspen. School Aspen is a publically funded democratic K-12 school, founded in 1971, and located in the suburban lower mainland of British Columbia. Although not describing itself as a free school, it is consistent with many of the criteria associated with democratic free schools, and in particular, the principle of non-coercive practices and a democratic approach to school governance. As such the school is distinguished from mainstream schools particularly by its lack of a mandated class schedule, formal assessment procedures, and the extensive freedom of choice given to students regarding their daily activities. At the time of the data collection, the school had approximately 100 students ranging from age five to age 19, and I counted a total of 10 staff members, including both certified teachers and non-certified teacher aids.

School Aspen got its start as a cooperative daycare and kindergarten, initiated by its founder (female) and a small community of other parents. As the students grew in age, the school developed to accommodate them. The school's founder, though retired, is still very active in the school community. The current principal is the daughter of the original founder, and came to the position after first serving as a teacher, and then going on to complete graduate studies in education. The school has been relocated several times during its existence, and has been on the verge of closing several times, but has a highly committed base of support from parents and staff, and a very supportive division leadership.

Interestingly, the school is not situated within the geographic range of the division to which it belongs. This situation came about after the division in which the school is situated—its longtime administrative home—made the decision to change the direction of its alternative programs, and to discontinue the program at School Aspen. At that point, School Aspen obtained the support of its new divisional home, which offers a range of alternative school programs,

including the democratic approach of School Aspen. Being housed within a public school division enables School Aspen to operate as a publicly funded alternative program—a fact that distinguishes it significantly from most other democratic schools. The school complies with the division’s policies and procedures, and is afforded considerable autonomy in how it operates.

I was given the opportunity to spend a total of six days fully immersed in the daily life of School Aspen. During this time I made detailed observations related to school activities, interactions between occupants, school artifacts, documents, and the building itself and how it was being used. Throughout this period, I also conducted a series of nine interviews, including three with current students, one with a recent graduate, three with staff, and one each with the school’s founder and current principal. Some of these interviews were conducted in multiple sessions, and included additional informal conversations after school and on the weekend between school visits. In addition, I had countless informal conversations with other school staff members, students, parents, and non-parent volunteers, all of who were eager to share their thoughts and experiences. While most of these conversations took place at the school site itself, others took place on the bus and on the walk between the bus stop and the school, as students and parents soon started to recognize me and approach me. I also had the opportunity to spend a full day with School Aspen’s founder and two of her friends, who invited me to join them on a day trip to a nearby eco-village.

School Birch. School Birch is a publicly funded ecological learning center, located on a small island on the coast of British Columbia. The school offers a semester-long residential program primarily targeting grade 10 and 11 students, but with the flexibility to accommodate younger students as well. In addition, the school offers a variety of day programs for students of other schools within the administration of the division to which it belongs. It is worth noting that both School Aspen and School Birch operate under the auspices of the same school division, a

fact that illustrates the division's commitment to alternative programming. At the time of the data collection, the school had 12 students enrolled, ranging from 15 to 19 years of age, and just two staff members, including the director (male), who is also the students' teacher, and a night supervisor.

School Birch originated as the result of a long effort by a small but committed group of educators and supporters within its division. The division had been offering nature immersion learning activities and direct, hands-on experiences in natural environments since 2000 within the context of another environment education centre. Those involved with the center began to develop ideas for a more immersive experiential program, and School Birch was launched in 2007. The school quickly grew to reach its target capacity of 12 students, and has been operating since, providing an integrated suite of courses that include both academic and non-academic credits. Although School Birch was designed primarily as a semester-long program, students regularly attend for consecutive semesters, and arrange their study plans in order to continue attending for as long as they are able.

Over the course of two visits to the island, I spent a total of five days and three nights at School Birch, immersed in the physical location and unique culture of the school. During this time I made rich observations regarding the daily routines and activities of the students and director/ teacher, the unique structural arrangements of the school, and the way in which the beautiful physical environment of the school infused the experience. Living on-site during a full three-day school week provided an additional dimension to my experiences at School Birch. I had numerous extended conversations with the students, usually in groups of two or more at a time as we worked through the day's activities and evening events. I also had more structured individual conversations with a total of eight students, the director/ teacher, and the night supervisor. In addition, I had the chance to have some extended informal conversations with several groups of

students, as well as a conversation with one of the Division's board members, during ferry rides to and from the island.

The physical site of School Birch is quite distinctive in several ways that will be discussed in the coming chapters; however, at this stage it is worth noting that the site itself is entirely disconnected from the island's power grid and other utilities. In addition, given the philosophy of the school, the use of electronics is discouraged, and as such, almost all of my data generation while at School Birch was carried out without electronic equipment, in a small notebook like those used by the students. I felt this was important not only to respect the school community, but also, to gain a fuller appreciation for the experience of being a part of that community. A small number of photos were taken during my last day at the site.

School Cedar. School Cedar is a small, privately funded school located in a BC urban center. The school focuses on what it refers to as bioregional education, and offers day school opportunities from pre-primary (ages three to five) up to grade 12, as well as a correspondence-based home learning program, a daily out of school care program, and a summer program. The school is privately operated, under the governance of a board appointed by the non-profit association that founded the school. At the time of the data collection, the school had approximately 50 students ranging from age five to age 19 in its regular program, and another 50-70 enrolled in its home learning program. I counted 10 staff members, including both certified teachers and non-certified teacher aids.

The current lead teacher of School Cedar (female) founded the school in 1999 for the purpose of providing a bioregion-focused alternative to mainstream school offerings. In fact, the founder decided to study education with the expressed goal of starting School Cedar, and the idea for the school was cultivated over time in conjunction with the research and papers required for

the completion of her education degree. The school has grown over time, and expanded its offerings to the broad array of current program offerings largely because of financial need.

I had the opportunity to spend a total of six days immersed in the daily life of School Cedar. During this time I made detailed observations and notes related to the activities and interactions of the school day, the use of space, and the integration of the school with the surrounding community. Throughout this period, I also conducted interviews with a total of seven students, six staff members, and the school's founder. I also engaged in numerous informal conversations with additional students and staff, and participated in a daylong bicycle field trip, staff meetings, and school-wide events.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations for this study relate principally to the need to secure the informed consent of those involved, and parental consent in the case of minors. I first obtained ethics approval from the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB), which included a review of the proposed research methodology and all relevant consent forms and research tools. My next step was to reach out to the administrators of each school in order to gauge their openness to participating in the study. With agreement in principle from the administrators, I then sought formal approval. In the cases of School Aspen and School Birch, this first required obtaining an approval letter from the Division Superintendent. This was not necessary in the case of School Cedar, as it is private school, and their internal approval was sufficient. For all three schools, the next stage of approval involved sending all of the ethics materials from the CFREB review, along with my full research proposal, for review by the relevant personnel. All three schools provided their approval.

After securing approval at the school level, I arranged the dates for site visits. On the morning of the first day of the site visits, I was given the opportunity to introduce my research to

students and staff, and to request individual participation. Consent forms were provided, and while staff were able to sign directly, I asked student to take the forms home to discuss with their parents, and to return the forms the following day if they agreed to participate. I received many forms providing the consent of/ for students in each school, and directed my attention to those students as participants.

Given the nature of the study, there were no serious risks to the participants involved. However, given the potential sensitivity of the hidden curriculum, and the potential that there may be reputational risks involved in having aspects of the schools' hidden curricula exposed, I made the decision to keep the names of the schools and individual participants anonymous.

Data Generation

The data collected for this research was generated over the course of approximately 200 hours of immersion in the environments of the three schools, and additional conversations carried out independently of the school visits themselves. Following the general guidance provided by Carspecken's (1996) approach to critical ethnography, the data generation process was divided into three general stages: development of the primary record; preliminary reconstructive analysis; and collection of dialogical data. However, it should be noted that the three stages were not conducted as discrete steps, and while the general sequence was followed, there was significant overlap between them. This fits with the conventional ethnographic approach which does not consist of distinct stages, but does generally begin with relatively open observation, and proceeds to more targeted data collection over time (Walsh, 2004)

Primary record. In the first stage, the development of the primary record, I attempted to situate myself first as a passive observer, and then as a participant observer in each of the school environments. Rather than attempting to isolate and distance myself from the activities of the schools, I took the more natural role of allowing myself to participate in them alongside both

teachers and students, “in order to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in...” in each of the school settings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001, p. 352). However, while I wanted to participate in the daily life of each school in order to gain a sense of the authentic experiences of students, I tried to minimize the extent to which my presence affected the patterns, interactions, and activities of students and teachers by making my participation relatively unobtrusive. In this way, I attempted to strike a balance between gaining first hand experiences, while not undermining the authenticity and meaningfulness of what I was observing (Kellehear, 1993).

My activities in the early days of data generation at each site included a wide range of experiences shared by the students and their teachers. I participated in both formal and informal sessions, including sitting in on lessons, participating in school meetings, joking and playing games with students, photocopying documents, chatting casually with teachers, reading in the library, helping students with their work, participating in meetings, and many more such experiences. At all times I was seeking to understand the subtle, taken for granted factors that guided the course of the day, the tone of interactions, and the general experiences of students. My activities in each of the three schools were unstructured, and I was granted the freedom to move around between rooms and outside locations. In general, my aim was to make the most of my time in each site, making sure that on any given day, I sought out the most distinctive activities or those that appeared to have the most significance to students and teachers.

When not fully occupied participating in activities, my data generation involved developing a thick record in the form of detailed fieldnotes. I followed the general approach outlined by Carspecken (1996), in order to construct a detailed account of what I observed and directly experienced in each site, including rich description of things like speech acts, movements, and non-verbal behaviors of those in the school, as well as contextual information, diagrams, and my

own observer comments. I recorded information related not only to the activities of the teachers and students, but also, the other things I saw, heard, and experienced. This included careful attention to things like displays, the ways in which activities were organized, things that seemed to be taken for granted or tacitly agreed upon, physical objects and their organization, and so on. At this point in the data generation process, I was not focused on the hidden curriculum *per se*. Rather, I was trying to develop a detailed account of everything that stood out to me in my observations and my own experiences. At the start of my time at each school, this meant that I was scribbling notes quite frantically, because there was so much new stimulation in each school. But as time went on, I became more accustomed to each school's environment, and was able to observe with more care and reflection, and to pursue things that I had been curious about. In addition to my fieldnotes, I also collected a wide range of additional primary source material, including dozens of photos of the different settings and visual displays, and over a hundred pages of photocopies of things like school policy documents, assessment matrices, planning templates, intake forms, and so on. My objective during this stage of the data collection was to collect a broad range of documentation on which to base my analysis, with as little influence as possible of my own preconceived thoughts and reflections.

Prior to beginning my research, I had been a little bit concerned about my presence in the schools affecting the behavior of students and/ or staff. However, from my first visit to each school, everyone appeared to be quite natural and at ease with my presence, to the extent that I felt almost insignificant and had to approach individuals myself in order to speak with them. I quickly realized that in a dynamic environment like a school, with so many individuals and competing interests, it would take more than the presence of a graduate student to disrupt the social context. After speaking with the teachers and administrators, I also realized that these schools are a particularly special case in this regard. Because they are all alternative schools, it is

very common for them to have visitors, including researchers, community members, and even video crews at their schools, and as such, the students and staff are all quite acclimatized to this.

Preliminary reconstructive analysis. After I had begun to accumulate a fairly large mass of primary material in the form of fieldnotes, photos, and photocopies, my observations and note taking began to take on a more reflective tone. Carspecken (1996) refers to this as a preliminary reconstructive analysis. This was not a distinct phase of data generation, as the reflective process began early in my visits to each school with the introduction of my own observer comments amidst the straight descriptive material. However, after a day or two of thick description in each school, the focus of my attention shifted so that I was attending more directly to the kinds of patterns, relationships, and structures that were beginning to seem prominent in each location. In addition, throughout the data generation process, I spent each evening reflecting on the day's observations and experiences, making note of the most prominent elements, and beginning to identify themes and potential ways in which my data might be coded. These reflections were recorded alongside the fieldnotes themselves.

While my analytical approach in this stage differed from that described by Carspecken (1996) with his focus on identifying normative or subjective themes, it was nonetheless reconstructive in that I was seeking to identify and tease out patterns that were beginning to emerge from my direct observations and experiences. Without forcing my observations into unnatural categories, I began to classify and group the kinds of contextual factors that I observed seemed to be guiding and influencing students' activities and interactions.

During this phase of the data generation process, I allowed myself to refer back to the preliminary model that I had developed for looking at the educative context, and to use this lens to guide my observations and further data generation. While I was careful not to let this lens interfere with the authenticity of my observations, I found it to be a useful tool in that it helped to

direct my attention to aspects of the context that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. To facilitate my observations, I created a matrix from the two sets of variables on which the model is structured (dimensions of the educative context, and levels of organization). This matrix used the dimensions of the educative context (physical, social, institutional, and content-related) as columns, and the levels of the education system (classroom, school, and system) as rows. I was then able to use the cells of the matrix as general categories into which more detailed observations could be placed. Observations that did not fit logically within the matrix were recorded around the perimeter. At this point in the data generation and analysis process, the tables were used primarily as a tool to help structure my thinking and expand the scope of my observations. However, this structure worked well, and several versions of this matrix are presented in the next chapter, summarizing the factors that I ultimately found to be most prominent in each of the three schools.

I acknowledge that this kind of structuring of data conflicts to some extent with the naturalistic underpinnings of my research design; however, this structured approach was used alongside more naturalistic data such as my preliminary record, and as such, the two were complementary. There is no requirement in naturalistic research that prohibits the use of structured data, and the caution is merely around the limitations of such data. In this case, being guided by Dewey's take on the general inquiry process (1922), I felt it was reasonable as well as prudent to make use of this model or lens as an observational aid, since it is reflective of my initial understanding of the topic—the understanding on which the research is attempting to build.

Dialogical data generation and participants. The third stage, or aspect of my data generation process was a series of informal conversations, interviews, and focus groups with participants in each of the three schools. While in reality, informal conversations started on the

first day of my arrival at each of the research sites, there was still a progression through stages. As my week in each school progressed, my focus moved through the first two stages of observation/ participation, to reflective observations and analysis, and then onto the third stage focused on dialogical data—involving in-depth conversations with participants. I conducted most of these interviews during my last two days at each site.

In total, I conducted 24 interviews for this study, with students, teachers, school leaders, and others involved with the schools. The interviews involved a total of 33 participants due to the fact that several were conducted as group interviews. A breakdown of the distribution of the interview participants across school sites is shown in Table 1 below. The participants ranged from a short group interview with early elementary aged students in School Cedar, to an extended half-day interview with the founder of School Aspen. Fifteen of the interviews were recorded, while nine were not, as they occurred spontaneously during the day or took place at School Birch where I did not use electronic devices. I took detailed notes by hand, including quotations, in the interviews that were not recorded. While the 15 recorded interviews were not transcribed in full, key sections and extended quotes were transcribed to facilitate the coding and analysis of the data.

Table 1

Distribution of interview participants across school sites, disaggregated by gender.

School	Interviews	Students			Staff		Other	Totals
	Participant s	Elem.	Junior	Senio r	Leader s	Staff		
School Aspen	Interviews			3	2	3	1	9

	Male			3		2	1*	6
	Female				2	1		3
	Total			3	2	3	1	9
School	Interviews			3	1		1	5
Birch								
	Male			3	1			4
	Female			5			1**	6
	Total			8	1		1	0
School	Interviews	1	1	1	1	6		10
Cedar								
	Male		1			3		4
	Female	3	2	1	1	3		10
	Total	3	3	1	1	6		14
Totals	Interviews	1	1	7	4	9	2	24
	Male		1	6	1	5	1	14
	Female	3	2	6	3	4	1	19
	Total	3	3	2	4	9	2	33

* Recent graduate

** Night Supervisor

My main objective in conducting the interviews was to gain insight into the experiences of the students and the intentions of teachers and school leaders, each from their own perspective. I also sought to validate certain patterns that I had begun to discern related to prominent elements of the hidden curriculum and educative context at each school site. The interviews were loosely

structured, and while I had drafted lists of questions in advance, I found it more fruitful to let the interviews take a natural course rather than directing them too actively. Early in my data generation process, it became clear to me that each of the individuals I spoke with had very different backgrounds, perspectives, and positions, and even before my first interview, I had determined that it would be best to set aside any prescribed framework, and focus on what individual insights each had to share, rather than concerning myself with consistency across interviews. Nonetheless, the interviews had some commonalities, and in most cases I tended to ask questions related to: the school's philosophy, and how it is reflected in the way the school operates; distinctive aspects of the school; the daily experiences of students; the approaches used for teaching, assessment, behavior management, and so on; as well as more some more targeted questions related to different aspects of the educative context.

In general, interviews with students focused on understanding their experiences at the school, and what they found to be the most distinctive and prominent aspects of that experience. I inquired about what kinds of things stood out to them in their daily experiences, and throughout the school year. For those that had attended other schools, I also asked about any differences that were significant to them. I gently guided the interviews to provide opportunities for students to speak about different aspects of their experiences that might relate to the physical environment, social context, and institutional arrangements of their school experiences—the three general categories of the initial model I had developed. However, I did not force the conversations into this framework, and allowed digressions into whatever the students were moved to talk about.

Interviews with teachers, school leaders, and other adults were somewhat more directed. Most were familiar with the objectives of my study, and the topic of the hidden curriculum more generally, which kept the interviews relatively focused. In these conversations, I tried to understand more about the history and context of the schools, and the participant's involvement

there. I also asked more directly about what they felt distinguished the school from other schools, about its goals and philosophy, and about how they felt those things were reflected in the culture and other aspects of the school. As with the students, I provided opportunities for adult participants to talk specifically about any relevant factors of the physical environment, social context, and institutional arrangements of the school, and how they might relate to the school's explicit goals. I did not focus on this framework, but rather used it as a method of helping to make sure the discussion was sufficiently broad in scope.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Given the nature of this study, there was a close connection between the generation and analysis of the data (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, Allen, 1993). Although there was a general progression from the more open approach of participant observation in the development of my primary record, to the more targeted data generation in the interviews I conducted, the relationship between data and analysis was interactive throughout the process. I made adjustments to my observation strategies and interview questions based on the understandings I was developing, and the kinds of themes that were becoming apparent.

Preliminary analysis and reflection. Although I wanted to begin data generation process with a very open mind, I came to the research with a clear set of initial understandings and prior experiences, and these affected my observations and reflections all the way through. I was comfortable with this, however, with the understanding that in ethnography, “the analysis of data can be said to begin in the pre-fieldwork phase with the formulation and clarification of research problems...” and to continue throughout the entire process (Walsh, 2004, p. 235). In this case, the process of analysis began even before arriving at the schools. Building on the initial understandings I had from my literature review and other experiences, I began reflecting on each

of the schools and formulating ideas about them based on the interactions I had with the administrators and the information available online.

This process continued on an informal basis through throughout the data generation, and was quite prominent during my evening reflections on the days' experiences and observations. I regularly made notes in the margins of my fieldnotes, and although informal, I began to identify and highlight key terms and themes that were beginning to seem important. I did not consider this to be part of the formal coding of data analysis process, but rather, reflection of the sort discussed by Dewey (Dewey, 1910; Dewey, 1922; Dewey & Bentley, 1949) in his descriptions of the inquiry process.

Data coding. As I continued with my data generation, and during my review of the data afterwards, my analysis became increasingly more formal. Using all of my data sources, I selected key words and phrases to develop my coding categories. My focus was on identifying themes related to the explicit mandate of the school, as it is understood by staff, as well as the factors that emerged as most prominent in the educative context of each school, and any indications about the tacit learning (hidden curriculum) resulting from those factors. As codes emerged, I regularly compared these to earlier reflections, noting similarities and differences until distinct patterns became clear (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 1998). The codes that emerged were redefined throughout the research process until I felt I had established a coherent justification for the approach that I was using (Cresswell, 2003). I sought to ensure that for any key themes, there was a sufficient basis for triangulation in terms of different data sources and different types of data they were based on (Merriam, 1998).

Coding was all done manually. I first used my fieldnotes as a focus, since these were the most comprehensive source of material, including: observations; notes taken during interviews; and descriptions of the visual environments of the schools. However, in order to make full use of

the photographs, school documents, and interview recordings I had taken, I soon moved my analysis over to use text files in my computer. In these text files, I transcribed (in the case of interviews and my field notes) and described (in the case of visual material) key portions of the data from the schools. I did not transcribe the interviews in full, nor did I transcribe my complete set of field notes, and focused instead on writing out the key material that I had already begun to associate codes and themes with. I returned periodically to review the original materials and listen to the full interviews in order to ensure that I had not overlooked anything in my earlier analysis.

The codes and categories that I ultimately used were no doubt influenced by my understandings and prior knowledge of the topic, including my theoretical perspective and my initial model for looking at the educative context, which was presented in Chapter Two. The use of this initial model during the data analysis process allowed me to employ the technique of pattern matching (Yin, 2003) which involves comparing the data with the initial or theoretical model.

Having a lens such as this before data generation creates a risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy, wherein the data generated and the codes developed simply reinforce the initial model. This is a risk with any data collection process, as one's data collection tools, questions, or prior concepts will always have an effect on the data that is generated. To mitigate this in the data analysis process, I used, simultaneously, an open coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), to ensure that my findings would not be overly dependent on any predetermined set of codes (based, for instance, on the initial model I had developed). While I could not entirely set aside this initial model, I was careful to ensure I allowed space for new codes to emerge organically. In many cases, I combined multiple codes to create a single code that was broader in scope, or split codes into subcategories that were more focused. Most of the coding took place at the level of

identifying individual contextual factors that were prominent in one or more of the schools.

While my initial concern was that the preliminary model from Chapter Two would overly influence my thinking about the factors, I found that working from my rich fieldnotes to generate and then aggregate codes, my thinking remained quite open. Ultimately, I ended up identifying a number of factors that did not fit within this preliminary model, and in my later analysis, I made adjustments to the model accordingly. These are discussed more in Chapter Four and Chapter Five.

Cross-case analysis. During the data coding process, I focused on each case individually, and while the themes I ultimately derived were applied in the analysis of all three schools, the process allowed for me to clearly depict the distinctive aspects of each school using the relevant codes. However, a key benefit of the comparative design used for this research was the potential for cross-case synthesis where the different schools are compared to one another for similarities, differences, new themes, and additional insights that might emerge (Yin, 2003).

It is particularly at this level of the analysis that I was able to return to Carspecken's (1996) approach to critical ethnography. The focus of analysis in this approach is on exploring system relations within the data, and using the system relations to explain the findings of the research. While each of the schools provided significant insight into the topics of the hidden curriculum and the educative context, the cross-case analysis provided scope for me to step back from the individual cases and to look at the system level patterns and themes underpinning the topic.

Limitations and Constraints

The main constraint affecting the data generation process for this research was the time involved. Ideally, I would have liked to have spent much longer at each of the school sites. This would have allowed me to conduct more interviews, to gain deeper and richer insights into the culture of each school, and to observe changes at different points in the school year. However, as

I spent a full school week plus one or two additional days at each of the schools, and because I was committed to the comparative design of the study, the data collection process spanned nearly a full month in total, which was already a considerable investment of time. Compounding this issue was the fact that each of the schools are situated in different locations, each more than two hours apart, and none were within commuting distance from my home, meaning that I required alternate accommodation arrangements during the days of my site visits. As such, there were limits to the amount of time I was able to spend at each site, which in turn limited the scope and depth of the data generated. Nonetheless, I feel I reached a reasonable compromise on this issue, and in each of the three sites I was able to gain what felt like a solid grounding and evidence base from which to proceed.

A second potential limiting factor in this study is my own bias and preconceived ideas about the hidden curriculum and educative context. In particular, the model I had begun to develop for understanding these constructs certainly affected my observations. Once I had identified my initial model of the educative context, with its different categories of factors that seemed to be involved, I had considerable trouble setting that lens aside. As much as I feel it assisted my observations and provided useful scaffolding for my thinking and data generation, I must also admit that my patterns of observation tended to reinforce this structure. This is part of the challenge with theory in general (see Kuhn, 1996); however, I did my best to question my initial model continually, and feel that despite the limitations, the use of the model was a net positive for the quality and breadth of my data generation.

There were no challenges with respect to access at any of the three schools involved in this study, and each of the three communities was very welcoming and forthcoming. It is worth noting, however, that during the process of identifying the schools sites in which to conduct this research, I approached 11 other schools in addition to the three selected. In several cases,

administrators were initially enthusiastic, but ultimately declined to participate or became busy with other work and did not follow through with approvals. In other cases, the administrators expressed interest, but schedules were not compatible. Feedback from schools that declined to participate underscored the political and sometimes sensitive nature of the hidden curriculum, as the study aimed, in part, to identify aspects of the schooling experience that may not have been intended, and may not be aligned with stated goals. One school responded to my initial inquiry with a defensive rejection, and another school I approached openly expressed anxiety with respect to the political implications of having their practices exposed. The schools that ultimately participated were all characterized by a high degree of confidence and a strong sense of security in what they are practicing.

I had initially hoped to conduct this study internationally, in order to work with schools that contrasted one another to the largest extent possible. This design was intended to facilitate the comparative analysis and support the generalizability of the findings. However, the logistics involved, and early rejections from two of the key schools where I had hoped to conduct the research, led me to compromise on this point. While lacking the international comparative element, the three schools that ultimately participated are each very distinct from one another, and allowed for the kinds of comparisons I was hoping for. In retrospect, it is probably to my advantage that the international data collection did not work out, because the additional layers involved in collecting data in foreign languages, and in interpreting the data in relation to different cultural contexts, may have unnecessarily complicated the study.

Summary

This chapter has focused on discussing the methodology used to carry out this inquiry. Because of the tacit and intangible nature of the hidden curriculum, consideration was given to the development of a research design that would make it possible to generate concrete and

pertinent data, and which would allow for an analysis that would help reveal the kinds of factors associated with the hidden curriculum—sometimes thought of as hiding in plain sight. The design ultimately described is grounded in the basic concept of inquiry, and uses both critical ethnographic and comparative approaches. Because of the naturalistic nature of the research, my own background and perspective on the research topics was discussed. A basic introduction to the three sites was also provided, along with the ethical considerations related to conducting research in them. In terms of the technical methodology, the data generation process was discussed, including the sample of participants involved, along with the process used for analyzing the data that was generated. Lastly, the limitations and constraints of the study, as framed, were discussed. The next chapter presents the fruits of the methodology outlined in this chapter—the overall findings of the inquiry.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

Chapter Four presents the findings of this inquiry into the contextual factors involved in the tacit teaching of the hidden curriculum in three different schools. In order to properly situate and understand the educative context, it is important to look at the different aims and educational philosophies of each of the schools, alongside the various practices and processes that make each school distinct. In so doing, it should become possible to draw substantive connections between what each school hopes to achieve, and the way in which they practice education.

This chapter is therefore divided into three parts, one for each school, with four corresponding subsections for each. First, I present my initial impressions of each school, in order to provide a background for the more detailed findings which follow, and importantly, to identify my potential biases. Second, I describe each school's educational mandate, including any aims or guiding principles by which the school operates. For this, I draw mainly from interviews with the schools' founders and senior staff, as well as school documents that explicitly discuss their goals and philosophies. Third, I present the consolidated findings of my fieldwork, based on the coding and categorization of the field data. This takes the form of a systematized description of the contextual factors that appear most prominent in each school and seem to have the most notable effect in shaping students' experiences. Lastly, I provide brief summary reflections on each school, drawing connections between the points raised.

It is worth noting at this point that in the presentation of findings below, I have deviated from the structure of observations suggested by the preliminary model of the educative context that I had presented in Chapter Two. That model was based on three categories of factors—physical, social, and institutional. I had opted to omit “content” as a category of factors because my focus is on the tacit, contextual aspects of learning. However, once I started generating data, I

was forced to acknowledge that many content-*related* factors are actually quite important aspects of the *context*, namely, things like what content is focused on, how the content is structure and divided up, the sources of content, and so on. Therefore, the findings for each school are presented in relation to all four categories of factors.

School Aspen

First impressions. I first learned about School Aspen during the process of researching democratic free schooling for my candidacy paper. The school's website gives the impression of a down-to-earth and welcoming place, and my correspondence with the Founder and Principal reinforced that. I was warned by the Principal not to expect the school to fit any kind of idyllic preconceptions – that it can be loud and chaotic – but I was reassured that the school welcomed me to come and see it “as it really is.” I found this honesty refreshing. It seemed to reflect a kind of defiant confidence that the school was not trying to live up to any artificial expectations of what it was “supposed to be.” I proceeded to make all the arrangements for formal approvals, and for travel to visit the school.

I was confused upon arrival at the school's address. School Aspen is currently housed in part of a larger building that includes unrelated offices and recreational programs, and after asking around, I was told to go around to the back of the building where I would find the school. I circled the building dubiously, and as I did, I began to see children, some sitting alone reading, and others out in the schoolyard, engaged in various activities. The density of students became thicker, and I soon encountered an adult with a walkie-talkie who was supervising some young children on a playground. I introduced myself and shortly thereafter was greeted by the school's Founder (now retired), and joined her on her way out to supervise another group of students.

The students were assembling twigs and other small natural items as part of a costume-making activity, and I had a long conversation with the Founder, interrupted periodically to help

students. She provided an overview of the school, its history, and what to expect during my visit. After some time, we went into the school where she introduced me to her daughter, the current Principal. The Principal and I talked in her office for some time about the school, and about my research, and finalized arrangements for my data collection the following week. I was then toured around the school and introduced to a number of other adults and students.

One of the key things that struck me in my first visit to the school was how vibrant and dynamic the place was. I have spent a lot of time in schools, and have not encountered one with this level of energy, stimulation, and general volume. There were students running, yelling, hiding, working, joking, talking, and doing all sorts of activities. What I didn't see were students looking bored or at loose ends. Everyone was engaged in something. I commented with excitement to the Founder about what I saw, and her enthusiastic response stuck with me, "Yeah, it's like a cross between a pre-school and a graduate school!" However, while I was excited by the energy of the school, I was a little bit anxious because of the noise level. More frankly, the school seemed a bit chaotic, and it was unnerving for me to see such a wide range of activities taking place simultaneously.

In contrast to the above, another impression during my initial visit was the warm and caring tone of the school. Despite the vibrant energy, the interactions between staff and students, and between students, all seemed to be surprisingly patient and tolerant. I use the word surprisingly, because this contrasted with the feeling of rambunctiousness I got from the students' activities. Moreover, I was aware from speaking with the Founder that many students come to the school, in part, because they had had difficulties fitting in at mainstream schools. Yet, I did not see anything evidence of teasing, exclusion, or other antagonistic behaviors between students. Quite to the contrary, I saw older students slowing down to talk with younger ones, and diverse groups working and playing happily together. Looking at the students, I could well imagine many of

them feeling like outsiders in conventional schools, yet at School Aspen, it felt as if everyone had their place and a sense of belonging.

One additional thing that struck me during my first visit was the demeanor of the students themselves. As I walked the halls initially, I noticed something subtly different about them, through the way they were occupying the space, interacting with teachers, and looking at me. It wasn't until a young girl, maybe seven years old, stopped me in the hall, looked me in the eye, and asked me with the confidence of an adult, who I was and what I was doing there, that I realized what it was. There was a sense of confidence, belonging, and ownership with this young girl, and with the other students. I immediately made the connection between this demeanor, and the way that the students participate in the governance of the school, and I realized that the hierarchical barrier between adults and children, between teachers and students, was substantially broken down at School Aspen.

I was intrigued by School Aspen, and excited, but I had some reservations as well. I was resolute in suspending any judgment, but I was surprised by how permissive the environment seemed to be. I was very tired by the end of the first day, and despite my attraction to the democratic philosophy of the school, I recall thinking that I would have a hard time there as a teacher. While I saw myself as a progressive teacher in terms of pedagogy, I always maintained a very structured classroom, with clear expectations, routines, and procedures, which made for a very controlled learning environment. School Aspen was quite the opposite—at least on the surface. I realized that at School Aspen, I would be confronting many of my own assumptions and expectations, and would need to reconcile these with what I found so attractive and refreshing about the school.

School Aspen's educational aims. School Aspen is over 40 years old, and during that time, it has evolved a very distinctive educational philosophy. In the literature about the school, and in conversations with the staff and administrators, a number of interrelated terms kept coming up, including: democratic; non-coercive; non-judgmental; inclusive; tolerant; self-directed; parent participation; publicly funded; alternative; multi-age grouping; and school community. However, these terms don't illustrate the uniqueness of the program, and many could also be used to describe mainstream schools. The teachers' statements emphasize that School Aspen is an alternative program embracing a philosophy of democratic governance that is almost libertarian in nature, in which students are not forced to learn according to any particular program of studies, but rather, are given the space to develop and learn according to their own internal drives.

This approach is closely connected with School A's educational aims, which relate more to the educational process rather than any preconceived set of educational outcomes. Interviews with staff and students underscored the point that School Aspen is fundamentally about providing students with the space and support to develop according to their own motivation, rather than conforming to external expectations of what they should be. This is reflected in the school's motto, "Room To Grow and Be Yourself." There is a strong focus on intrinsic motivation, and an unwavering belief in the innate drive of students to learn and grow, and the importance of letting them take responsibility for the decisions that affect them—individually and collectively.

The formal mandate of the school is perhaps best expressed through its guiding principles. These principles, discussed below, were developed through a participatory process, led by the Principal, and involving the school community. Interviews with staff members, students, and alumni, reinforced these principles, and while the themes from my interview data may have

emerged somewhat differently from these seven principles, they are, collectively, very close to what I heard from the students and staff I interviewed.

The first principle is “profound respect, across all ages and roles strengthens relationships and makes the School [Aspen] safe place for learning and development” (School Aspen, n.d.). Respect, in this context, goes beyond merely tolerating others and treating them decently, and extends into the realm of acceptance, in which the ideas and feelings of each individual are taken seriously. Conversations with students and staff reinforced how the school was exceptionally nonjudgmental, as well as being non-coercive, and linked these characteristics to a deep respect for the inherent capacity and right of each individual to make decisions on their own behalf.

The second principle, self-directed education, “is an opportunity for students to take charge of designing their own learning environments, which helps ensure relevance and engagement” (School Aspen, n.d.). This is perhaps the most prominent feature of School Aspen, and it was consistently reinforced during my interviews. Students described being able to make their own choices about what to do each day, including the choice to do nothing at all. Staff described their approach of providing program offerings, both scheduled and spontaneous, based on students’ interests and requests, and coaching students to develop their own interests and learning plans. Older students provided evidence that this approach was working, as they articulated their plans for courses and credits, for graduation or not graduating, and for what they planned to do after leaving School Aspen.

The third principle, democratic governance, relates to the process of decision-making in the school, in which each person, regardless of age or role, has an equal opportunity to voice their questions and concerns, and to vote on school resolutions. Students, staff, and parents all have the same opportunities to participate in the School Council, and have a say in room usage, materials budgets, rules, and policies. Along with the self-directed nature of the curriculum, this was the

aspect of the school that appeared most exciting for students and staff. It was interesting to hear the enthusiasm with which staff, especially, talked about how the democratic process is manifested in the school, with resolutions and counter-resolutions, with groups of students lobbying and staking claims, and how the nature of the system encourages active participation. Importantly, even serious issues like periodic incidents involving drugs, are handled through the School Council. While there are limits to democratic governance in School Aspen, related to the legal responsibilities of the adults, there is a clear commitment to key democratic principles.

The fourth principle, multi-age grouping, relates to the flexible nature of learning and social groups in School Aspen, based on common interest rather than age or grade level. Both students and staff mentioned this aspect of the school repeatedly. Students talked about this as a kind of liberating aspect of the school, in which there was no stigma associated with spending time with students of other ages. Staff talked about it more in terms of its value in students' development and in the cohesion of the community. One teacher recounted a story to me about when a visiting District Administrator was touring the school, and asked a young girl what she thought was the best thing about School Aspen, to which the youngster replied, "The babies!" This response is explained in the context of the next principle.

The fifth principle is participation. While all members of the community are expected to participate, this principle refers specifically to the involvement of parents and alumni, and their role in sustaining and binding together the community. This aspect of the school was particularly prominent in comments from the teachers, who discussed the role that parents play as volunteers, guest speakers, and other roles in the school. Students seemed to just take the presence of parents (including parents with babies and young children) as natural, and during my week at the school, I also became very accustomed to seeing new adult faces throughout the school each day.

The school's sixth guiding principle is freedom with responsibility. This principle was explicitly stated and tacitly implied throughout most of the conversations I had while I was at the school. The staff and older students talked about the high degree of freedom at the school, in connection to both the self-directed nature of learning at the school, and in relation to their participation in the school-level decision-making, linking freedom with individual autonomy as well as shared authority. While some of those I interviewed acknowledged that the freedoms are sometimes abused, they talked about this as a natural part of the learning process. Both students and staff indicated that they felt that School A's students likely have higher degrees of self control and personal responsibility than mainstream students, because they are given more freedom and naturally learn to regulate themselves because of that.

The seventh guiding principle at School Aspen is accountability, and specifically, accountability to the provincial Ministry of Education. As a publicly funded institution, the school must comply with ministerial orders, including those related to attendance, assessment, and reporting. This principle came up primarily in conversations with staff, and it is clear that there is some tension between the school's philosophy, and this formal accountability. For example, while the Ministry requires that report cards be developed for students, the school community has agreed that these report cards will not be shared with students and parents. The school can therefore comply with Ministerial requirements, while staying true to its philosophy regarding assessment. While this kind of *formal* accountability was not prominent in conversations with students, accountability to the school community was. Students mentioned how they are held accountability through the School Council and Judicial Council, and expressed considerable buy-in to these institutions.

Consolidated findings for School Aspen. School Aspen is unique, to the extent that it challenged my concept of what it means to be a school. Many of the school structures that I have

long taken for granted, and structures that some might say *define* a school, are absent at School Aspen. However, by the end of my visit, I was thoroughly impressed by the richness of the learning that is taking place there, by the unwavering commitment of the staff to the philosophy of the school, and by the extent to which that philosophy is tangibly manifested in the culture and operations of the school.

This section presents what I found to be the most prominent factors comprising the educative context at School Aspen. These factors are those aspects of the context that appeared to be the most important or meaningful in shaping the experiences of students, and while each student's experience will be unique, the factors listed here were prominent in my observations at the school, as well as in conversations with the students and staff. These factors are summarized in Table 2, and are presented in more depth below, based on four categories: physical factors; social factors; institutional factors; and content-related factors.

Table 2

Summary of prominent factors in the educative context of School Aspen

Level	Physical	Social	Institutional	Content	Total
Classroom	•	•	• Room councils	• Integrated formal curriculum content • Individual learning and tutoring	3
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of designated rooms • Use of undesignated rooms • Conventional school building • Student ownership • Use of informal spaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity in some dimensions • Inclusive and accepting culture • Management of incoming students • Behavior management • Social friction and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loose institutionalization • Process orientation • Assessment practices • Credit and graduation • School council • Judicial council • Rules and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities as content • Core curriculum • Responsive content • Teachable moments • Simulation activities • Civic engagement and activism 	32

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permeable and expanding boundaries • Availability of learning materials • Visual environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conflict resolution • Lack of formal groupings • Egalitarian structure • School identity • Special vocabulary • Staff presence • Teacher selection 		
District		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitigation of district policies and initiatives 	2
Total	8	12	9	8
				37

Physical factors at School Aspen. *Conventional School Building.* On the surface, the physical environment of the school looks fairly conventional. School Aspen occupies a portion of a larger district-owned building that looks as though at one time it was a single large school. This site is somewhat incidental, as the program has moved around over the years, moving between houses and school buildings depending on the circumstances, and from my observation, the nature of the program depends more on the ways the physical spaces are used than the nature of the spaces themselves. The school building has standard ingredients one would expect—hallways, classrooms, lockers, bulletin boards, tables, chairs, books and computers.

Student ownership. While the building itself is conventional, one can begin to see distinctive aspects of the space upon looking more closely. The arrangements are casual, with desks and chairs assembled for conversation or for just hanging out, rather than giving lectures or maintaining order. Many of the displays have been made by students, and many of the spaces are maintained and organized by students without adult intervention. While the physical space could be described as messy or haphazard, it was refreshingly so, and it is clear that students feel very much at home and empowered within this space. Many of the rooms, in fact, are allocated to student groups, as discussed below.

Use of designated rooms. While many of the rooms in School Aspen are undesignated, there are several that have become, either formally or informally, designated for specific purposes. Several of these have become home bases for individual teachers, resembling the conventional school model. While these rooms could theoretically be taken over by another group, this is rare in practice. Due to the nature of the rooms, the types of activities they are suited for, and the equipment within them, most of these rooms were locked unless opened and/or supervised by a teacher sponsor. Examples of designated rooms include:

- Office: The school has an office area, reminiscent of offices in standard schools. This area has a number of different rooms, one of which is used by the Principal, and the area includes shelves for Minute Books from various council meetings, school notices, a photocopier, and so on. However, it is worth noting that this area is fully accessible to students, and it is common to see students in the space. In fact, one of the small office rooms next to the Principal's office had, at the time of my visit, been taken over by a group of young girls.
- Big Muscle Room: The "BMR," as it is referred to, is a large carpeted room designated for rambunctious play. The room is sparsely decorated, but includes reconfigurable indoor play structures, as well as an assortment of pillows and other materials. The BMR functions a little bit like a gymnasium, but without any fixed classes or activities. During my time there, the BMR was generally used primarily by a group of younger boys, for wrestling, indoor hockey, and other physical play.
- Library: The school has a small library room, full of interesting reading materials, and comfortable chairs for students to read in. One of the students I interviewed spoke fondly of a corner chair in the library, known within the school as "his" chair, as he had spent so much time there over the years.
- High School Room: This is a large classroom with long tables and high school level textbooks and learning materials. It is the *de facto* space in the school for the high school students to hang out and work in.
- The Cottage: This is a large space consolidating materials for the school's youngest students. It includes a loft, and small sized furniture for the young students. It is adjoined by a fenced-in outside space with a small playground, referred to as "The Garden."

- The Ampersand: This is actually an office within a large classroom, and has been designated as a quiet space for students to work in when they want to get away from distractions.
- The Kitchen: There is a small kitchen room in the school, used occasionally for workshops, and on a biweekly basis for afternoon tea with the Founder. The room is also used by students to prepare food, practice cooking, or just for hanging out.
- The Portable: The schoolyard includes one portable classroom, which is full of woodworking tools and musical instruments.

Use of undesignated rooms. Unlike conventional schools where rooms are associated with either a class, or a teacher, or a subject, most room assignments at School Aspen are not fixed. Apart from the designated rooms mentioned above, all other rooms in the school are undesignated, and students (or staff) wanting to use or “take over” a room for any purpose are free to put forward a resolution to the School Council. The resolution is then voted on, and a decision is taken. These resolutions require an endorsement from a staff member, which provides the staff a degree of control over the process, but the staff intervenes as little as possible in this regard. The related processes are discussed below in relation to institutional factors at the school. In this section on physical factors, it is sufficient to mention the process, and the idea of student ownership for these spaces. While technically each of the student-run rooms has a staff sponsor, the rooms are occupied, maintained, and decorated by the students. Some of the rooms had unique features like Christmas lights installed in them, and others were simply spaces for students to hang out with a greater degree of privacy.

Use of informal spaces. While classrooms may be the primary organizational unit of most schools, this is not necessarily the case in School Aspen. Conventional boundaries and divisions of spaces are largely broken down in School Aspen, probably resulting in part from the process for occupying rooms, described above. Many students spend large portions of their days in the hallways, in non-classroom spaces like office rooms and closets, outside, or in the case of older students, off site in the community, or in the forest surrounding the school. The long road leading to and from the school also proved to be an unconventional social space, and I observed students of different ages grouping up while walking to and from school each day.

Permeable and expanding boundaries. Another factor related to the physical environment of the school is way in which the physical boundaries of the school change, depending on the ages and parental permissions of the students. The youngest students in the school spend most of their time in the “Cottage” room mentioned above, or outside in the “Garden.” Older students tend to roam the halls, and have access to the different rooms, with some groups choosing to occupy a room of their own, and others content to find their own spaces apart from those rooms. With regard to the rooms that are theoretically open to all students, there are soft unwritten rules regarding which age groups belong where, resulting in a gradual expansion of boundaries as student get older. Accompanying this, the school has a system for obtaining parental permission for students to go into different areas, either supervised or unsupervised, for example, playing outside unsupervised, going into the forest beyond the school grounds, or going off site. A number of older students, for example, check in at the school each morning, as they are required to do, but then walk back down the hill into the community, often spending much of their day at a nearby mall.

Availability of learning materials. The school has a rich array of physical materials for students to use. These include things like costumes and props that get used in historical

simulation activities and drama events, unconventional materials like unicycles and enormous wooden blocks, and conventional materials like science equipment and art supplies. Certain rooms are home to certain kinds of equipment. There is a room for younger students, with all sorts of toys and puzzles and craft materials. Another room has cooking supplies and a basic kitchen. Yet another room contains math and science materials. While I only saw a small portion of these materials in use while I was at the school, and much of it was stored away in a large storage room, the materials are all there and accessible to students, and certainly have the appearance of being well used.

Visual environment. The visual environment at the school is also worth noting. As discussed above, the students' role in the visual environment is prominent, and is characterized by a general degree of disorder. However the students' voice is also prominent in other ways, with student-generated displays and artwork decorating all the walls. Some of these displays relate to the core values of the school, with content related to democracy and human rights, while others relate more simply to students' interests. Within the classrooms, many of the displays have a clearer pedagogical purpose, including things like a "word wall" and posters depicting mathematical principles—many of which looked quite old. In general, the visual environment of the school is very busy, and I found it hard to discern the signal from the noise. However, one display was particularly noteworthy. Along the main hallway of the school was a large display with photos of the members of the school community, and basic information about each of them. The prominence of this display, and the space allocated to it, sends a clear message about the importance attached to the school community.

Social factors at School Aspen. *Diversity in many dimensions.* In many respects, School Aspen is quite diverse and inclusive. The school community includes students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, including those from richer and poorer suburbs, and those from

diverse backgrounds. A meaningful proportion of the students have come to School Aspen principally because they had experienced issues fitting in at other schools, while others have come because of the philosophy specifically, or for other reasons. The school community is very open with regards to sexual orientation, and includes openly gay community members. However, while the school is diverse and inclusive in many respects, and goes to great lengths to show respect and acceptance of different cultures, and lifestyles, the school community has very low ethnic diversity.

Located in one of Canada's most ethnically diverse cities, it is notable that all of the teaching staff members are Caucasian, and among the student population, I don't recall seeing a single visible minority. I asked the Founder about this issue, and she demonstrated a frank understanding of the situation, indicating that it was regrettable that the school did not have greater ethnic diversity, but recognizing the connection to white privilege. She acknowledged that they have had visible minority students in the past, but that many minority families tended to feel more pressure to succeed within the conventional education system, even if they are having bad experiences; whereas Caucasian students, correctly or incorrectly, feel they have more expendable social capital, and if they are not having good experiences in mainstream schools, they feel more freedom to select an alternative program like School Aspen. However, whatever the reasons, the salient aspect of this is that students' daily experiences at the school are almost entirely with other Caucasian students, and this may well have an impact on their level of understanding and comfort with other races over time, particularly if they are not involved in out of school activities with more ethnic diversity.

Inclusive and accepting culture. In an unstructured environment like School Aspen, free from close supervision and external controls, there is a lot of potential for exclusion and bullying of certain students. However, while I was there, I saw no evidence of teasing or bullying, and

while students may choose to befriend some peers over others, I didn't see any instances of exclusion. On this point, it is worth restating that many of the students at School Aspen came there because they were not fitting in well in other schools, and in many cases were either being picked on or were repeatedly in conflict with other students. In other words, the school population includes those who had been either bullies, or bullied, in the previous schools.

And yet, at School Aspen these students have been fully embraced into the community. When new students come into the community, they are welcomed, and seem to easily adopt the norms of the community. One student told me, "I literally owe my life to this school," reflecting on his negative experiences in other schools, and the way in which this school had accepted him, and allowed him the space to be himself. Positive peer pressure is an important factor in this, and rather than the imposition of seemingly arbitrary rules, the staff focus on ensuring that students understand the importance of tolerance and open-mindedness to the community and each individual in it. I noted the caring tone taken by staff when talking with, and about the students. During a staff meeting, there was some discussion about students with highly disruptive behavior and aggressive language, and the Principal skillfully facilitated this discussion, finding positive and constructive ways of framing the behaviors and the student's perspective. The social environment at School Aspen is fostered by the behaviors and interactions modeled by the staff, and indeed, the Founder indicated that the staff really maintain the culture of the school year after year.

The Founder was open about the need to actively manage the proportions of students in the school in order to ensure that the balance of the school culture does not become disrupted. The school is welcoming of students with histories of behavior problems, learning disabilities, and other challenges, but an effort is made to ensure that there are always a sufficient numbers of established and less challenging students, to maintain the kind of cultural norms that allow the

school to function. When conflicts and social incidents arise, the staff works concertedly with the students to unpack their experiences and move beyond them.

Management of incoming students. The students at School Aspen come from a variety of backgrounds, including conventional schooling, home schooling, positive experiences, and negative ones. A small proportion of students enter the school in Kindergarten, and some come seeking the democratic schooling experience specifically. But many of the students come to the school either by choice, or due to lack of other options, after having negative experiences – socially or academically – in other learning contexts. In short, the students (and their families) generally self-select, in one way or another, to come to School Aspen. All new students and their parents are required to attend several “experience days” before they are able to transfer in. Both parents and students are required to participate, in order to ensure that there is no unrealistic expectations or misunderstandings about what the school is. The Principal meets with the student and their parents throughout this process to discuss and debrief before a decision is agreed upon as to whether or not School Aspen is a good fit for the student. During the final intake meeting, the Principal asks the student if they want to come to the school, which may seem a minor point, but one of the students I interviewed noted the significance of this question, and mentioned that this was a major incident in his life, though it had taken place nearly five years earlier. The simple fact of being given a choice had contrasted so starkly with his previous school experiences.

Behavior management. Behavior management at School Aspen differs dramatically from conventional schools. The accepted standard of behavior at School Aspen is relatively permissive, and much of what qualifies as normal student behavior at School Aspen would be probably not be tolerated in conventional schools. While the school has quite a sophisticated set of policies and procedures in place to regulate student behavior, the key features of this system is

that it is regulated by the school community on the basis of complaints filed by community members, and resolutions describing expected behaviors. While the system is discussed more in the section on institutional factors, it warrants mention in relation to social factors as well, as it has important social consequences.

In keeping with the school's non-coercive approach, the Founder refers to behavioral guidelines as being "not so much rules, as norms;" however, from my observation at the school there appears to be a disconnect between many of the accepted norms, and the stated rules. In many cases, behavior is simply regulated by natural consequences, and I observed, for example, some students running around outside in the pouring rain, and then having to deal with being soaking wet afterwards—a lesson more powerful than being told they were not allowed to go outside. However, I also noted that there was a tendency among staff and students to turn a blind eye to certain behaviors that were technically not allowed, particularly when there was no direct consequence to others—such as shouting and running in the hall. While this approach is natural and democratic in many respects, it does risk undermining other democratic principles, such as the rule of law, as students' behavior seems to be governed largely by what they believe they can get away with. The philosophy was characterized well by one of the older students I interviewed, who indicated, "Obedience to authority is good sometimes, but not blindly." The emphasis in School Aspen is on rationalizing and explaining one's own behavior, rather than compliance with any particular set of expectations.

The students I interviewed showed great appreciation for this system, noting that the rules at the school are negotiable and evolve over time, and especially that there were always opportunities to explain oneself rather than facing arbitrary enforcement. There is open and ongoing deliberation involving staff, students, and parents, on rules and consequences, and the student indicated this system, "Really helps you to see other people's point of view." The

positive consequences of this approach are many, and the students were confident and able to articulate their perspectives very well, as I observed during council meetings. I got the impression that the students, while sometimes impulsive, are very self-aware, and confident about why they are doing what they are doing.

However, there are also some other potential consequences to a system like this. In addition to the point raised above about rule of law, there is a risk of behavioral norms being adopted that do not serve the students well in their future lives. I commonly saw behaviors that would be considered quite rude in most social settings. There is a risk to the students if they go through their years of schooling believing that such behaviors are generally acceptable, because schools are a primary site in which more formal forms of etiquette are learned, and where habits such as self control and self regulation are developed. School Aspen emphasizes the intrinsic development of these things, and the students exhibited a great deal of maturity in many ways, but this aspect of their schooling leans more towards libertarian ideals than democratic ones. There are also more practical considerations as well, as the general level of disruption is not conducive to anything resembling conventional instruction. During the classes and workshops I observed, the teachers spent a great deal of their time trying to manage student behavior, quieting students down, responding to interruptions, and so on. It was clear that the teaching (if not the students) would have been well served if there were more structure, and clearer and higher expectations for student behavior.

Social friction and conflict resolution. Although the social environment of School Aspen is very open and tolerant, it lacks the kind of formal structures that constrain and control student interactions in most schools. With students free to roam the hallways and play for long periods of time without close control or supervision, it is not surprising that conflicts arise. One of the teachers indicated that much of their time was involved with conflict resolution, and working

through interpersonal issues with students. Peer pressure is discussed openly, and it is common for teachers to spend long periods of time talking with students individually or in groups to unpack and work through issues that come up. This teacher considered this to be a major part of the informal curriculum at School Aspen.

I noted a high degree of social maturity among the students there. Many seemed older than their years, and one teacher I spoke with attributed this to the fact that at School Aspen they are constantly encountering and working through the kinds of unconstrained social interactions that many of us do not encounter until we are out of school. They are free to make their own choices about their how they spend their time, and who they spend it with, and so this aspect of their learning and development is accelerated. While teachers in most schools may provide a counseling function to certain students, in School Aspen, this aspect of teachers' work appears to be more significant. The school appears to be achieving some success in this approach. For example, I was surprised to see the level of physicality in the play that took place in the Big Muscle Room, which included some fairly intense wrestling, and I was, frankly, impressed by the extent to which the supervising teachers *did not* intervene, and allowed the students to work things out themselves, while at the same time being on hand to support them if required.

Lack of formal groupings. Unlike most schools, which are organized by classes and grades, there are no such groupings at School Aspen. For administrative purposes and certain academic functions such as planning and reporting, each teacher has a list of students designated to them, but these lists do not have a major bearing on students' daily lives at the school. Practically speaking, the students are free to choose their own groupings, and these are fluid. Students may group together for certain activities, or spend time alone or with one or more friends. Some students move between groups frequently, while others may form tight and exclusive groups that last for months. Students and staff reinforced the importance of these

relationships and social dynamics as being a major factor in students' lives at School Aspen. In addition, since the social environment is largely uncontrolled, these relationships develop and change naturally. Perhaps the most meaningful consequence of this is that the students are free to associate with whomever they want to associate with, and to avoid those who they choose not to associate with. Several students I spoke with commented about how freeing it was for them to be able to associate with anyone in the school without stigma, in contrast with prior experiences in which their peer group was dictated by their grade and class.

Egalitarian structure. The social structure is very non-hierarchical. Although there is a principal, certified teachers, non-certified teachers' aids, part-time staff, and parents volunteering at the school, the organization and communication structure was very flat. I was unable to tell by observation, for example, which of the staff were certified versus non-certified, a distinction which would be immediately obvious in most schools. Moreover, the egalitarian structure extends to the student body, and is reflected in casual tone of interactions between students and staff, and the democratic governance of the school.

Although most school decisions are made democratically, and the staff are committed to the principle of equality, there are certain situations where their responsibilities as adults and professional require them to be more directive. These are identified by the phrase "staff direction." All of the students understand the need for staff direction at times, and accept that there are limits to what is allowable within the school community.

School identity. I perceived a strong sense of identity among both staff and students as members of the School Aspen community. While part of the aim of the school is to help students to develop their own sense of identity, it is clear that part of that identity involves belonging to this particular school community. The school is associated with a democratic, socially engaged, and alternative or even counter-cultural perspective, and I this perspective came across in my

conversations with the students and staff. During these interviews, there was a consistent rejection of the mainstream cultural narrative that schooling should lead to graduation, to post-secondary, and on to a conventional job. Students often spoke as advocates of democratic education, contrasting it to mainstream schooling, which one student characterized as being based on extrinsic rewards, fear, artificial stability, and approval-seeking. Another student discussed how, before coming to School Aspen, he had been considered a success of the mainstream system, because he was, “against fun and freedom,” and without any motivation of his own. The Founder distinguished School Aspen by indicating that even in many democratic schools there is still an emphasis on achieving learning outcomes that fit within the conventional system, whereas in School Aspen, the emphasis is on questioning the system itself.

To illustrate this point, one student acknowledged that certain educational outcomes may be required to achieve his desired career path, and in reference to a conventional post-secondary program, he stated that he could, “submit to that” for a short time in order to achieve his goals. However, it is clear from his phrasing that this would be an intentional choice, and not just a blind step forward based on mainstream norms. Interestingly, while there are students from School Aspen who have gone on to prestigious universities, successful careers, and fame, the Founder expressed the most excitement in conveying stories about students who had found their passion, and were pursuing it in any form. A strong theme in these stories was the idea of not buying in to social assumptions and pressures about what students should do in the future, and not surprisingly, the students I interviewed talked about artistic and entrepreneurial goals, and several commented specifically that they could not see themselves working for someone else in a conventional job.

Special vocabulary. Part of the unique identity at the school is the special vocabulary shared by the students and staff. Many of the special terms and cues in School Aspen relate to its

democratic processes, and its council meetings, for example, are conducted using an approach based on Robert's Rules of Order. I saw a student, perhaps six years old, make a "point of order" during a School Council meeting, and students of all ages fluently used thematic vocabulary such as resolutions, amendments, motions, passing, and so on. Specific reference was made in several occasions to the Convention On the Rights of the Child, and it was clear that this is something that the students are also familiar with. Other specific terms used by the students referred to the institutions of the school, such as the different councils, processes, and roles taken by students and staff, such as sponsors, advisory groups, licensees, and so on. These kinds of school-specific terms all contribute to the sense of belonging that students feel at the school, and one student I interviewed recounted his experience of coming to the school several years earlier, and initially not understanding what his peers were talking about, until he gradually gained this insider knowledge.

Staff presence. When I talked with teachers about the approach to teaching at School Aspen, I received very interesting answers, and nothing resembling descriptions of conventional pedagogy. Two teachers talked about the idea of "respect as pedagogy," emphasizing the importance of real engagement with the students, authentic relationships, and profound respect for them. One teacher indicated that "the best pedagogy in a non-coercive school is to get out of the way; to do no harm," rather than over-intervening in the learning of students. In mainstream schools, the role of teachers may be somewhat taken for granted, but because of School A's unique structure, that conventional role is uprooted, and is replaced by the idea of staff presence—where qualified teachers are present and available to support students, to provide scaffolding and identify opportunities, and intervene as required. The teachers (and other staff) at School Aspen provide an academic underpinning for the school to ensure that when the students are ready to learn or demonstrate an interest in a given topic, the resources are available to

support them. In addition, each student belongs to an Advisory Group led by a teacher, and they meet with that particular teacher on a regular basis to talk about their interests, and plan their academic program. While some teachers teach scheduled classes, offer workshops, or tutor students who are studying independently, most of the teaching could be classified as taking more of a *life coaching* approach, in which they help the students to identify priorities and develop the tools to pursue them.

Teacher selection. Staff play a key role in setting the tone for social interactions at School Aspen, and the school acknowledges the importance of ensuring new teachers understand the philosophy and are a good fit for the community. The staff is quite small, and each staff member has unique connections to the community. In addition to the Founder, and the Principal (the Founder's daughter), one other staff member began as a student in the school, and then came back to the school, first as a volunteer, and then as a teaching assistant. Another staff member started out as a parent of students in the school, and began volunteering, before eventually becoming a staff member herself. Other staff members have experiences in other democratic schools, or other related stories. Because School Aspen is a public school, and its teachers are union members, the school is respectful of the union environment, and works within this context to identify and contract suitable teachers—typically by identifying substitute teachers who appear to be a good fit for the school. The Founder indicated that they had had very few instances in which staff members were not fully on board with the philosophy of the school, as the administration works hard to make sure that new members of the community fully understand what the school is about, before joining.

School community. School Aspen refers to itself as, among other things, a parent participation school. Parents are expected to contribute to the school community by volunteering around the school, in routine activities, special events, or as guest speakers or contributors.

Naturally, parents are a conspicuous part of the school community, and it is common to see parents and young siblings in the halls of the school. Parents are also voting members of the community and are eligible to participate in School Council meetings.

However, the school community goes well beyond the parent body. While I was visiting, I saw many guests at the school who were not parents, including volunteers, guest speakers, external workshop leaders, substitute teachers, a prospective family, and other interested parties who came simply to find out about the school by participating in a biweekly tea hosted by the Founder. I also had the opportunity to interview a recent graduate who had returned to the school to talk with the Principal about a workshop on blacksmithing that he was going to be offering at the school in the following semester.

In addition to these local community members, I also heard from a number of interviewees about the broader alternative educational and democratic schooling communities that School Aspen belongs to. These include the International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC), an annual meeting of democratic educators and students from around the world, who the Principal referred to fondly as “my people,” and the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) community and its members. Other names that came up repeatedly were those of prominent local alternative education figures, and a number of community organizations that have complementary philosophies. It was clear from these interviews that the School Aspen community is part of a much broader community, and that broad community provides School Aspen with a network of support, inspiration, and opportunities for both staff and students.

Institutional factors at School Aspen. *Loose institutionalization.* Whereas the lack of formal structure in the social environment makes School Aspen difficult to compare with conventional schools, the institutional environment is relatively more structured, and includes analogues for most of the institutional structures that one would find at any mainstream school.

That said, the institutional structure is far from rigid, and there is a high degree of flexibility in how the different policies and procedures are implemented. This is at least partly intentional, and teachers indicated that they do not want things like rules to be perceived to be written in stone, because they want to invite students to participate in the deliberative processes, and to feel a sense of engagement and ownership for the school institutions.

In practice, however, I did not observe a high degree of engagement from the students. The Judicial Council meeting I observed included only five students, and the School Council meeting which I observed initially included the whole school, but after the resolutions were read, all but 15 of the students left, and after voting on the first resolution, most of those left as well. I also perceived some confusion amongst students regarding certain policies and procedures. Several times during my visit to the school, I overheard students asking one another, what the rule or procedure was for a certain activity or process. There did not appear to be any definitive list of rules and procedures, as many were instituted on the basis of resolutions at a School Council meeting at some point in the past.

Process orientation. One of the important themes at School Aspen, related to both the institutions, and how they are implemented, is an emphasis on processes rather than outcomes. The Founder and other teachers raised this point explicitly, emphasizing the value in having students participate in the school governance, and make decisions for themselves, even if they know that the superficial outcomes might be better with more teacher involvement. During my time there, I heard this point echoed numerous times, for example, in discussing the School Council meetings, both students and teachers mentioned to me that the best part of these meetings was the conversation, and that the actual resolutions that were passed, or not, were of secondary importance. Perhaps this orientation is best represented by one student who indicated during the meeting, “I have a thought, but I’m not really sure how to say it.” This student was then

encouraged patiently by others to work through and express her idea. The school's emphasis on the process will of course lead to its own outcomes, but the process is valued for its own intrinsic importance, rather than its instrumental value in achieving any specific ends.

However, it is worth noting that this emphasis on process over outcomes has created some debate in the school, and some of the teachers expressed concern over the extent to which students are following through on commitments and producing completed work. Taken to an extreme, there is a risk that students may internalize the perspective that it is reasonable to constantly change their minds, or to not follow through on commitments. Interestingly, and somewhat ironically reinforcing the process orientation, this point came up in discussion at a staff meeting, and resulted in a new resolution about a requirement to honor one's commitments. This resolution was put forward and debated the following day at the School Council meeting.

Assessment practices. Assessment practices at School Aspen are also closely aligned with the philosophy and aims of the school. The school makes very little use of formal assessment, especially summative assessment. Informal and formative assessments are more common, but still not prominent, and are used principally in the context of the academic program offerings where, for example, math questions may be corrected with students. In general, the school community sees a conflict between intrinsic motivation and the use of letter grades, and instead, students work with staff and parents to develop learning portfolios that are reviewed during conferences. Because the school is accredited and publicly funded, report cards are issued for ministerial purposes, but “the parent community has collectively opted not to see them, preferring to draw on the ongoing dialogue generated through conferences, e-portfolios, and time spent in the school community to capture the “how” and “what” of students’ learning” (School Aspen, n.d.). For students of high school age who are studying credit courses, grades are discussed, but the principal objective is for students to develop and demonstrate mastery of the content.

During the time I visited the school, one of the issues that several staff members were reflecting on was how to assess the progress that students were making in other, non-academic areas that were more aligned with the school's key aims. Several teachers commented on wanting to find effective ways of documenting students' development of critical thinking skills, social intelligence, personal responsibility, innovation, inquiry skills, and so on.

Credit and graduation. Related to the issue of assessment, the process for high school aged students to study for credit towards graduation is quite unique at School Aspen. Although teachers are available to assist, it is up to the students to develop their own study plans, including what courses they will study, and how they will study them. Many choose independent study options, and a meaningful proportion of the students *do* choose to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. However, this is presented to students as an option, not an expectation, and at the end of each year, the school holds a “leaving” ceremony, which celebrates the students leaving the school and moving on to the next phase of their lives, rather than a conventional graduation ceremony.

School council. One of the most commonly mentioned ways in which the school philosophy was manifested in practice is through the School Council. The School Council, which meets weekly to discuss events, make plans, and vote on resolutions, is considered by many to be “core curriculum” at School Aspen. It embodies the school's democratic values, the commitment to equality, the faith in students' capacities to take responsibility for themselves, and the importance of giving them opportunities to do so. Staff indicated that School Council encourages students to become engaged in their community, since the decisions taken at council affect them. Moreover, through the deliberative process, students develop critical thinking and rhetorical skills. While some students are more engaged than others in the School Council, all

have the opportunity to put forward resolutions, to share their opinions, to ask questions, and of course, to vote on them.

In the School Council meeting that I attended, I was impressed to see articulate and respectful debate between a young boy, perhaps eight years old, and a high school student, talking about the issue in question as equals. A middle school aged student chaired the whole process, from the reading of the resolution, through the discussion, to the completion of voting. It was clear during this meeting that the processes for conducting the meeting, such as the rules of order, are well known and well practiced, and for many students, these had become second nature.

Judicial council. Another key institution at School Aspen is the Judicial Council, and its related processes. The Judicial Council meets weekly to discuss matters related to order and discipline in the school community. This is generally perceived in positive and constructive, rather than punitive, terms. As one student put it, “The Judicial Council is about healing a relationship that has been damaged,” between the parties involved. Typically the council meetings involve some general discussion of issues, followed by a review of complaints that have been filed during the preceding week. These complaints are discussed by those present at the meeting, and as deemed necessary, individuals connected to the complaint may be requested to join the meeting to discuss. The Council then determines if the complaint is justified, and if so, determines a suitable consequence. Certain types of complaints have predetermined consequences, particularly if there have been repeated offenses by a given individual; however, for the most part, the Judicial Council tries to identify logical consequences that are relevant to the nature of the complaint. Based on the discussions at the meeting, resolutions may be drawn up and put forward at the next School Council meeting. Like the School Council, the Judicial Council is student directed, but a staff member is typically present.

Room councils. The idea of rooms occupied and run by students at School Aspen was discussed above in relation to physical factors, but there are important institutional arrangements that make this possible. Among them is the general policy and democratic approach to the use of space at the school. Once a resolution is passed, giving a group of students control of a room, they become responsible for the room, and are required to post room rules, and a list of “licensed” occupants—those who are permitted access to the room. They are also required to have Room Council meetings, and to keep minutes from those meetings, or risk having their room privileges revoked. The Room Councils decide who is licensed to join them in the room at their own discretion, but the school has a policy that licensing cannot be blocked for discriminatory reasons.

One particularly interesting aspect of the system for room use is what happens when a group of students wants to occupy a room that is being used by another group. The students can submit a resolution to council, and make a case for their intended use. If the students currently occupying the room do not attend the meeting, or do not make a strong enough case for continuing their occupancy, the resolution is likely to pass. Many of the students I spoke with recounted strong memories about this process, and the interesting dynamics that follow, when different groups jostle for the use of the room over the course of several council meetings. One older student recounted an incident where the Principal’s office had been taken over by a group of students—a situation that did not endure, but was nonetheless exciting and empowering for those involved. There are important lessons in all of this, related to participation, privilege, influence, and security, as well as the importance of being inclusive enough to gain sufficient numbers in support of one’s own position.

Rules and procedures. Somewhat counter-intuitively, School Aspen has a large number of well-established rules and procedures. As mentioned above, the Founder considers these to be

norms more than rules, and they are not rigidly enforced, given the emphasis on freedom and choice at the school. Nonetheless, these norms support the smooth functioning of the community, without the reliance on more constraining structures like class groupings and schedules. In addition to basic rules related to safety and respect for others, I noted explicit and detailed procedures for things like: computer use, attendance, academic meetings, time outside and off-site, library use, kitchen use, using school materials, parent participation, scheduling of activities, filing complaints, proposing resolutions, conducting meetings, speaking in meetings, participating in special activities, and so on. In addition, each of the rooms of the school has different expectations, and often, explicit rules about what is allowable within the room. It is worth noting that while most of the rules of the school are established through resolutions at the school council meetings, there are certain rules, such as a drug policy, that are considered non-negotiable, and are respected at the school based on the requirements of the District, the Ministry of Education, and the legal obligations of staff and students.

As noted above in relation to behavior management, the enforcement of rules and procedures at School Aspen is based on the complaint system administered by the Judicial Council, and therefore reflects the needs and tolerance level of the community, rather than strict adherence to the rules and procedures themselves. While the range of normal behaviors at School Aspen is broader than at most schools, it appears, nonetheless, that a balance has been reached that the school community itself is comfortable with, and I did not see any gross violations of rules or extreme behaviors.

Mitigation of district policies and initiatives. School Aspen has an institutional home in a public school district that appears to value the program and respect its philosophy. Nonetheless, given the nature of the program, there is some tension around compliance with the policies and regulations of the district and province. While the school has recently moved to a new district

with a very supportive board, the Founder noted that the relationship with the district has historically been challenging due to the school's unique philosophy. This is reflected in the fact that the school's previous district had opted to discontinue the program under its jurisdiction by changing the direction of its alternative education and remedial programs.

The new district appears to be very supportive of what the school is trying to achieve, and acknowledges the value of the approach, and therefore, it affords the school considerable autonomy, provided that basic conditions are met. The school, for its part, has sought to maintain a balance by finding ways to mitigate the gap between the district policies and the school's philosophy. One example of this is the school's approach to report cards, mentioned above, which are developed for administrative purposes only. Another example is the approach to high school attendance, wherein the students check in for attendance only at the start of each day.

In many aspects of its operations, the school demonstrates an openness to new ideas presented by the district and province. During my time at the school, I heard mention several times of the provincial education plan, and various performance standards and guides related to it. It is clear that the school administration sees value in the plan, and recognizes there may be an opportunity to use the associated tools and guides to demonstrate some of the strengths of the school's philosophy. Nonetheless, there is also some disagreement regarding certain initiatives. There was, for example, considerable discussion among staff members on the topic of Response To Intervention (RTI). RTI training was an initiative launched at the district level, and training had been provided to some of the School Aspen staff. While RTI represented a departure from the general approach of the school, most of the staff appeared to be open-minded regarding the approach, and interested to learn how it might benefit the school and their students. However, I sensed a degree of tension around this training, and suspicion among some staff that the district may be trying to influence the culture of the school through the introduction of this approach.

Content-related factors at School Aspen. *Activity as Content.* Given the process orientation and lack of scheduled classes at School Aspen, it is somewhat challenging to talk about the educational content being learned there using conventional terms. In discussion this point with the Founder, we shifted the focus from educational content to learning activities, at which point she said, enthusiastically, “The whole day is activity,” emphasizing the learning that takes place when students are given the space to make all of their own decisions, and reinforcing the developmental value of that process. She went on to explain that conventional perspectives on teaching and learning usually focus on content, and frame the process either in terms of a “banking model” or a “constructivist one,” and that in School Aspen, they see both of those models as too shallow—because they focus on content learning and disregard richer and deeper aspects of students’ development. The school’s non-coercive approach means that students are not forced to participate in academic programming or any formal program offerings, and are not required to do any reading or conventional school work. However, on any given day, there will be a number of activities offered, including a small number of regularly scheduled classes, non-academic workshops, council meetings, open work/play time in some of the purpose specific rooms, as well as other activities and meetings decided on a more spontaneous or responsive basis. These include guest speakers, field trips, *ad hoc* meetings of different committees, as well as short-term or medium-term projects like drama productions.

Students are free to participate in these offerings, or to play, or read, or do nothing at all throughout the day, and both the Founder and Principal stressed that often students choose to do the latter. In the words of the Founder, “What actually comes out of non-coercive is that people do whatever, for however long, and then they wake up to the fact that actually this is my life, and if I want to make something of my life, I should do something!” This approach places heavy

emphasis on the development of intrinsic interests and motivation, and student ownership for all decisions and their outcomes.

Core curriculum. To understand the idea of curriculum at School Aspen, one must set aside conventional assumptions of subject areas and learning outcomes. The staff and administrators I spoke with often talked about “core curriculum” at School Aspen, in reference to institutional structures and processes at the school, such as the School Council and Judicial Council. Building on this, teachers also talked about other activities and processes, such as the school’s large simulation games, the necessity of taking initiative, the experience of democracy and respect at the school, and other factors related to the daily experience of the school environment, including peer pressure. In terms of the anticipated outcomes of this curriculum, the staff mentioned a range of thinking skills and dispositions, including: intrinsic motivation; the ability to recognize assumptions; critical thinking skills; personal and social responsibility; interpersonal skills; self-efficacy; and self-awareness. In my interviews with students, I saw strong evidence that this curriculum was achieving the desired effect, through the strong independent thinking and insights they shared. What struck me most about the discussions of curriculum at School Aspen was the emphasis placed on experiential learning and the factors that affect it, since this resonates so strongly with the idea of educative context. Moreover, the kinds of learning and developmental outcomes discussed by teachers at the school have are very similar to the kinds of dispositions that I have associated with the idea of tacit teaching.

Integrated formal curriculum content. Explicit instruction related to the provincial curriculum is quite limited at School Aspen. Classes at the school are scheduled based on students requests and interests, and rarely fall into the conventional subject disciplines. Periodically, workshops and other activities are implemented which relate to certain outcomes in

the provincial curriculum, but these connections are incidental, and the curriculum, while theoretically available to students, is not imposed on them.

During the time that I was at the school, the only academic class scheduled was the Full Meal Deal, a biweekly integrated class, covering math and humanities content, and targeting students in the upper-elementary to junior high age range. Participation in the class was optional, but students were asked to make a commitment regarding their participation, and to follow-through on that commitment. During the session I observed, the class discussion was focused on an iPhone game that involved probability, and the teacher was leading students to understand the principles underpinning the game by using questioning and facilitation techniques. Towards the end of the class time, the students were asked to work from their math textbooks, and the teacher circulated to help them and check on them individually, as the different students were working at different grade levels, and on different sections of the books. While the students in attendance had ostensibly committed to participating in the class, a number of them came and went throughout the class, and there were many disruptions and interruptions throughout the time block. The general level of engagement and proportion of on-task behavior was quite low, making the class fairly inefficient from the standpoint of content learning. However, it is important to bear in mind that, according to the philosophy of the school, this content learning is of secondary importance, and the these disruptions, and the conditions which made the disruptions so commonplace, were actually part of the experience for students.

Individual learning and tutoring. While class offerings such as the Full Meal Deal resemble the kinds of classes offered in conventional schools, I observed that more of the students were learning curriculum content independently, particularly at the high school level. The high school students I spoke with referred to study plans that they had prepared in consultation with their advisory teacher, and mentioned specific courses and projects that they

were working on. I learned that it is common among high school students to work through courses independently or in small groups, with the support of staff members. The staff are readily available to support academic and non-academic learning, and schedule time when there appears to be sufficient interest. For instance, there was a scheduled time block during which high school students studying for math credit would work together in one of the rooms. As they were studying at different levels, the teacher would circulate and help them individually as required, rather than preparing and teaching a class to all. However, the teacher indicated that this approach was certainly no less labor intensive than conventional teaching, because she was tutoring such a range of students that she had to essentially prepare for and track students across 12 courses at a time.

Responsive content. A key characteristic of the content being offered to students was that it was always responsive to their interests, requests, or perceived needs, and in most cases (particularly for younger students) this was not motivated by the formal curriculum. There was very little, if anything, going on at the school that was supply-driven, and consequently, most of the activities and sessions that I observed were well-attended, and with good participation. These included: a set of guest speakers involved with a soup kitchen in one of the city's poorest areas; a workshop series in which students were building costumes to be used in an upcoming parade event; a prop-building session for a large dramatic production; a working session in the school's woodworking shop; a cooking session in the school's kitchen; a weekly session called What Have I Missed in which the Founder discussed with students about what kinds of things students in conventional schools might be learning at this point in time; and several open-classroom sessions.

The school makes an effort to provide content to students according to any interest they identify, and one student remarked, "You can literally learn anything here." Between the library,

the classrooms, and the storage room, the school has a wealth of physical resources and reference materials available. In addition, the school's pool of expertise and human resources includes students' parents and the broader community, and the staff mentioned a number of workshops and programs that had been offered by parents in recent history. Using a coaching approach, as mentioned above, the staff makes an effort to identify student interests and provide opportunities for the students that will allow them to capitalize on those interests, whether that be learning about quantum physics (as one student was), or building an electric guitar (as several others were).

Teachable moments. The responsive approach to educational content is also reflected in the use of teachable moments (see Havinghurst, 1952) at School Aspen. The relative freedom afforded to students at the school means that unanticipated situations often develop, related to students' social relations or things they encounter that spark their curiosity. The staff at School Aspen described using these moments to provide timely instruction, resources, or other learning opportunities for students. Teachable moments may come from relatively minor incidents, such as when a student asks a question and a staff member leads them to resources and explores the answers with them. They can also include more significant events, and the Founder described an earlier incident involving drug use by some high school aged students, and another incident in which there was a major disagreement between two staff members. Rather than trying to minimize these incidents, or to control the environment so as to prevent them, the staff takes the approach that facing such real-life experiences in the safe and nurturing environment of the school provides an opportunity for the students to learn from them before encountering them on their own as adults. Teachable moments may involve individual students, groups of students, or even the whole school.

Simulation activities. One of the content-related activities that I did not have the chance to observe was one of the school's large simulation activities, which teachers and students described enthusiastically. These activities are arranged periodically in the school, and typically focus on a specific historical period. Students learn about the time period and socio-cultural conditions through staff presentations, activities, and their own research, culminating in an actual simulation, involving costumes and dramatic role-playing. These simulations were described as being very significant to students, involving learning on multiple levels depending on the age level of the individual participant, and providing a rich, authentic experience for them.

Civic engagement and activism. One substantive theme that I identified in the content at School Aspen was related to civic engagement. There were several activities at the school during the week I visited that related to this theme, including a guest speaker talking about urban poverty and soliciting students' help, an art activism workshop, and an impromptu session during which one of the staff members was discussing with students a series of YouTube videos related to electoral systems and democratic reform. In speaking with the teachers, I realized that several of them are quite active in their communities, and participate in activist organizations themselves. In speaking with students, I learned that some of them had also become involved in similar activities. For example, one of the students I interviewed was the President of the BC Student Alliance, had participated in the province's Youth Parliament, and was involved with other organizations, both as a volunteer and a conference speaker.

I was slow to identify this theme during my data collection, because many of the activities related to it were related only indirectly. However, I began to make connections to the emphasis on participatory processes in the school, and the staff commitment to the idea that things in the school should be the result of student initiative rather than staff direction. I also realized that the skills practiced by the students, related to organizing their peers, presenting and supporting their

opinions, and directing meetings, were all a natural fit for participation in civil society organizations. Many of the seemingly disparate aspects of students' daily experiences at School Aspen make a great deal of sense when viewed in relation to the idea of civic engagement and activism.

Summary remarks on School Aspen. School Aspen proved to be a very rich source of data relevant to this inquiry, while at the same time challenging some of my preconceptions about education and schooling. Many of the structures that are taken for granted at mainstream schools have no analogues at School Aspen, and many of the contextual factors that I went in looking for are non-existent there. I had to adjust my approach in order to try and identify the structures that *are* present, rather than simply looking for distinctive manifestations of the structures I had expected to see. While I found the context chaotic during my first visits, it didn't take long before the underlying structures that shape students' experiences began to reveal themselves, and while the staff would be the first to say that School Aspen is not the right fit for every student, I found their philosophy very attractive, and their uncompromising commitment to these ideals refreshing.

Based on my observations, document review, and interviews with students and staff, the educative context at School Aspen appears to emerge primarily from the school level. While differences from classroom to classroom and initiatives from the district level do have an impact on students, the school is clearly the dominant organizational unit in shaping their experiences. In general, the data from School Aspen tends to emphasize factors related to the social context of students. Because students choose how to spend their time at School Aspen, most of that time, for most students, is spent interacting freely with peers, and the school community itself is highly distinctive, making the social experience all the more prominent. However, it is the institutional context and specific policies of the school that makes this kind of social interaction possible.

Specifically, the non-coercive approach, and the trust and responsibility bestowed on students through the mechanisms of the School Council and Judicial Council, seem to have a very meaningful impact on students. Physical factors were also quite prominent in the data; however, these tend to relate more to how space is used in the school, rather than the specifics of the physical environment itself. Not surprisingly, content-related factors were not prominent in the data, and content learning seems to factor in to students' experiences primarily through its absence, and its replacement with more spontaneous and self-directed learning.

In general, I observed a very high degree of alignment between the educational aims of School Aspen and the factors that comprise the educative context of the school. The philosophy and accompanying approaches have been developed and refined over more than 40 years, and there is a clear sense of consistency and groundedness among the staff, along with a firm commitment to the democratic educational philosophy. I was struck by how the democratic ideals of equality and individual autonomy were reflected in so many of the school's policies and procedures, and how the staff worked to embody them in the social milieu of the school as well.

While it is easy to draw connections between the school's philosophy and its practices, the best evidence of alignment between the two is the impact on the students themselves. In speaking with the students, it was very clear that the kind of critical and democratic consciousness embraced by the school is taking root. Through my observations and interviews with the students, I observed many have a strong will and clear sense of identity, and I observed very high levels of critical and independent thinking, social intelligence, and community engagement. Many of the students, particularly the older ones, also demonstrated a commitment to democratic ideals, and spoke at length as advocates of democratic education. However, while the school's philosophy was manifested in many aspects of the educative context, I also perceived some potential contradictions or unintended consequences.

In reflecting on the democratic ideals of School Aspen, I have come to think that an analysis of the educative context and hidden curriculum should involve a critical eye and not just an analytical one. This means thinking through the consequences of the educational practices, and not just their alignment with the school's ideals. While School Aspen embraces democratic ideals, and manifests them in many ways, the major emphasis is on a subset of democratic principles, including individual autonomy, equality, and tolerance. In practice democracies also rely on additional principles that include a high degree of personal responsibility, respect for authority, and the rule of law. However, the standards of authority and the adherence to rules and procedures in School Aspen are very different than those at mainstream schools. The casual demeanor of students towards the school staff may uphold the principle of equality, but conflict to some extent with the authority of the staff. Moreover, staff members often seem to turn a blind eye towards behaviors that are not permitted by schools' policies, in favor of allowing the school community to police itself through the Judicial Council. These aspects of the school, while upholding certain key principles, may do the students a disservice in the long run; because one of the functions of schools, at least in the mainstream, is to teach students the standards of conduct that allow liberal societies to function smoothly. While some of these standards are very prominent at School Aspen, others are not. There is solid reasoning behind the argument that learning a respect for authority in childhood provides the foundation for a sense of justice in adult life (Steiner, 1927). Therefore, certain aspects of the democratic ideal appear to be in conflict with one another in School Aspen.

Another aspect of learning that is largely sacrificed at School Aspen in favor of other priorities is the learning of mainstream curriculum content. This decision was intentional on the part of the Founder, based on the conviction that learning is best when it comes from students' own innate interests and drives. However, the impact of this decision on students can be quite

serious, and at the time of my visit, the school community included, for example, students as old as 15 who had no cognitive delays, but had not yet shown an interest in learning to read. While the school also included students who were working well above their grade level in some areas, those who do not develop fundamental academic skills and content knowledge shared by the vast majority of the broader community are at a considerable disadvantage in many areas, and may risk alienation or marginalization, particularly after leaving the school. Students, especially young students, often benefit from structure, and often do not have a broad awareness of their options. School can play an important role in helping to provide useful and practical structures to guide students' thinking and behavior, as well as raising awareness about different disciplines, ways of thinking, and skill sets that students may not otherwise know about. While the students at School Aspen certainly gain exposure to many valuable experiences that mainstream students do not, there may nonetheless be some value in a slightly less extreme approach. As an example, the default choice for daily activities at the school is for students to either do nothing, or to come up with their own things to do; however, the non-coercive approach could be fully retained by changing this default and having more structured classes, while still making attendance optional.

A key lesson I learned from School Aspen about the educative context is that it is informed not only by the presence and form of different factors, but also by the absence of those factors. Many of the defining factors of mainstream schools, such as classes, schedules, explicit teaching, and assessment, are minimized to an extreme at School Aspen, and some, like testing and required assignments, are entirely absent. However, without these kinds of standard structures, other factors will invariably come into play in shaping the decisions and experiences of students. This is a variation on the "tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman, 1973), which recognizes that when some (formal or artificial) structures are abolished for the sake of a libertarian or egalitarian ideal, they tend to be replaced by other (organic or natural) structures that may actually

undermine the ideal more than the original structures did. This is manifested in a number of ways in School Aspen. Building on the preceding paragraph; doing away with formal academic schedules comes at a potentially major cost. The students at School Aspen theoretically have infinite choices and options available to them, because there is nothing compulsory taking up their time. However, the social norms of the school, and the available options for what and how to learn, effectively limit the actual range of possibilities, and many students spend very little time engaged in academic work.

To put this into Bourdieu's terms, field is an inescapable aspect of any social context, and any field has a corresponding habitus associated with it. There will always be factors that provide the architecture for students' choices and shape their experiences, and those factors include both the presence and absence of different structures. Therefore, in analyzing the educative context of a school, it should be viewed as a comprehensive entity (like field), and not just a sum total of factors that appear prominent. A granular analysis of key factors related to the educative context needs to consider not only the nature of the factors present, but also, the full range of possible factors, and the consequences of factors that are absent or minimally present.

School Birch

First impressions. The first time I heard about School Birch was during my time on site researching School Aspen. The two schools belong to the same district, and the Principal was organizing a day trip to School Birch for an outdoor education experience for students, and to have them learn about the program being offered there. Because of my interest in sustainability, I am naturally interested in outdoor and environmental education programs, and the more I heard about School Birch, the more interested I became, and I was surprised I had not heard about it before. The school sounded like just the kind of place that I was looking for, focused on

sustainability and place-based education, situated on a small island, and completely off-grid and sustainably operated. I corresponded with the Director, and arranged to come out for a visit.

I had a little bit of information about the school from its website, and from my initial phone conversations with the Director, but I was unprepared. When I got off the ferry at the island, it was pouring rain, and I realized I hadn't been wise to count on walking the 2km up the road to try to find the school myself. Fortunately, the Director had anticipated my naivety, and had arranged for someone to meet me at the ferry and drive me to the school's property line. This turned out to be a double blessing, as I probably would have missed the gate for the school's path along the road. The school is situated several hundred meters up a forest path from the edge of the road. I walked up the path and as a generous clearing came into view, the school's uniquely designed buildings emerged. The setting is peaceful and picturesque, and I had a very good feeling about the place.

Given the weather, everyone was inside of the main building when I arrived. They were in the middle of a lesson, discussing an article they had been reading. Everyone greeted me warmly and we introduced ourselves. I was given the opportunity to introduce my study and answer any questions. The students, all 12 of them, gave the impression of a very tightly knit community. They were gathered on benches around the two tables of the main building, some leaning against each other, and everyone in good temperament, like a big happy family. The Director had made it clear before my arrival that they welcomed guests as participants rather than observers, and I was immediately invited to join their discussion. As the group broke for lunch, I had the chance to mix among the students and began to feel at ease. After lunch, the weather had cleared, and we all went out to play a round of disc golf, on a course that the Director and previous student groups had created. I completed the round in a group with two girls. While all of our conversation was

informal, this gave me a chance to establish a basic understanding about some of the activities and dynamics of the school, and to get a sense of what to expect during my time there.

What struck me most during my initial time on site at School Birch was the tight community and the connection of the program to the physical place where the school is situated. The group of students was very mixed, and yet, they functioned very cohesively, and gave the appearance of fully and genuinely accepting one another. Basing my impression only on appearances, many of the students could have been outsiders in any mainstream school, but it was immediately clear that there were no outsiders at School Birch. In addition to this cohesiveness, I was struck by how the education program was integrated into its forest setting. This was apparent from my first visit, in how the weather influenced the structure of the school day, and how the outdoor environment was used as a platform for learning, and not just a site within which activities took place. During my time at School Birch, I began to see other more subtle ways in which the place permeates the program as well.

After my first visit, I was eager to return for my formal data collection the following week. I knew that this would be entirely different from my experience at School Aspen, yet equally rich. With the strong sense of place that I felt in my first visit to School Birch, I had the sense that it was going to be an ideal site, one where the context of learning foregrounds the explicit content

School Birch's educational aims. The literature connected to School Birch describes it as a place-based ecological learning center. While the students have opportunities to study a range of courses, the focus of the program is very much on learning experiences connected with the natural environment. The underlying philosophy of the school is distinctively constructivist and experiential. The term “place-based” refers to the way in which the learning experiences are tailored to, and by, the setting itself, to help learners to develop a deep appreciation for that setting. A profile of School Birch, written by the former District Superintendent notes, “The core

learning aims are more about how students learn than it is about specifically what they learn” (OECD, n.d.). In this context, the environment is viewed as the main learning resource—a point made by the Director himself. While the students earn high school credits during their participation in the program, the curriculum itself is largely generative. In terms of School Birch’s aims, those things to which the hidden curriculum would optimally be aligned, I identified two key themes. These themes came up repeatedly in the conversations I had with staff and students, and were reinforced by written descriptions of the school, including its vision statement (Dunsmuir, Hopkins, & Blagborne, 2009).

The first aim is the development of students as good citizens, especially in the sense of environmental citizenship. The school aims to cultivate an appreciation for the natural environment, and an understanding of our interdependence within it. There is a clear emphasis on developing comfort and confidence in the natural world, and taking responsibility and action for the health and preservation of the environment. While at the school, students are encouraged to live sustainably and disconnect from the “excesses of modern society” (Dunsmuir, Hopkins, & Blagborne, 2009, p. 3). The notion of responsibility and interdependence is not limited to the natural environment, and includes the broader human community. For example, the school has a program for connecting the young students with adult community members for a kind of “cognitive apprenticeship” (OECD, n.d.) as a means to gaining an appreciation for intergenerational interdependence.

The second aim is the development of students’ identities and self-awareness, essentially supporting them to become well-grounded individuals. The program aims to support students in learning about their own passions and strengths, exploring who they are and what is important to them, and recognizing their ability to shape their own learning. By extension, this aspect of students’ development relates to building confidence and groundedness in who they are and what

they are able to accomplish. Part of this confidence comes from becoming confident handling oneself in the natural world, and the students mentioned that they have challenged and expanded their comfort zones substantially since coming to School Birch. But another part of this comes from providing the students with space and time to reflect, and giving them choices regarding certain activities.

Consolidated findings for School Birch. While the two aims mentioned above bear some resemblance to the aims of School Aspen, the ways in which those aims are manifested at School Birch are entirely different. As noted above, the learning aims of School Birch relate more to how the learning takes place, rather than specifically what is being learned. This is another way of saying that in School Birch, the explicit content is secondary, and the processes and experiences are the focus. The processes and experiences at School Birch have been designed with care and intentionality to reinforce objectives like those described by the two aims above, and many connections can be drawn between the different factors in the educative context, and the aims they have been designed to reinforce.

This section describes the most prominent factors comprising the educative context at School Birch. These factors have been identified through the process of analyzing the interview data, documents, and observations I made while at the school. They are summarized in Table 3, and are presented in more depth below, based on four categories: physical factors; social factors; institutional factors; and content-related factors.

Table 3

Summary of prominent factors in the educative context of School Birch

Level	Physical	Social	Institutional	Content	Total
Classroom	• Geographic setting	• Small scale community living	• Ecological approach	• Experiential learning	33
School	• Physical site	• Close personal relationships	• Imposed but flexible scheduling	• Individualization rather than choice	
	• Outdoor exposure	• Pedagogical relationships, role modeling, and mentorship	• Weekly flow	• Place-based outdoor education	
	• School buildings		• Duties and responsibilities	• Informal and <i>ad hoc</i> content	
	• Main building		• Routine activities	• Cognitive apprenticeships	
	• Visual environment	• Pedagogical approach	• Conservation practices	• Critical reflection	
	• Student dorms	• Acceptance and diversity	• Waste management	• Life skills	
	• The Little School	• Changing Community Composition	• Evaluation of students	• Academic skills and lifelong learning	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical learning materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group activities with varying structure Down time and authentic interaction 			
District		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acceptance in the broader community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> District policies 		2
Total	9	9	9	8	35

Physical factors at School Birch. *Geographic setting.* One of the most distinctive factors of School Birch, relative to mainstream schools, is its physical setting. It is located on a small island, in a picturesque rural setting, surrounded by lush forests and beautiful scenery. The school itself is located in a generous clearing, with a hill on one side, and a small creek just downhill. It is the kind of natural setting that is easy to appreciate. The students and Director come to the island by ferry each week, and make their way a couple of kilometers inland to the school site. This, along with other factors, such as very limited light and noise pollution on the island, create a sense of geographic isolation.

Physical site. The physical site of School Birch defies conventional school definitions. There is a collection of buildings, described below, which comprise the home base for the students during their time on the island. There are also a number of sites around the school, such as a fire pit, that have been developed with natural sitting areas in which lessons and activities take place, and an even greater number of sites in the surrounding forest that students use or develop themselves as part of the school's experiential curriculum. However, the school is also affiliated with a small primary school where the students spend time most weeks, located in the island's town site, and the students also spend time at many other places on the island. As the school's Director describes it, at School Birch, they like to view the entire island as the school, including natural areas, businesses, and even the homes of some island residents.

Outdoor exposure. In keeping with the above description of the physical site, the students spend a large portion of each day outside in the natural environment of the island. While there is some indoor instruction, the natural environment is viewed as the main learning resource, and the students generally spend most of their day outdoors. The focus on outdoor activities and learning *in* and *through* the environment was a dominant theme in all conversations with students and staff, and the students described multiple favorite spots on the island, and fond memories and

experiences at each. The school makes extensive use of many sites around the island, including forested areas, parks, hiking paths, and shorelines, each with its own unique features. The students demonstrated a very high degree of familiarity and comfort in these settings, and referred to the distinct sites by their individual names.

School buildings. While it is important to define the boundaries of the school broadly, it is also important to acknowledge the importance of the school's main site as a hub for the school activities. This site includes a "main building," two dormitories, separate bathrooms, and a number of other less used structures, such as a tool shed, and a private cabin for the Director. The buildings are unique, and were designed by a local architect to complement and fit in with the natural landscape. Importantly, the buildings are not connected to utility networks, and the site is considered to be fully "off grid." A small hydro generator in a nearby creek feeds electricity to the school in order to power lights and an electric pump, which provides the school with well water. The bathrooms are connected to an environmentally responsible septic system, which is maintained elsewhere on the property.

Main building. Activities at School Birch are quite decentralized due to the emphasis on spending time outside, but there is a main building on the site that features prominently in students' daily experiences. This building is where students eat their meals, take lessons during poor weather, and relax or warm up after being outside. It is the only building at the school with an active heat source—a wood stove, which students maintain, and use for cooking. In addition to the stove, the building also has a passive solar design, to make the best use of sunlight and natural heating/cooling effects. To accompany the stove, there is a specially designed energy efficient refrigerator, and a kitchen area for preparing food. Rather than desks and chairs, the building has two sets of booth benches, arranged so that all students can sit and interact together. Each student is allocated a rubber tub to store their non-perishable food in, and a cloth bag for perishables. The

tubs are housed neatly beneath the bench seating, and the cloth bags are stored in the shared fridge. In addition to these communal fixtures, the main building also has a bunk where the Night Supervisor sleeps.

Visual environment. The visual environment of the main building resembles a cross between a rustic cabin, a thrift store, and a conventional outdoor education centre. The space is quite crowded, and most of the shelf space is packed with books, board games, and mismatched cooking and eating utensils, along with some crafts and artwork created by students. The walls are sparsely decorated, but include a number of handmade posters of wildlife and poetry, as well as school principles and procedures. During the times the students are on site, the main building also reflects their presence and comfort there, including an assemblage of students' clothing and food items left around during the day. The general impression is of a cozy and comfortable place—a home away from home for the students.

Student dorms. The school's dorms are worth mentioning on their own, because they have distinctive characteristics. The dorms are passive solar buildings, just like the main building, but lack any other heat source, other than the bodies of the occupants. The dorm buildings are small, and are dominated by the students' bunks, which are stacked three high, and built into the downhill wall of the buildings. The bunks themselves are generous, and have partial walls facing the interior of the dorm, which provides a degree of privacy for the students, along with built-in storage space for the students' personal items.

The Little School. School Birch is associated with a small primary school in the town site of the island, of which the Director is technically also the Principal. During each week, the students spend some time at the Little School, as it is referred to, working on projects, or engaged in activities with the handful of primary students there. The Little School, while small, is a conventional school building, and importantly, has a bank of internet-connected computers that

the students can use for research, fact checking, and for typing up assignments. While much of the experience at School Birch is designed to help students slow down and disconnect from certain aspects of modern life, the resources at the Little School provide them an opportunity to access some of the benefits that modern educational settings have to offer. The element of “slowness” is retained to some extent, by other aspects of the experience, such as the 30-40 minute walk from the main school site to the Little School, along a beautiful forest path.

Physical learning materials. Some conventional learning materials can be found at the school, both in the main building, and in the Little School. These include books, computers, desks, and even some conventional manipulatives and science equipment. However, most of the learning materials I observed students using were decidedly low-tech tools for working outdoors. Most of the paper-based materials are designed to be reused, and the handouts used during the time I was there were all numbered, and diligently collected after each lesson. Many lesson materials and activity cards used by the students are laminated for repeated use, and the students use them with care in order to preserve them. The students generally work in notebooks and duotangs, and do most of their written work by hand. However, much of the work that the students are involved in is not conventional schoolwork. During my time at the school, much more time was spent working with natural materials and hand tools in the natural environment. Distinctive learning materials that students make regular use of include things like: axes; pocketknives; tarps; rope; GPS units; and materials like rocks and deadfall taken from the natural environment itself.

Social factors at School Birch. Small scale community living. One of the key factors in the social context of the school is the fact that it is residential, with students staying there from Sunday to Wednesday each week, living and learning together. This residential element is compounded by the fact that there are just 12 students in the program at any given time, meaning

that every student is spending a lot of time in close proximity with every other student. They are with each other through long days (16-18 hours of contact), through meals, and through physical challenges, and they don't get a break from each other at the end of each day. Moreover, individual space is very limited, with booth seating, and stacked bunk beds in the dormitories. This sounds like a potential pressure cooker for teenage drama, but students are coached to live and interact responsibly, and the school appears to have been successful in establishing a culture of community living among the group. In preparing their meals, I observed that students would often share ingredients, and on one night a large group pooled their resources to make a communal meal. In terms of community responsibilities, there is a set of well-established routines and procedures at School Aspen to ensure that the site is well maintained, that the kitchen and bathrooms are kept clean, and so on. It is clear that the residential nature of the school was a key part of the social experience, and the students demonstrated the kind of close connections and mutual understandings that would normally take years to develop in conventional school settings.

Close personal relationships. Closely related to the idea of community living are the close personal relationships that develop amongst the students. The students emphasized their social experience and friendships at the school as being a major factor in their overall experience, and they referred to individual friendships, as well as deep connections to the broader group of students. In many ways, the group functioned like a family more than a class or school. The context of the school requires students to spend a lot of time together, to face challenges together, and only gives students a real break from one another at the end of each week. With a diverse group of adolescents, such a context could easily result in tension, but with skillful facilitation from the Director and Night Supervisor, and well-planned activities, the result has been just the opposite.

In speaking with the Director, I learned that a lot of work is done at the beginning of each semester to establish the right kind of social dynamics, through team-building activities and outdoor experiences that help students relate to and appreciate one another. These appear to have been successful. Students referred repeatedly to specific activities designed to break down barriers, to challenge them, and to let them help each other succeed. During my time there, I saw many instances in which one or more students would go to check on a student or staff member who was alone. I also witnessed inspiring exchanges, such as an argument between two tough young students, which I had initially feared might escalate, but concluded when one of them said, “Well, I don’t support that idea, but I will still help you however you want to do it.”

Pedagogical relationships, role modeling, and mentorship. Mentorship, in a variety of forms, is an important aspect of School Birch’s pedagogical approach. A major part of this is relationship developed between the Director and the students. While the students did not mention role modeling explicitly, it was clear that they had a deep respect and admiration for the Director. Through his wisdom, personality, and caring, the he has developed strong personal influence with each of the students. The students indicated clearly that the Director, “Really makes the program,” and that, “He doesn’t think like regular teachers.” The small group size, and the decentralized experiential approach where students are often on their own or in smaller groups, gives the Director opportunities to spend time coaching and mentoring students individually or in small groups as well.

These kinds of pedagogical relationships, and the role modeling and mentorship that accompany them, are not limited to those with the Director. Other influential adults in the school community include the Night Supervisor and the Director’s wife, both of whom spend a substantial amount of time at the school site. The Night Supervisor, although not officially in a pedagogical role, spends a lot of time talking with the students, helping them to unpack their

daily experiences, and providing her insights. There are other kinds of mentorships that take place at the school as well, as part of the school's "cognitive apprenticeship" program described below, through evening programs, and through informal relationships with other adults, who visit the site periodically, such as the school's architect. However, while these other adults play an important role, it is clear that the Director himself is the key figure in students' experiences. In fact, he expressed some concern about this point when discussing the sustainability and replicability of the program, recognizing that it is potentially problematic in the long run if the program is too dependent on him as an individual.

Pedagogical approach. The experiential approach of the school was prominent in discussions with students. The students recognized the role of the Director in the learning process, but did not depict him as a teacher in the conventional sense. One student described his role by saying, "He is not stuffing the learning down our throats. He lets us discover it." He humorously added, "It's like a cougar, you don't know it's coming until it's on top of you." In my observation, I saw the Director make artful use of pre-planned experiential activities, discussions, and especially, debriefing of activities in order to help students recognize all that had been learned. This was much more than a mechanical approach, and one student commented that the Director's "enthusiasm makes you want to learn." For my part, I was also quite inspired by the Director's understated enthusiasm and personal engagement in the topics being discussed.

Acceptance and diversity. While the community is tightknit, it is very diverse considering the small number of students. The small student population included two visible minority students, one from Japan whom was an exchange student learning English as a second language, as well as two openly gay students, and others who would stand out from most students due to distinct appearances (one with a punk-style "mohawk," and one with green hair). There was also one very quiet and introverted student, and a considerable age range, of at least five years

(despite the program targeting primarily grades 10 and 11). Several of the students at the school had been previously home schooled, and the remainder included a student who had been in a gifted program, others who may have been considered at risk of dropping out, as well as some students who had had very positive experiences previously in conventional classrooms. A common theme in conversations with the students was an appreciation for this diversity, and for each of the students individually.

According to the Director, this diversity is quite intentional, and the program is designed to provide experiences that will develop mutual understanding and appreciation amongst these students. The students reinforced this point, and several talked about how they have learned to look past what they see on the surface, and not judge people prematurely. One of the students described his own surprise that he, a “rich kid” from a wealthy suburb would have ended up becoming good friends with a “punker” from the inner city. He went on to talk about how the school emphasized that there were no wrong answers in the context of personal choices such as these.

Changing community composition. Another important aspect of the social context of School Birch is that the community membership changes each semester. The Director indicated that roughly a third of the students tend to return for a second semester, and the rest move on to other programs. This context provides a sufficient number of students to help retain the norms and culture of the school, while also helping to ensure that any cliques or subgroups do not become too established.

Group activities with varying structure. While students do some individual work at School Birch most of the activities I observed were done in groups. Some of the group activities were very open-ended, in which the Director posed a certain task or objective to students, and asked them to work together to complete it. In these cases, the groups engaged in problem-solving and

discussion, allowing them to develop skills in leadership and delegation. In other activities, groups were formed, and specific individual roles were assigned to each group member. In these more structured activities, each role was complementary, and each was important to the successful completion of the task. This provides students with a different kind of group experience, and different insights into how groups might work together. The Director made a point of debriefing all of the group activities, specifically addressing issues related to the division of responsibilities and the effective functioning of the groups. This mix of different kinds of group activities, along with the debriefing, provided students with approaches and opportunities to refine their skills, and I was impressed with the level of cooperation, and the ways in which the students had learned to draw on one another's strengths.

Down time and authentic interaction. While students' school days on the island officially run until 5:30pm, the time is allocated in large blocks, with ample time for transitions. In addition, there are several hours each evening in which students' time is not scheduled. As a result, students have a good amount of down time each day, which allows for decompression, and also for authentic interaction. Sometimes this interaction is around meaningful tasks such as preparing meals, and other times, there is no particular task at hand. From my observation, the important aspect of this down time is that it is unstructured, which means that students have the space to discuss whatever they want, to unpack the day's events, and at times to get into conflicts and then resolve those conflicts. I observed a number of emotional conversations between students during these times, as well as roughhousing, hugging, and laughing. In discussing the school's approach, the Director used a phrase that resonated with the kinds of wholesome interactions that I was observing. He said the school tries to emphasize living, rather than the preparation for living. Because the environment is not tightly controlled, it allows students the opportunity to be themselves and to interact naturally.

Acceptance in the broader community. Another factor affecting the social context of the school is that all of the students were from elsewhere, off-island. While one had a relative on the island, and many were from other islands in the district, none were local. In this context, coming to this small island together as outsiders, the students all have something in common, and I observed how they stuck together in small groups during the times when they were in the town site, or on the ferries. Their interaction with others was cordial, but limited to what was necessary. However, while they were all outsiders, they were very much at home in the community, and the local townspeople appeared to be welcoming and trusting of them.

With a new and diverse group of teens coming to the secluded island each semester, this trust cannot be assumed, and I learned that the Director and Night Supervisor have done a lot of groundwork to establish trust in the island community. In addition, the school has the support of a School-Community Liaison, who helped to identify opportunities and establish linkages between the school community and members of the broader community on the island. To introduce themselves to the community, each of the students at the school had written a short biography and provided a picture, for inclusion in the island's newsletter. More fundamentally, the Director himself had also clearly gained the respect and confidence of the community members, who always looked pleased to see him. In the early days of planning the school, some of the longstanding community members, including the site's architect, had become involved in the project, and the school had reportedly benefited from this show of confidence as well. More recently many of the community members have become involved in one aspect or another of the program, including working as mentors to students on projects, or being involved in evening programs. These activities give the student and locals an opportunity to interact and get to know one another.

Institutional factors at School Birch. *Ecological approach.* While there are many well-established policies and procedures in place at School Birch, these are not rigidly applied. In contrast with the more rigid industrial model of mainstream schools, the institutional approach at School Birch is much more ecological, in that it is responsive to the natural world, adaptable, and evolving over time. This is evidenced in everything from the way the school day is planned based on the weather conditions, to the way group activities are implemented, growing and shrinking to accommodate different numbers of students as they come and go from other responsibilities. The small scale of the school makes this approach manageable, and the Director indicated that 12 students is probably the optimal size for a program like this, because there are sufficient numbers to allow for a wide range of activities, while at the same time being small enough that a single adult can realistically keep tabs on them all. While the linkage between this kind of flexible and responsive programming and ecological thinking may be somewhat abstract, it was clear that the approach had begun to impact the thinking of some students, as several commented to me about how they appreciated the flexibility of the programming, and how the Director would adapt activities depending on how they were going. One student also commented about her former school, in which “everything was rigidly controlled by bells,” and in which she was always waiting for the current time block to be over. She contrasted this to School Birch, where she indicated that things just naturally take their course.

Imposed but flexible scheduling. An important part of the ecological approach is the flexible schedule at School Birch. The Director develops the daily schedule, taking into consideration the long- and medium-term learning goals of the students, as well as the daily weather conditions, students’ energy levels, and other circumstances. Blocks of time related to learning different subjects or working on certain projects are scheduled loosely in advance to give

students a general sense of what to expect, but substantial flexibility is shown in order to make the most of different opportunities, and also in response to other factors.

However, while the schedule at School Birch gives serious consideration to students' needs, the students themselves have relatively little choice in their daily activities. The school does not purport to use a democratic approach, and students' choices are primarily exercised *within* the context of a given activity, rather than *between* activities.

Weekly flow. While I was only at School Birch for a short time, I got a clear sense of the weekly schedule for students, and gained some insight into how this schedule affects their overall experience. The students arrive at the island on Sunday afternoons, and depart again on Wednesday afternoons. There is considerable excitement as students arrive and greet each other, unpack, and settle in for the week. The Night Supervisor is on hand on Sunday evenings, and the school week officially starts on Monday mornings when the Director arrives. With just three long days of school each week, there is a clear progression to the days, with activities peeking on Tuesdays. During the week that I was there, Wednesday was quite low-key, and after lunch, the students all did their required duties, packed up, and then headed back to the ferry. The commute itself warrants some mention, as many students come a long way to and from school, riding on public transit, and taking multiple ferries. These trips are, for many students, social occasions, and an important part of the weekly routine. I observed a number of student rituals during these commutes, reinforcing my impression of the strong bonds they have formed.

Duties and responsibilities. As part of the weekly routine at School Birch, each student is assigned particular set of duties related to the care and maintenance of the site, on a rotating basis. While each student is required to be responsible for their own belongings, for cleaning up after themselves, and so on, the assignment of duties provides an additional level of responsibility and accountability, in addition to ensuring that the different chores around the school are attended

to. Part of the daily and weekly routine at the school involves reviewing the assignment of duties, and ensuring that all are taken care of. One important aspect of these duties is that they are considered by the District as community service, and as such, students have the opportunity to earn Graduation Transition Credit for them, part of a provincial requirement for graduation, provided they document their work and can demonstrate their fulfillment of these responsibilities to the Director. However, these duties are more than just a credit requirement, and more than just a necessity for maintaining the shared living spaces. They are part of the curriculum of personal development and life skills at the school, and as one of the older students put it, “Having more responsibility leads to more confidence.”

Routine activities. While the daily schedule at School Birch is flexible and responsive to factors such as the weather conditions, there are a number of routine activities that the students engage in on a regular basis. Some of these are academic, while others are not, but all have their place in the school’s comprehensive experiential approach. One of the favorite activities of the students during the time I was there was disc golf, played with frisbee-style discs on a course that has been developed all around the school site. The students play several rounds of disc golf each week as part of their physical education credit, as a break from indoor learning activities, or when there was an available block of time during the day. Another recurring activity was for students to work in their learning journals, using one of the experience and response cards developed by the Director. Other routine activities include cooking, eating, and cleaning, writing in ecological identity journals, geocaching, and a variety of chores around the school site. The students also make regular trips to sites around the island such as the Little School, the recycling center, the general store, or one of many natural areas. These activities, and the corresponding locations, are all well known to the students. There is sufficient variety among the activities to provide a rich and varied set of daily experiences, while at the same time providing a degree of reliability and

familiarity. Because these activities have become routine, very little time is spent instructing students on these activities, allowing for more time on task actually doing them.

Conservation practices. There are some well-established routines and norms at the school related to resource conservation. Some of these are a function of the physical environment and the buildings. Since electricity is only available by micro-hydro in the main building, the students do not use electronic devices. Lights are used very sparingly, and as one student noted, “If I use the light during the day, I won’t have it at night.” This student went on to reinforce the point that much of their learning around conservation would be lost if they went home each day, and it was important for them to actually live on site, in order to gain the full experience of these conservation principles. Water is also carefully conserved, and the students all follow similar procedures for cooking, cleaning up, and washing dishes, in order to minimize wastewater. While I was there, I observed very little written work, and as noted above, paper-based materials are diligently reused.

In general, students at School Birch appear to have become accustomed to a very simple lifestyle and a much less resource intensive approach to schooling. The conservation practices have become norms in the school community, and I did not observe any kind of complaints or even comments about the rustic nature of the experience, or about being wet or cold. When necessary, students changed or shared clothes, or sat close to the wood stove.

Waste management. School Birch does not purport to be waste free, but in practice, it generates remarkably little waste. This is due to a set of well-established practices and routines at the school. To begin with, the input of new materials to the school is constrained, due to the fact that all resources need to be carried in by hand. This naturally reduces the amount of waste produced. In addition, the school has routine practices, and related student duties, to ensure compostable waste is composted, and recyclables are collected and sorted. The compost area is

regularly maintained, and at the end of each week, recyclable materials are taken to the island's recycling processing center. When the students leave, each is responsible for taking home their own materials, and the student with the corresponding duty carries communal garbage out to the town site for removal. As with the conservation practices mentioned above, waste management practices have simply become norms in the school community, and there were no complaints related to these practices—only occasional reminders between students.

Evaluation of students. Evaluation is not heavily emphasized at School Birch, but it came up in several conversations with students and the Director, and is worth mentioning because the approach is somewhat distinctive. Given the diversity of students and their courses, as well as the nature of the program, it is not practical or appropriate for the Director to rely solely on conventional assessment methods such as tests to evaluate learning. Instead, the school emphasizes self-evaluation, particularly for formative assessments. The Director requires that the students demonstrate to him that they have achieved the outcomes of the courses they are studying. The important aspect of this is that the responsibility is on the student to demonstrate their learning, rather than being the teacher's responsibility to test it.

Those students seeking credit are challenged to show how they are working to earn it; however, the director identifies an important distinction between credits and learning, with the latter being much broader in scope. He recounted a story of a student who had failed three courses during his time at the school, and yet, both he and his parents were very happy and satisfied with the experience. He also shared the story of another student who had been very driven and heavily into academics, but after being in the program, decided to relax and take an extra year to graduate. The common factor in all of this is an approach that de-emphasizes the imposition of assessment that values only a narrow range of learning, in favor of a broader and more appreciative approach designed to empower students to make their own academic choices.

District policies. To fully understand the institutional context of the School Birch, it is important to acknowledge the policy environment of its District. The District has a strong tradition of outdoor and environmental education programs, and a supportive environment for alternative programs in general, including that of School Aspen discussed above. An important difference between School Birch and School Aspen, however, is that the School Birch program was conceived, developed, and launched within the District, building on its existing environmental programs. Not surprisingly, the program is very closely aligned with District policies and educational philosophies. According to the Director, the District's previous superintendent had provided instrumental leadership for the advancement of inquiry and experiential approaches within the District, as well as promoting deeper and more meaningful community partnerships, apprenticeship programs, and project-based learning. This led to some reconfiguring of roles and responsibilities at the district and school level, such as recasting the role of Work Experience Coordinator to that of School-Community Liaison. Aspects of the program at School Birch, such as the emphasis on experiential learning, the cognitive apprenticeships (discussed below), and the blurring of boundaries between the school and the surrounding community, are all direct expressions of these District-endorsed educational priorities.

In speaking casually with members of the District Board, I found there was a sense of pride about the program at School Birch, and recognition that it represented many of the ideals to which the District is aspiring. There also appears to be an interest in expanding the program or disseminating the approaches to other schools within the District. It is also worth noting that because of the school's remote location, it receives double the per-child funding of other schools, and as such, is a profitable program for the District. Collectively, these factors allow the program

to operate with a sense of security and confidence that is uncommon among alternative programs, many of which operate at a loss or face cutbacks due to shifting priorities.

Content-related factors at School Birch. *Experiential learning.* School Birch does not provide a full curriculum or a standard set of courses, but it does allow students to study for credit in a number of content areas, including academic courses in the sciences and humanities. The students come to the program from a range of grade levels, and each student at the school is studying different courses according to their own individual study plans. Therefore, teaching at the school tends to integrate subject matter from different academic areas, and focuses on open-ended projects that allow for individualization, as discussed below. A common theme, regardless of the content area, is an emphasis on experiential learning. This is not limited to outdoor activities, and during my visit I observed a very engaging session in which the students read, analyzed, and debated an article that presented an incisive critique of mainstream schooling. Since many of the students at School Birch had had negative experiences in mainstream schools, this article was emotionally resonant for them, and the activity, while classroom-based, was highly experiential. In most of the activities, including the informal ones, students were prompted to engage in doing something, often with minimal instruction first. They were coached along the way as required. And finally, once the activity was completed, the Director would bring the students back together to debrief and unpack their experiences with them.

Individualization rather than choice. Relative to the other two schools in this study, the program at School Birch offers less freedom of choice in terms of students' daily activities. Students choose whether or not to participate in the program, and they develop their own academic study plans, but since there is only one teacher, most of the activities involve all students doing the same thing, or something quite similar. However, while the students do not choose between alternative activities at School Birch, there is, nonetheless, a high degree of

individualization. The activities that I observed tended to be quite open-ended, including problem solving activities, discussions, integrated experiential activities, free writing, creative activities, and projects. As such, while students are not choosing between activities, they did have a fair degree of freedom within the parameters of the activity itself. In this way, the Director is able to offer students individualized learning opportunities, and as noted above, many students are earning credit towards different courses from one another, even though they appear to be involved in the same activities day-to-day. The Director indicated that he is currently working to provide further differentiation in the program, in recognition of the very wide range of academic skills of the different students.

It is worth noting that in addition to their enrollment at School Birch, some of the students are also working on other credit courses during the other days of the week. One student I spoke with was enrolled part-time in a private high school, and another student was completing other courses by distance learning. Thus, the structure of the program at School Birch, with just three long days on campus each week, appears to be conducive to student choice in this regard.

Place-based outdoor education. While the curriculum at School Birch is more well-rounded than what one would expect from a conventional outdoor school, the school remains, nonetheless, an ecological education center. In keeping with the place-based philosophy of the school, much of the learning takes place *in* the outdoor environment, and is *about* the natural environment. I noticed the Director naturally incorporating little ecological lessons into discussions and activities, even when the focus of the activity was something else, and I noticed many of the students doing something similar when they were speaking with me, often making reference to natural phenomena or sharing short anecdotes that were related to our topic. I found the students extremely knowledgeable about the local ecology, and several times during our outings the students offered me edible plants. Related outdoor learning activities that took place

during my visit included: geocaching, and learning to use GPS devices; building base camps/ outdoor classrooms; and reflective writing in personal outdoor spaces. The students at the school all keep Ecological Identity Journal, in which they record their experiences and reflections, in addition to other activities. Collectively, these place-based activities appear to be having an effect on the students, and in several conversations, students commented to me that during their time at the school they had learned how to appreciate everything around them, how to live in the moment, and how to read cues from their environment.

Informal and ad hoc content. In addition to the formally organized programs at the school, there is also a great deal of informal content. These include teachable moments, but more distinctive than these, are the creation of additional *ad hoc* learning opportunities for students. As one example, the Night Supervisor regularly arranges for members of the island community to come to the school in the evenings to provide workshops for students, or arranges for the students to go into the community for events. During the week that I was there, the students went into town one evening to participate in self defense seminar with a local martial arts instructor. Another example of an *ad hoc* opportunity came later in the week, when the District's School Board was meeting on the island. The Director arranged with the board to allow the students to each make a short presentation to the board, building on activities earlier in the week regarding their experiences in school. The students worked up to this opportunity, writing and practicing, and finally, delivering their presentations to the Board.

Cognitive apprenticeships. One of the distinctive aspects of the island is that many of the residents are highly educated retirees, with rich backgrounds and unique skill sets. To capitalize on this resource, and to build rapport and inter-generational learning between long-time residents and the visiting youth, the school has organized a program that they refer to as "cognitive apprenticeships." These apprenticeships are organized mentoring programs where older island

residents are paired with students, based on shared interests or complementary skill sets. The students are able to earn independent study credit through this program by working on a project of their own creation, with the support of their community mentor. The students arrange time with their mentors, and the mentors work with the students to structure and refine their project ideas, and support them in completing the projects. Through this process, the students gain not only content-area skills and high school credit, but also an appreciation for their community elders, and a personal relationship with a new adult mentor.

Critical reflection. One of the common elements in many of the lessons and discussions I observed at School Birch was critical reflection. Several of the students in the program appeared to be quite critically oriented to begin with, and they had many opportunities to exercise their critical thinking skills during the time I was there. The Director had carefully selected content for the students to discuss that involved critiques of mainstream schooling and environmental practices, and the students were encourage to analyze and further critique the articles and the subjects they were discussing. This included identifying and questioning the assumptions of the articles, as well as fact checking and verifying the sources cited in the articles. The Director is skillful in structuring these activities, and in leading the ensuing discussions, so as to engage all of the students and keep them focused, while not directing or intervening too much. After one student apologized for going off on a tangent, the Director replied, “You’re not off topic, you’re making good connections,” and then encouraged the student to bring his point back to the original topic, which he did.

These kinds of critical thinking activities and discussions appeared to serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they involved relevant content, and the students were able to sharpen their skills in relation to that content. On the other hand, I saw the students developing their own positions and perspectives in relation to the content, and recognized that these kinds of activities were

playing a role in the development of their own ecological identities. Many times I heard students making impassioned and well-reasoned statements related to education, society, and the environment, and I saw that the students were making very personal connections with this content.

Life skills. The learning of life skills at School Birch is an intentional part of the way the school is set up. As noted above, the Director makes a distinction between school as a preparation for life, versus school as life, and the emphasis at School Birch is on the latter. Students at School Birch live their lives simply, and the context of their choices is relatively constrained given the scale of their community. But within that context, they are given considerable autonomy and responsibility. They are responsible for planning their meals, bringing the materials with them, and for cooking and cleaning up after themselves. They are also responsible for maintaining the school site, chopping wood, managing the wood stove, and other tasks that relate to their self-sufficiency and self-efficacy on the island. In their daily experiences they are put into challenging situations, and need to work together to solve problems, ask for help, accept help, and offer help to one another. With very little space from one another during the week, they need to learn personal responsibility, how to get along with each other, and how to work through any interpersonal issues. While the context is dissimilar from their daily lives at their homes, the tasks are nevertheless authentic, dynamic, and relevant to the kinds of roles they will need to take on as adults. One student talked at length about the kind of learning that occurred during mealtimes, including not only the meal preparation, but also the social dynamics of sharing the space together. Another student reinforced the point by stressing that at School Birch there is really no distinction between when they are working, when they are playing, and when they are just living. Putting a somewhat different angle on the point, but emphasizing the real-world relevance of the

program, one student said, “Here, so much is unexpected, you’re on your toes all the time, you need to pay attention, unlike in regular schools, where things slow down.”

Academic skills and lifelong learning. While the students at School Birch do earn academic credit, academic skills are not an emphasis of the program. In general, the students appeared to have quite good critical thinking skills, and most were highly articulate; however, much of the written work I saw was considerably weaker, and there was some emphasis on having students engage in reflective writing in order to work on this. What I found more interesting, and more germane to the goals of the program, was the school’s success in engaging students in their own learning processes.

The students School Birch manage their own academic programs, and are responsible for understanding the prescribed learning outcomes for all of the courses they are working on. Moreover, the students are required to demonstrate their learning to the Director, as discussed above in relation to the school’s evaluation practices. This was particularly notable given that many of the students had either been home schooled, or had had negative experiences in mainstream schools previously, and I had not anticipated that they would have such keen awareness of things like learning outcomes. All of the students I talked with were able to talk intelligibly about these outcomes, and what work they were doing in order to achieve them. This approach to personal responsibility is also reflected in students’ independent studies projects, which they design in consultation with the Director, and then refine through consultation with community mentors. By shifting more responsibility to the students to design and manage their own learning, the school has been able to effectively engage (or re-engage) them in the learning process, something which, it is hoped, will stay with students through their adult lives.

Summary remarks on School Birch. While every school is unique in its own ways, School Birch is particularly unconventional. In fact, it may be better understood as a program

than a school, because it does not offer a full curriculum, works with only 12 students at a time, and is designed as a semester-long experience. However, this classification is somewhat arbitrary, and for the purposes of this research, I was interested in schools with distinctive educational approaches that were aligned with a strong philosophy, and in this respect, School Birch more than qualifies. Moreover, because the school was developed directly by a public education district (rather than adopted into it, like School A), School Birch provided an excellent opportunity to explore linkages between district initiatives and school practices related to place-based experiential education.

At School Birch, the Director is the only full-time staff member, and there is only one class on site at a time. As such, the Director is largely responsible for structuring and mediating the experiences of the students. While this research identified prominent contextual factors across all four categories – physical, social, institutional, and content-related – my impression was that the physical and social aspects of the experience were most prominent in shaping students' experiences. In particular, the beautiful site of the school, and the tight community that the Director has helped to establish there, featured very prominently in both my interview and observational data, and it appears that these feature very prominently in most students' experiences at the school. Institutional factors were generally less prominent, but the community procedures related to sustainable living do seem to have been normed at the school.

Content-related factors were identifiable, but were not emphasized by students, and in keeping with school's philosophy, the experiential approach, rather than content-related learning outcomes, was the focus. This observation led me to question the idea of content-related factors as part of the educative context, and while I was on site, I contemplated a new category of factors related to experiential learning. However, I soon found that most of my notes pertaining to students' experiential learning were also related to physical, social, or institutional factors, and I

was not observing anything distinctive or uniquely “experiential.” Experience, I concluded, was the nexus of many factors, rather than a separate category of factors. Nonetheless, while I was able to accommodate most of the things I observed within the four categories of factors, there were some fragmented observations, like students walking barefoot in the forest, or going out at night without flashlights in order to better see the stars, that I’m certain were meaningful to students, but which were hard to classify within the framework I was using.

School Birch was designed as a place-based experiential ecological education center, based on years of experience within the District, and the site was purpose built for this task. Not surprisingly, the program delivers on its mandate. Whereas School Aspen has a high-level philosophy, with much of students’ experiences being left up to the students themselves to determine, the experiences of students at School Birch are much more orchestrated. Specific aspects of the school make this feasible, including its relatively controlled environment, the limited external influences on the island, and the very small scale of the school. It was clear from my observations, and my conversations with students, that these experiences are having an impact on them. The sustainable and inclusive values of the community seem to be in the process of becoming internalized by the students, and the desired behaviors have been effectively normed.

However, the school’s emphasis on process goals rather than specific educational outcomes makes it somewhat difficult to discuss the degree of alignment between the educative context of the school and the school’s mandate. The arrangements and practices of the school all seem to contribute to students’ experiential learning, but this is quite general. The school mandate is somewhat vague about expected outcomes related place-based education and ecological citizenship. If these are interpreted to mean a sense of place and connectedness to the natural

environment, as well as a sense of responsibility to care for the environment, then certainly the factors noted above appear to be in alignment with these goals.

Building on the paragraph above, it seems to me that while there is a great deal of intentionality around the way School Birch is set up and run, and while there seems to be a lot of coherence in the daily experiences of students, there may be value in further clarifying the outcome goals of the program. There is a lot of value in emphasizing processes and experience rather than solely focusing on outcomes; however, it preempts some important thinking to state that, as cited above, “The core learning aims are more about how students learn than it is about specifically what they learn” (OECD, n.d.). Experiential programs are experiential for a reason, and there remains value in clearly identifying expected learning and developmental outcomes, even if these are personal and unique to the individuals involved. Students’ experiences at the school are already very coherent, and there are no major misalignments in the factors I identified. However, if the school were to clearly articulate developmental goals related to students’ sense of place, citizenship, personal development, identity, and so on, it would create space for even more meaningful discussion about the program content and how it is implemented.

Another important consideration relates to the nature of the program itself, as a residential learning experience of relatively short duration. Things that are learned in one context are often difficult to apply in other contexts, and our behavior in one social group may differ from our behavior in another social group. The students learning at School Birch leave their home environments each week, travel to the school and stay there for three nights, and then return home again. At the end of one or two semesters, students’ experiences at the school will come to an end, and while the students may have had life-changing experiences at the school, they will probably find that the community around them is roughly the same as it was before. The students experience something very special at School Birch, and their behaviors while at the school seem

to be very much in alignment with what the school is trying to achieve. However, I suspect that some students may fall into old habits once their experience concludes. I observed, for example, how the students, once on the ferry, pulled out their electronic devices, and the healthy, natural lifestyles I had observed on the island faded away as they returned from the vending machines with junk food.

This is admittedly speculative, but it bears consideration in the context of this study to say that while the program appears to be successful in norming the behaviors and values of environmental citizenship at the school, it may be unrealistic to expect that it will have a lasting impact on students' socialization. The culture at the school is the culture *at the school*. The school can define what is normal for students while they are at the school, and the isolated residential approach is conducive to this. However, for the sustainability and transferability of students' learning, it might be more conducive to have a program of longer duration, situated within students' own communities, or to consider approaches that might help the students bridge their experiences at the school to those in their home communities.

School Cedar

First impressions. As with School Birch, I first heard about School Cedar from another teacher while I was at School Aspen. The teacher gave me the name of the school, and shared a little bit about its “bioregional” approach. I was familiar with bioregionalism, but had never heard of bioregional education, and was curious about what would motivate positioning the school in relation to bioregionalism, as opposed to a more established but substantively similar concept such as sustainability. I was somewhat skeptical, but curious enough to get online and do some research. From the information I found online, the school looked intriguing, and after learning that the school was started in 1999, even more so. Education for sustainable development did not rise in prominence until the early 2000s, and the United Nations Decade on Sustainable

Development began only in 2005. This signaled to me that School Cedar was, at least in this respect, ahead of its time, and having been working at bioregional education for over a decade, I anticipated that there would be a well-established culture and set of practices at the school, making it a good candidate as a potential research site. I contacted the school and made arrangements with the Founder to come for a visit.

From the school's website, I had a favorable impression of School Cedar, but did not know quite what to expect. The policies, constitution, and other information posted online looked promising, and suggested a strong, comprehensive philosophy, though perhaps somewhat eclectic. Knowing that the school encouraged students to bike or walk to school, I decided to go by foot on my first visit. As I arrived at the cross street suggested by the address, I looked down the block and did not see anything resembling a school. When I arrived at what was supposed to be the school's address, I found nothing but a big old house. I decided to walk up the path, and as I did, I saw a small sign above the door, that had been obscured by a tree. I was in the right place.

Upon entering the building, I was struck by the cozy feel of the place—the school looked almost as much like a home from the inside as it did from the outside. This first visit happened to be on a preparatory day when there were no students around, but I soon began to see evidence of children, of classes, of projects, and other telltale signs that this was indeed a school. I also remember being struck by how full of “stuff” the space was. Every vertical and horizontal fixture in the building seemed to be covered with something, and while the building itself was fairly large, it seemed too small for its contents. However, despite the clutter, my impression was a positive one, and the school had a distinct charm and character to it that made me feel welcome and at ease. I met the Founder and another senior teacher in the school's library (located in the comfortable living room of the house), and we had a long talk about the school, its history and

philosophy, its practices, and my research. We were all sufficiently interested in one another's ideas, and made plans for my return visit.

The next time I returned to the school, it was a regular school day, and the whole site, occupying two houses on adjacent lots, was buzzing with activity. Very little of what I saw resembled the conventional schooling environments I was used to, or even those of the other two schools I had visited, but I saw teachers, and classrooms, and students engaged in a variety of activities in all different corners of the houses and yards. It was clear that the school was functioning smoothly, and I was excited to better understand what I was seeing around me.

School Cedar's educational aims. The staff and students of School Cedar refer to it as a bioregional school. Bioregionalism is a perspective based on naturally defined "bioregions," which are generally large geographic areas marked by physical and environmental features like watersheds, categories of flora and fauna, and topographic or geographic features such as mountains and coastlines. Bioregionalism is referred to in the School Cedar community as being a blend of sustainability, with its environmental focus, and community, with its human focus. As an educational philosophy, this is expressed in terms of providing a bioregionally focused alternative to mainstream schooling, and helping students to become more engaged and active in their bioregion. Generally speaking, then, the concept integrates elements of environmental education, citizenship education, and education for sustainable development, as well as experiential and critical pedagogical approaches.

In more formal terms, School Cedar's educational aims are enshrined in its guiding principles (School Cedar, n.d.a), and its constitution (School Cedar, n.d.b). These two documents overlap considerably, and cover a broad range of areas, intermixing the aims of the school, and the pedagogical principles involved in achieving those aims. In general, the documents emphasize the development of civic virtues related to democracy, equality, and sustainability.

Drawing on these documents, as well as conversations with students and staff, three general themes emerge.

The first theme, and perhaps the most central, is the development of students as engaged citizens of the local bioregion. The school aims to help students become familiar with their community and the natural environment within it, and encourages students to work together to take an active role in preserving and protecting the natural world. This involves developing community awareness and a connection with the natural world, as well as an emphasis on cooperation over competition. However, while these aims appear quite moderate, they are often expressed at the school in somewhat counter-cultural terms, with students and staff describing the school's philosophy using terms like activism, socialist, and hippie. In discussing a prior incident in which some students were behaving defiantly, one teacher recounted another as saying, "well, we do want to make activists out of them," suggesting that this defiance may have been something the school had been cultivating. Another teacher indicated, somewhat more generally, "We want to empower them to change the world, and to work with others to achieve something." Certainly, my classroom observations reinforced the emphasis that the school places on critical thinking, on questioning assumptions, and on values such as community and social justice—all of which were discussed regularly. This theme of engaged, active citizenship is central to the values on which the school was founded, and helps to unify the other educational aims of School Cedar.

The second theme regarding the aims of the school is the development of students as individuals, in terms of their self-efficacy, autonomy, and personal responsibility. Much like School Aspen, the philosophy of School Cedar is partly a reaction against traditional mainstream educational approaches that are lecture driven and that put students in a passive role as learners. School Cedar aims to empower students by providing them with choices, and supporting them to take a more active role in the learning process. There is an emphasis on helping students to

identify, understand, and express their needs and interests, and to develop the skills necessary to meet those needs and pursue those interests. As one teacher put it, “I’m here to help the students figure things out for themselves, and to help them get to where they want to get to.” The emphasis on personal responsibility at the school is complementary to this, and teachers coach students regularly on taking ownership for their goals and actions.

The third theme in the aims of School Cedar is the establishment of a safe and inclusive educational environment. This is the flip side of the second theme, and relates to accepting individual differences, being nonjudgmental and respectful, and valuing diversity. School Cedar aims, explicitly, to provide a safe and caring environment where students from all walks of life will be welcomed into the community, and valued as individuals (School Cedar, n.d.b). The student population of the school includes many students with special needs, as well as students who had previously faced challenges in mainstream schools. The staff constantly model and encourage empathy and understanding, through an acknowledgement of needs and interests. One teacher explained to me that a fundamental part of her philosophy as a teacher was to constantly ensure her students know, “You matter to me, and your needs matter to me.” Other staff also emphasized the importance of letting the students know they are accepted for who they are, and supporting them in developing self-knowledge and a sense of their own identity within the community—not just as independent individuals. Fundamentally, this emphasizes the community-oriented philosophy of the school, helping all of the students to learn to coexist and collaborate together.

These three general aims have very broad expression at School Cedar. It is worth noting, however, that while I was able to identify these three common themes, the perspectives and approaches of the different staff I interviewed were each quite different from one another. My impression was that the philosophy and aims of School Cedar, while coherent, are not as focused

or tightly defined as those of School Aspen and School Birch. Nonetheless, while the educative context of the school varies from classroom to classroom, there is, throughout the school, a strong effort towards educating children in a manner that will contribute to these aims. The next section presents my structured observations at the school, based on interviews and observations during my time there.

Consolidated findings for School Cedar. Although the philosophy and aims of School Cedar were framed more broadly and generally than those of the other two schools, they are manifested in the school in a variety of ways. These factors have been identified through the process of analyzing the interview data, documents, and observations I made while at the school. These factors are summarized in Table 4, and are presented in more depth below, based on four categories: physical factors; social factors; institutional factors; and content-related factors.

Table 4

Summary of prominent factors in the educative context of School Cedar

Level	Physical	Social	Institutional	Content	Total
Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School furnishings and décor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual responsibility for behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activity tracking Expectations, guidelines, and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual responsibility for learning 	4
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School buildings Variety in classrooms Movement between classrooms Crowdedness Schoolyard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nonhierarchical structure Nonviolent communication Norming Small multi-year groupings Low student to teacher ratio Variety in teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consensus-based decision-making Hand signals Community meetings Community contributions Waste-free operations Schedule of activities Financial constraints Funding sources Overlapping programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community fieldtrips Project-based learning Consistent development of core skills Choice within parameters Integrated workshops Bioregional content 	2

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedagogical relationships • Mixed-age opportunities • Varying interests of school population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-judgmental assessment 	
District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School location 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent governance • Adherence to regulatory requirements 	1
Total	7	10	14	7
				38

Physical factors at School Cedar. *School location.* School Cedar is situated in a residential community, close to the downtown area of a quiet urban center. There is a large field beside the school, and there are many parks and natural areas in close proximity. This is significant to the program because of the emphasis on bioregionalism, and the effort made at the school to take learning outside of the school buildings and into the surrounding community. This location reflects the philosophy of the school, because it provides opportunities for both ecological explorations, and community-related learning in an urban setting. This is somewhat unique because, in spite of its environmental emphasis, the school is unapologetically urban, and despite the bioregional philosophy, the school does not purport to be an ecological or outdoor education setting. Rather, environmental learning takes place in and around the urban environment, reflecting the blend of human and non-human environmental considerations that characterize its bioregional philosophy.

School buildings. As noted above, one distinctive aspect of School Cedar is that it is not housed in a conventional school building, but rather, in two single-family houses. The houses are on adjacent lots, making for a continuous space, but with a variety of gates and subdivisions possible. Being situated in two houses, gives the School Aspen unique atmosphere, much like a home, which contrasts with the industrial feeling of many modern schools. However, while the school benefits from a comfortable, welcoming feeling, the buildings were clearly not purpose built for schooling. Noise carries throughout the houses, and many of the rooms used as classrooms do not have closing doors to create quiet learning spaces. Moreover, the buildings and yards show a lot of wear and tear from the daily demands placed on them by students.

Variety in classrooms. The spaces within the two houses have been divided up with intentionality, filling all of the rooms, basements, and hallways with classrooms, office space, and storage. Not all of these rooms are entirely practical, but good use has been made of the

available space. Decisions about room usage are made, in part, based on the number of students and the space requirements. However, it struck me as interesting and appropriate that the younger age groups occupied the bedrooms and living rooms of the two houses, the spaces that one would associate with comfort and refuge; whereas the older students were in self-contained spaces separated from the younger grades—reflecting a degree of independence. The high school program occupies the basement of one of the houses, with its own separate entrance at the back; and the junior high school program occupies a renovated detached garage, separate from the other two buildings. While there are also spaces where the age groups mix, there are some potential messages in this configuration, around the nurturing of younger students and the privacy and autonomy of older students.

Movement between classrooms. Each of the students in School Cedar is assigned to a given class with its own designated “open classroom” space. The term “open” refers to the open choice of learning activities that take place in the classrooms, rather than describing the physical spaces, some of which are quite closed and private. While students have a special connection to their open classrooms, and store their materials there, most move around throughout the day. With the exception of the pre-primary program, students move from room to room for workshops and different scheduled classes, which may take place anywhere on the school site. This means that the students have a sense of comfort, security, and belonging throughout the two houses, and not only in their own open classrooms.

School furnishings and décor. The furnishings of the two buildings do not immediately appear to be those of a school, and in many cases, resemble home furnishings. Both houses are full of bookshelves, couches, tables, and chairs of different shapes and sizes, and the furniture in the school is largely of the residential variety. However, there are a several rooms that have more conventional school furniture, including small tables and chairs, as well as blackboards or white

boards. In keeping with the school's philosophy, much of the furniture has been donated, or bought second-hand, and an effort is made to fix things rather than throwing them away, and not to buy new things unless necessary.

The other décor of the houses is more clearly that of a school. The walls are full of posters, displays, student work, and pages outlining schedules and procedures, making it clear that these houses are indeed places of learning. The different rooms have distinctive looks and feelings, corresponding to the age groups occupying them, and to the personalities of the teachers as well. Some rooms are relatively clean and organized, whereas others, such as the high school room (referred to fondly as “the swamp”), are much more crowded and disorderly. There is a degree of age appropriateness in all of this, with, for example, small tables and chairs for the pre-primary program, and tall stools and couches for the high school program.

Crowdedness. One of the things I felt immediately upon arriving at School Cedar was how crowded it was, in terms of the number of people there, the use of space, and the visual environment. To put things plainly, these are two single-family houses, being occupied by 50 or more students and as many as 18 staff. The rooms and hallways of the two houses are lined with bookshelves and storage cupboards, all of which are brimming with books and supplies. Similarly, the wall space of almost every room is equally full, with posters, artwork, displays, and so on. After spending several days at the school, the space felt to me like it was about half as big as it needed to be in order to house everyone comfortably. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and part of the hidden curriculum talked about by the teachers, is the importance of students learning to get along with one another in this space, and learning about constraints—of resources, of space, and so on. Moreover, the crowdedness of the houses also contributed to the feeling of community in the place, much like a large family gathering might in a regular house, where there are familiar faces in every pocket of the space.

Schoolyard. The schoolyard at School Cedar is principally made up of the large yard of one of the two houses. The yard includes a generous paved area with picnic tables, where students play and eat their snacks, as well as some modest playground equipment. There is also a garden area, and some naturalized spaces with trees, all of which provide students with other places to play and spend time. The yard of the second house is quite small, and does not include recreational space. The schoolyard is well used at School Cedar, and students come out not only to take breaks, but also to sit at the picnic tables during classes and workshops, to prepare for field trips, and for other purposes. While the basement of one of the houses is sufficient in size to hold the entire school population, and school meetings are held there, the schoolyard appears to be the most common muster point for the activities of the school.

Social factors at School Cedar. *Nonhierarchical structure.* In keeping with the communitarian tendencies of School Cedar, its organizational structure is nonhierarchical, and teachers appear to be given considerable autonomy. The Founder of the school is referred to simply as the Lead Teacher, and while she certainly plays a key role in providing leadership to support the maintenance and advancement of the school's vision, the other teachers are also very much involved with decision-making in the school, and there is no formal structure of authority. Decision-making is a collective activity when the broader school community is affected, and when it is not, decision-making is decentralized. In addition, there appears to be very good delegation of responsibilities across the teaching body. Some teachers take a lead role in certain aspects of the program, and other teachers, particularly the newer ones, appear quite willing to learn from their colleagues.

In addition to the flat organizational structure, the school aims towards egalitarianism in other respects as well. In speaking with one of the teachers I learned that while each staff member had their own responsibilities related to their expertise and seniority, all staff, regardless of

seniority, are paid at the same rate. While this approach may affect a number of different factors, such as retention and morale, it is certainly reflective of the non-hierarchical philosophy of the school.

Nonviolent communication. The use of nonviolent communication (NVC, see Rosenberg, 2005) is a major factor in the social context of School Cedar, and permeates interactions between staff, between students and staff, and across the school community. The NVC approach emphasizes showing empathy for the other party and recognizing their needs, as well as understanding of one's own experience, and honestly expressing one's own feelings. This approach is very much in keeping with the school's non-hierarchical structure, and the emphasis placed on personal responsibility and interpersonal understanding. The NVC approach is well developed in the school, and most of the staff have received formal training on it. I observed NVC in action many times during my visit, and it was extremely common to hear students and teachers discussing needs, sharing feelings, and generally talking through issues that have transpired, in an open and honest way. I was impressed with this approach, and observed teachers applying NVC skillfully to diffuse difficult situations such as potential conflicts and power struggles. One teacher commented to me that she had decided she wanted to work at this school after first visiting and observing one of the senior teachers apply NVC to calm down a student who had completely lost control, like a martial artist disarming an opponent and quickly gaining control of the situation. Several teachers indicated that NVC is a key tool they use to help students learn to self-regulate, and I saw evidence of this approach impacting the students, for example, talking through issues themselves using some of the distinctive phrasing modeled by the teachers.

Norming. There is a distinct culture at School Cedar, and while talking about this with one of the teachers, she casually used the term "norming" to describe the process of teaching students

the expected ways of behaving and communicating at the start of each year. While norming is an implicit process at all schools, I took note of the explicit and matter of fact way in which this teacher talked about it. She described this as a process that all of the teachers at the school were aware of and participated in, which included explicit and implicit elements, as well as role modeling and repetitive practice of certain behaviors. After speaking with this teacher, I began to notice some of the ways in which the teachers reinforced the community norms, using phrases like, “Remember how we do this here,” and leading students, especially the younger ones, through activities to reinforce the expected ways of performing them. The smooth functioning of the school, and the use of NVC by some students, described above, is good evidence that this norming process was well underway during my visit.

Small, multi-year groupings. Students at School Cedar are not divided into specific grade levels, but they are grouped into classes that span several grade levels each. These groupings are not rigid, but provide some structure to the organization of the school, and the teaching and learning schedules. Students move from one group to the next based on readiness, and based on the spaces available. The multi-grade groupings are partly a function of the fact that there are insufficient numbers to create single-grade classes, and most of the classes have just five to 10 students. Each class has one core teacher, referred to as their “open classroom teacher” that takes primary responsibility for them, but the students generally have time with a number of teachers throughout each day. These multi-year groupings fit with the school’s curriculum, which is planned on a four-year cycle, and give students opportunities to be at the younger end and older end of their primary social group several times as they progress through their years of schooling.

Low student to teacher ratio. Another factor related to the small classes in the school is the low ratio of students to adults. During the time of my visit, there were 18 teachers and educational assistants on staff, and approximately 50 students enrolled in the on-site program.

However, this ratio is complicated by the fact that some of the teachers are part-time, and some have responsibility for the school's home learning program, involving an additional 50-70 students who do not attend classes at the school. The teachers involved with the home learning program develop learning materials for these students, and maintain and regular correspondence with students and their families, but they are also involved with the school's on-site students.

Even if the school's part time staff and home learning students are taken into consideration, the number of adults physically on site at the school, relative to the number of students, is extremely high, and students have access to a great deal of adult attention, individualized instruction, and counseling. In practical terms, most classes at the school have less than eight students, and these students are regularly in smaller groups of just four to six for different workshops or other activities. During my visit, when issues arose in an activity that required individual attention, it seemed there was always another adult available to help out. Such a low ratio of students to teachers makes possible a unique kind of teaching that is highly individualized and responsive to students' comments and reactions, and I saw lots of evidence of this kind of tailoring of instruction. There may, however, be some unintended consequences with this approach, and it was clear that students had very high expectations about the degree of attention and support that they should receive, which may work against the school's aims of cultivating autonomy and personal responsibility.

Variety in teachers. Another factor related to the teachers is the fact that, while students have a homeroom or core teacher who they spend relatively more time with, they are also taught by a number of other teachers. The teachers specialize in different areas, lead workshops that the students may choose, and rotate responsibility for other activities such as field trips. As such, the students all get to know different teachers and their strengths, and I could see how different students had affinities for different teachers, based on their interests, personalities, or other

factors. As compared to mainstream schools, one distinctive element of School Cedar is that, with the exception of homeroom teachers, the teachers are not prescribed for the students, and the students choose which teachers they learn from based on what workshops they select.

In speaking with and observing the teachers at School Cedar, I was struck by their uniqueness. Each of the teachers has a distinctive background, interesting hobbies or interests, and intriguing perspectives on education and society. Of course, all teachers and all individuals are unique, but the teachers at School Cedar seemed particularly so, in a positive way, and I have no doubt that the student benefit from the rich experiences and reflective personalities of the staff. However, alongside these differences, I also noted inconsistencies in the pedagogical approaches and classroom management styles of the different teachers, with some being very progressive in their approach, and others being quite traditional. I also noted important differences in the kinds of expectations, cues, procedures, and general effectiveness of the teaching and learning in the different classes. There is valuable social learning from having students work with different adults who have different styles and personalities. However, in this case, the differences in pedagogical approach were such that I went away reflecting on how this diversity can be retained while also maintaining the integrity of the school's philosophy, and the coherence of students' experiences around that philosophy.

Pedagogical relationships. While the teachers at School Cedar are very different, all of them seem to be highly appreciated by the students. This was common across grade levels, and I observed close and amicable relationships between students and their teachers, from the pre-primary program up to the high school program. During a group interview with several elementary-aged students, there was a strong agreement that, “all of the teachers are cool,” in their own ways. Students are given choices, indirectly, about which teachers they want to work with, through their daily choices in workshops and other activities. All of the students I spoke

with indicated that the primary factor affecting these decisions was their interest in the activity, rather than which teacher was leading the activity. Several students mentioned specifically that they enjoyed and appreciated having variety in the teachers they worked with.

In general, the relationships between students and teachers in School Cedar are respectful, but somewhat closer and more casual than those in conventional schools. While everyone uses their first name at School Cedar, and student-teacher interactions are generally informal, there is still a clear deference to authority in the school. However, at the same time, it is clear that many of the students have developed close relationships, even friendships, with their teachers. I was surprised, for example, to see one of the high school students invite a teacher to go to the movies with him and his friends over the upcoming weekend. I also observed that the students are accustomed to sharing their feelings and concerns with teachers, with the teachers taking on the roles of counselors and confidants. On this topic, one of the staff members commented, “I get a lot out of teaching here, because the relationships are allowed to be real, and reciprocal.” She described her recognition that she had become a real attachment figure in the lives of several of her students, and that this was normal in the school. This may be partly a function of the very small class sizes, and the amount of personalized attention available from the staff, but it is also, clearly, the result of the personalities, commitment, and caring nature of the individual staff members. It was also clear to me that these positive relationships were cultivated with intentionality in the school, evidenced not only by the focus on empathy and NVC, but also, the positive tone used in discussing students (and student issues) between staff members—even when the students were not around.

Mixed-age opportunities. In addition to students’ main (age-based) class groupings, they also have daily opportunities to participate in activities with students from other groupings. These opportunities include workshops that they select according to their interest, field trips, meetings,

special projects, and break times. In addition to scheduled multi-age activities, there are also spaces at the school where age mixing takes place naturally, including the library, workshop rooms, and the outside schoolyard. Because the school is physically quite small, students of all ages are in regular contact with students of all other ages.

Due to the multi-year age span of the different groupings, resulting in staggered progression from group to group, students may have close friends in older and younger groups, and I observed a fair degree of friendly mixing between students of different age groups. I also observed what appeared to be genuine friendships between high school aged students and elementary aged students. One interesting theme that came up repeatedly in my conversations with students was their sense of responsibility with respect to younger students. Those from the elementary program, the junior high school program, and the high school program all mentioned during interviews that there are little (younger) children at the school, so they needed to be good examples for them. Clearly this is a message reinforced throughout the school.

Individual responsibility for behavior. Individual responsibility, both to oneself and to the community, is an important emphasis in the program at School Cedar. This was a theme reinforced repeatedly through interactions between teachers and students, as well as the kinds of learning activities and routine practices within the school. The approach I observed for cultivating responsibility in School Cedar seems to begin with personal awareness; helping students to understand their own needs, to take ownership for their behaviors, and then to relate these to the broader context of school community. For example, in one instance, a teacher politely told a young student, “Your body doesn’t look like it’s under control right now. Do you need to take some time for a movement break so that you won’t distract others?” In practice, while these kinds of interactions between teachers and students are quite common, students are also given a lot of leeway in managing their behavior. Even with the very small class sizes at the

school, there were frequent interruptions due to off-task behavior in many of the classes I observed, and a lot of learning time was expended in trying to get students to self manage. It struck me that the emphasis on discussing personal responsibility with the students resulted in an approach to classroom management that was primarily reactive, and that a more conducive teaching environment could likely be developed through the establishment of clearer expectations and procedures.

Individual responsibility for learning. In terms of academic work, students are given a lot of freedom and choice, but are held accountable for making a basic level of progress, and for completing certain projects and other required assignments. Due to the small class sizes, teachers are able to work with students to identify learning goals, and to provide individualized coaching as they complete their activities. However, from the activities I observed, many appear to be very open-ended, and presented with a minimal degree of scaffolding or other expectations. As a result, responsibility for the results is largely up to the students. The objective in these activities is to help students become more self-directed, to make plans, and to follow through on those plans. In practice, while I was impressed to see all students delivering completed work, the quality of the work was highly variable, and it appeared that many students would have benefitted from higher expectations, additional scaffolding, or a gentle push, to help them work to their potential.

From my observation, personal responsibility in the school seems to be operationalized primarily as the responsibility to abstain from negative behaviors, such as disrupting others and not completing assignments. While this resembles the basic idea of personal responsibility in adult society, in terms of acting in accordance with laws and performing above minimal expectations at one's job, the extent of growth and learning that results is very much left up to the individual students. In this way, School Cedar walks a middle path between the non-coercive

approach of School Aspen, and the much more regimented approaches found in conventional schools.

Varying interests of school population. Through my interviews with staff and students at School Cedar, it appears that there are a variety of different interests intersecting at the school, each having its own impact on the social fabric of the community. While the school's bioregional philosophy came up explicitly in most of the interviews, many of those I spoke with had a hard time explaining what was meant by bioregionalism, and how the school reflected bioregional principles. Apart from the use of NVC, and a general child-centered perspective, I found few commonalities in the pedagogical philosophies of the teachers. One teacher expressed an interest in other alternative philosophies such as Montessori and Waldorf education. Another favored coaching approach more influenced by psychology and brain science. Others expressed philosophical approaches influenced by a range of other philosophies, including inquiry, critical pedagogy, socialism, indigenous knowledge systems, and other orientations. In short, while unified by the ideas of bioregionalism and personal responsibility, I had trouble discerning a cohesive philosophical thrust in the school.

Amongst the students I interviewed I found an even broader range of perspectives. While there appears to be a shared identity amongst the students that this is an alternative school, and most used the term bioregionalism to describe it, few were able to describe what was meant by bioregionalism. In contrast to School Aspen, where most students expressed a clear understanding of the school's philosophy, which impacted them deeply, discussions with students about School C's philosophy were much shallower. One student explained, "It's like a more free type of school, like a community where you learn." Another student described the school as, "a hippie school." The inclusive nature of the school, and the efforts made towards developing the

school community are reflected in these statements, but there was no strong reflection of bioregionalism or sustainability.

The Founder noted that the school attracts a diverse range of families, and that the bioregional philosophy is only the main draw for a small proportion of those. The school has gained a reputation for success in working with special needs students, and as such, coded students, as well as non-coded students who had experienced challenges with social integration, comprise a relatively high proportion of the student population. It is also worth noting that while the school charges tuition, it offers a sliding scale for tuition payments, and according to the Founder, only about half of the families are paying any tuition at all. While there are some common values holding all of these observations together – things like inclusiveness and community – there also appears to be some confusion, as well as some friction, due to the many competing perspectives and interests amongst the members of the community.

Institutional factors at School Cedar. *Consensus-based decision-making.* School Cedar has based its operations on a consensus model, involving representation of different stakeholder groups insofar as is practical. While the school espouses many democratic ideals, this approach is quite different from that of School Aspen, in which decisions are put to a vote. In School Cedar, the approach focuses on ensuring that the perspectives of different groups are represented, and then discussing realistic options for addressing whatever issues have come up. While not all stakeholders are equally involved in all decisions, there appears to be a genuine interest in robust deliberation, in order to arrive at decisions that will work for everyone involved. I observed the consensus approach in action several times during my visit, including during classroom meetings, a staff meeting, and a large school-wide meeting. The Founder indicated that the school's independent board also operates using a consensus model. During a breakout session at one school meeting I attended, I overheard a student ask the teacher why they couldn't just vote on

the issue being discussed. The teacher replied, “While it might be faster to let the majority decide, that’s now how the school works.” The teacher went on to explain the rationale for the consensus model, focusing on the idea that the needs of everyone matter equally, and that all needs in the community need to be address, not just those of the majority.

Hand signals. One of the ways that School Cedar makes the consensus model work, particularly during large meetings, is through the use of specific hand signals. These hand signals are known to all students and staff in the school, and are used by those not chairing the meeting in order share their perspectives with minimal disruption to the large group. Key hand signals used in the school community include those intended to show agreement, acquiescence (disagreement but willingness to comply), and strong disagreement. Other signals are used to indicate where clarification is needed, or to request an opportunity to speak in turn.

Independent governance. School Cedar is an independent school, and its “board” refers to the board of the non-profit association under whose authority and mandate the school operates. In keeping with the school’s inclusive philosophy and consensus approach, the board of directors of the association includes representatives of the student body, the teaching body, and the parent community, in addition to the Founder, and representatives of the broader community. While the school operates within the regulations of the provincial Ministry of Education, these regulations give considerable leeway to independent schools. According to the Founder, the board is responsible for making policy decisions for the school, while operational decisions are made collectively by the school staff. In all cases, issues are discussed and worked out collectively, and when necessary, committees are formed in order to take particular issues forward.

Community meetings. Monthly Community Meetings are held at the school in order to keep students informed about things going on at the school, to address any issues of shared concern, and to involve students in decision-making processes. While these meetings take place

only once a month, they constitute one of the principal ways in which students at the school go beyond conventional student roles and participate more actively as citizens in the school community. The Community Meeting that I attended followed a set agenda, with opportunities for students to participate on all topics, as well as adding subtopics of their own for discussion. The meeting was quite long, and involved some open discussion, as well as a breakout portion in which small, mixed-age groups discussed ways in which the school's Community Meetings might be made more interesting and engaging for the students. The small group breakouts were facilitated by the teachers, and generated ideas and recommendations, which were then shared with the whole group. There was good effort from the teachers to help students understand about the level of decisions that can be made at the community level, versus decisions taken by the teachers, or by the school's board of directors.

In principle, this Community Meeting process reflects the commitment of the school administration to empowering and engaging the students to participate more actively in the community, and to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for decisions take within it. The staff is genuinely interested in sharing responsibility and authority with the students. However, in practice, much of the input provided by students was off topic, and the overall level of engagement was quite low. Many students appeared bored or restless, and some were asked to leave the meeting because they were being disruptive. My reflection towards the end of the meeting was that a long process like this may not be optimal for many of the students, and may in fact contribute to a sense of disengagement or alienation, particularly if students do not have a clear sense that their input is contributing to meaningful changes at the school.

Community contributions. Another part of the monthly routine at School Cedar is what they refer to as Community Contributions. This is a block of time in which students work together to make physical contributions to the school. Based on their "open classroom" groups,

the students, together with their teachers, work to complete small projects such as cleaning, tidying, organizing, or decorating different parts of the school. These contributions are not confined to the students' home classrooms, and during the time I was there, there were students completing a wide variety of projects, ranging from sweeping floors and wiping down surfaces, to cleaning up the school's garden, to making new signs to hang on the school walls.

Waste-free operations. In keeping with its emphasis on sustainability, conservation and simple living are practiced at School Cedar. While not apparent at first, this turned out to be one of the more distinctive aspects of the school's operations. In contrast to the large amounts of waste produced at most conventional schools, School Cedar aims to be entirely waste-free. This effort is manifested in many ways, and there is an emphasis on reusing scrap materials, maintaining and repairing old items rather than replacing them, conserving water and electricity, and recycling or composting anything that cannot be reused. Instead of paper towels, the school uses designated hand towels for each student, and students are required to bring waste-free lunches (and if they have lunch waste, they must take it back home with them). In practice, the school is not entirely waste-free, and there are small trash receptacles in a few places such as the bathrooms; however, I was impressed with the minimal waste generated by the school. The school's conservation efforts also include buying second hand items such as furniture or computers, rather than investing in new ones. The conservation of resources and limiting of waste are admirable; however, one of the indirect consequences of this was the clutter in the physical environment (noted above), which included some items such as broken furniture outside, which did not appear to be destined for repair, and adversely affected the look and feel of the school.

Schedule of activities. At School Cedar there is a clear schedule of daily activities, which repeats each week. This schedule does not include the conventional subject areas found in mainstream schools, and instead, consists of uninterrupted blocks of time for the various learning

activities—many of which are discussed below under Content-related Factors. The schedule, although written down and followed fairly closely, is not rigid, and I observed a number of instances in which the teachers made adjustments during the day in order to accommodate the needs and interests of the students. Notably, there are no bells at School Cedar, and all transitions between classes and sessions are handled by the teachers, or directly by the students, in the case of those in the high school program.

Activity tracking. As noted, the students at School Cedar have a lot of choice in their daily learning activities. However, the school administration is keen to ensure that all students, as they progress through their years, complete the mandated provincial curriculum. In order to track students' learning and participation, the school has devised a system of Learning Logs, which are essentially binders where students keep a record of the workshops they participate in, and the topics they study. The Learning Logs are the responsibility of the students to maintain, and after each session, the students must obtain their teacher's signature to confirm their participation. This system enables the teachers to quickly review what each student has been studying over the course of the year, to discuss their interests and aptitudes with the students and their parents, and to make recommendations for future programming. The system is also a way of helping to ensure that, over the course of the school's four-year planning cycle, students achieve the learning outcomes of all of the required courses of study.

Adherence to regulatory requirements. Although School Cedar is an independent school, it receives partial funding from the provincial government, and must fulfill certain requirements in order to maintain good standing. Some of these requirements are curriculum related, and others relate to other factors like standards for safety, hygiene, and communication with parents. I was interested to note that I heard more discussion about these standards and requirements at School Cedar than I had heard previously at other schools, including those I had worked in myself. There

is a clear interest from the school administration to ensure compliance with all of the standards, and some of these were the subject of discussion during staff meetings I attended. For example, one of the issues being discussed at that time was how to maintain student choice during open-classroom time, while ensuring that each child over 10 years old is actively studying a second language, as per Ministry requirements. Another issue under discussion was related to the standards of hygiene for accredited after school care programs, and how to meet those requirements (for example, for cups and towels) without compromising the school's waste-free initiative. During my time at the school, I also heard some of these requirements being communicated to students, conveying the understanding that while students are given as much choice as possible in the program, there are some things that are non-negotiable and cannot even be changed at the board level.

Financial constraints. Financial constraints were a factor that came up repeatedly in conversations with the school staff, and substantial effort appears to go into maintaining the financial viability of the school. To some extent, these constraints appear to complement the philosophy of the school, and the school culture has developed in a manner that supports the careful utilization of resources. There is some synergy between frugality and environmental responsibility, and certain practices are germane to the program goals, like the use of bicycles rather than busses for community-based field trips, reusing and repairing things as opposed to replacing them, and making due with the resources available rather than upgrading them. Reportedly, prior to my visit, there had been a break-in, and several of the school's computers had been stolen. The school did not have the resources to replace them right away, and the teachers talked about the valuable life lesson for students in this, in contrast to the less constrained resources of many other schools.

However, financial constraints also appear to detract from the core mandate of the program in some respects. They have been a factor in the development of new programs that generate revenue for the school, but do not seem to advance the core aims of the program, such as the school's home learning and online language learning programs. Perhaps more significantly, financial constraints affect teachers' pay, and while the school reportedly has a flat pay structure, teachers indicate they receive substantially less than what they would receive in the public system. While this may contribute to positive self selection among some teachers committed to the philosophy, it also means that many top quality candidates have other more lucrative options available to them teaching elsewhere.

Funding sources. As a private school, the operating budget of School Cedar depends substantially on tuition from parents. However, in keeping with the school's philosophy, accommodations are made in order to ensure that families are not excluded due to lack of financial means. In reality, some families pay more than others, and as noted, at the time of my visit only about half of the families were paying tuition.

In addition to tuition fees, School Cedar obtains some funding, on a per child basis, based on the provincial guidelines for independent schools. The school also operates a number of other programs that provide additional revenue for the school, the most significant of which is the school's home learning program, which enrolls students and provides curriculum materials and distance learning support, in exchange for a portion of the provincial grant for distributed learners.

Overlapping programs. To elaborate further on the paragraph above, the school offers a variety of programs, including: a day school program; before and after school care; a home learning program; a pre-primary program; a summer program; and online language learning opportunities. The students involved in these programs overlap to some extent, and in particular,

the summer program and before and after school programs tend to involve mostly the day school students. The pre-primary program involves many of the younger siblings of those in the day school program. There are also, reportedly, some home learning students who come to the school and participate in the day programs or field trips from time to time, although this appears not to be common. The variety of programs creates potential for the school to have a stronger than normal impact on students' development. However, I did not get a sense that there was a clear and consistent philosophical approach across the programs, and it appeared to me that the range of programs was principally due to financial need rather than potential impact.

Expectations, guidelines, and procedures. Discipline at School Cedar is handled humanely, and while teachers are in a clear authority position, the approach is far from authoritarian. Non-violent communication plays an important role in how classroom management is handled, and the teachers appear to use NVC consistently. This involves recognizing students' needs and feelings, while at the same time maintaining a firm stance about the expectations for behavior and the importance of maintaining an environment suitable for everyone to learn in. While I found many inconsistencies in procedures and expectations across the school, the staff appear to be making an effort to increase consistency, and to devise procedures that are consistent with the school philosophy. For example, I witnessed a lengthy discussion at one staff meeting about the process for tracking assignments in the high school program, and what values and subtle messages are conveyed by different approaches. The staff members are clearly attuned to the issue of the hidden curriculum and its relationship to policies and procedures, however, the debate was lively and there was considerable disagreement about the most appropriate procedure in this case.

A distinguishing feature of the approach to behavior management in the school is the focus on expected behaviors and ways of communicating as *context-specific guidelines*, rather than

fixed rules imposed arbitrarily. While expectations for behavior are not consistent across classrooms, and some teachers have more effective strategies than others, the students generally appear to have a clear understanding of how they are expected to behave in different situations, and most of the behavior I observed was consistent with that found in mainstream schools. With students for whom compliance with expectations was more challenging, the staff has developed different strategies. For example, there is a comfortable area near the school's office where one of the students often worked alone. Working in this area was not presented as a punishment, but rather, as an option (or sometimes, imperative) based on the collective interests of everyone, including the child.

Non-judgmental assessment. In general, conventional forms of assessment are downplayed at School Cedar. Assessment strategies such as exams and grading are viewed within the school community as unnecessarily judgmental, and at odds with the general philosophy of the school. Historically, student assessment has been carried out using portfolios in which students keep work samples and projects they have completed, along with their Learning Logs, which provide a record of what they have been working on. When feedback is provided to students, whether on their work, or in their report cards, teachers aim to make that feedback observational, rather than judgmental. My reflection on this point was that it is difficult to provide constructive feedback without some form of underlying judgment involving criteria for what is considered “good” work. I found that the teachers are also attuned to this point, and some mentioned that they have recently started to focus more on the use of rubrics, particularly for writing assignments, projects, and presentations. The teachers indicated that these were given ahead of time to students, however, during the school's Moon Day, during which the students presented projects they had been working on, I did not see any evidence of such rubrics being used—either as scaffolding tools or as assessment guidelines.

Content-related factors at School Cedar. *Community fieldtrips.* One of the hallmarks of School Cedar's program is weekly bicycle fieldtrips into the local community and to surrounding natural areas. While the field trips are not mandatory, they are a key part of the program, and a significant proportion of the students, across all grade levels, participate every week. These field trips are designed to familiarize students with the local community and bioregion, and to provide experiential learning opportunities related to natural history, cultural heritage, and ecology. During the week that I was at the school, I joined the field trip to a local park, and then to a natural seaside area. On site, the students broke into groups and went with the teachers to participate in different activities based on their interests, all the while, discussing the geographic and ecological features of the site.

Project-based learning. A lot of the learning at School Cedar is project-based, and the students are regularly encouraged to identify topics of interest, conceptualize a project, and then follow through with developing it. This is sometimes done in the context of workshops, where students may work individually or cooperatively on a project related to the workshop theme. However, in addition to these, one of the staples of the program is a monthly process of planning, developing, presenting, and celebrating individual projects. These are referred to as Moon Projects, because they are celebrated with each new moon. I was fortunate to be on hand for one of the monthly Moon Days, and found the projects to be extremely diverse, in terms of depth, format, and overall quality. Through the regular development of individual projects, the students are expected to develop initiative and follow-through, and other characteristics of lifelong learners. While the students receive some guidance on the projects at school, the parameters and scaffolding were somewhat unclear. The projects were presented in very different formats, and there appeared to be very little instruction around the expected project components, level of refinement of topics, and so on.

Consistent development of core skills. While students at School Cedar have a lot of choice in their learning, the school also gives priority to ensuring the steady, consistent development of core skills in English and math. While other curriculum areas are integrated into thematic workshops, the school administration has elected to dedicate a fixed block of time each day to skill development in English and math. This helps to support accountability and to ensure progression in these skill areas year after year, even while other content areas are much more open to student choice. The time blocks for skill development are used for relatively conventional lessons, as the classes work through units and practice their skills; however, since the classes are multi-aged, there is considerable individualization in the assignments of different students. In addition, to make the learning participatory and relevant to students, the teachers are generally quite flexible regarding the flow and content of each lesson, allowing for digressions and linkages to students' experiences and other subject areas. For example, during my visit, the high school class was studying ratios as part of a larger unit on the theory of measurement. Part of this involved looking at the body dimensions of a Barbie doll and discussing both the approach and the findings. This lesson evolved into a discussion about archetypes, body image, and the media. While the lesson digressed considerably from the original topic, I was impressed with the degree of critical thinking and engagement on the part of the students.

Choice within parameters. Apart from English and math, the remainder of the curriculum is taught and learned through integrated workshops, projects, and other non-lesson-based activities. The students at School Cedar are given a great deal of choice regarding what and how they learn; however, these choices are not entirely open ended, and usually involve choosing between several alternatives. This allows the school to structure the learning of students to some extent, while still giving students a degree of autonomy and self-direction. On any given day there may be two or three blocks of time for workshops, and within any given block, students

have a choice between a variety of workshops, or may choose to work on their own projects in their classrooms—referred to as “open classroom time.”

On the topic of choice in learning, it is worth noting that the school is attuned to the different needs and capacities of the different age groups in the school. Generally speaking, older students are given a wider range of choices and more flexible parameters than younger students, and as students progress year after year, they are given much more autonomy. In one example, a student in the high school had expressed an interest in learning about agriculture, but no teacher was offering workshops on the topic. So, with the support of her teachers, the student designed her own agriculture course, including the development of the expected learning outcomes, and then completed the course on her own. While one may be skeptical about the rigor in this process, my emphasis here is on the structured way in which student choice was supported.

Integrated workshops. The school staff uses an integrated and thematic approach to planning workshops, and ensures that the full provincial curriculum is available to students as they progress through the grade levels. To do so, the staff makes annual plans for what workshops will be provided, based on a four-year planning cycle covering all of the mandated topics and outcomes in the curriculum. Students’ learning is tracked using the Learning Logs described above, and teachers monitor these logs and encourage students to make sure their learning is balanced across the different content areas. The range of workshops available to students gives them exposure to a wide range of concepts and disciplines, and I was impressed with the sophistication of some of the topics. For example, one of the workshops geared towards high school students was focused on “the foundations of thinking,” including things like logic, analysis of evidence, and critical thinking. Another workshop was on the history of conflict, and was exploring the impact of conflict on local cultures, and the idea of cultural appropriation.

Bioregional content. The students at School Cedar get a lot of exposure to bioregional content, in terms of environment-related and community-related learning. Probably the most significant source of this content is through the weekly field trips offered by the school. Many of these field trips are to natural areas, where the staff involves the students in explorations, mini-lectures, and experiential activities to learn about the geography, history, and biology of their bioregion. Additional bioregional content is provided through the workshops offered to students, many of which have themes related, in some way, to sustainability or citizenship. However, both the field trips and the workshops are optional components of the program, and it is possible for students to consistently choose other alternatives, and thus, to go through the program with relatively limited exposure to such content. As noted, many of the students I spoke with had trouble articulating what is meant by bioregionalism, and while this does not necessarily mean they were not learning related content, it does suggest that the explicit emphasis on bioregionalism may not be as strong as what might be inferred from the positioning of the school. However, all of the students I interviewed shared relevant experiences such as learning about edible plants and removing invasive species, and it is clear that most of the students are indeed learning some bioregional content.

At least on an informal basis, all of the students have substantial exposure to elements of bioregionalism, just by being a part of this distinctive school community, with its waste free lunches, recycling and composting programs, and garden, as well as the influence of the teachers—who are themselves committed to bioregionalism. At the time I was there, for example, a large part of the schoolyard was covered with seaweed, which was in the process of drying. The seaweed had been gathered by students, and was going to be added to one of the garden beds, in order to help the garden retain water, while at the same time providing nutrients. While some

students understood more about this than others, all of the students I spoke with were aware of the seaweed, and its intended purpose.

Summary remarks on School Cedar. Whereas School Aspen and School Birch operate programs grounded in established philosophies, namely, democratic education and outdoor/ environmental education respectively, School Cedar is implementing a program entirely of its own design, developed over time, without reference to any particular body of literature. The program is quite eclectic, and while it is labeled a bioregional school, it incorporates elements of global education, civic education, outdoor/ environmental education, as well as other elements entirely of the school's own design. Since the school has developed in relative isolation from other alternative programs, it has developed a number of innovative and entirely unique approaches. These approaches reflect the school's reaction against mainstream schooling, as well as the eclectic philosophy on which the school was founded. This, along with other factors, made School Cedar a rich site for my data collection.

Many of the factors shaping students experiences at School Cedar are school-wide, but more than the other two schools, I also observed differences at the classroom level. In general, the most prominent factors in students' experiences tended to be institutional ones, and the students particularly highlighted the degree of choice and flexibility in their program. However, the students also cited the school's weekly bicycle fieldtrips as a distinctive aspect of the school, and a major part of their experience there. The social aspect of the schooling experience was certainly present, but was less prominent than I had expected, and certainly less prominent than at the other two schools.

While content-related factors were not particularly prominent in the data from my time at the school, it is worth noting that it was during my time at School Cedar that I became convinced of the necessity of including content-related factors as a category within my operational

definition of the educative context. Educational content is taken up in a variety of ways at the school, and students regularly mentioned their choices in learning as something they really valued about the school. Through my observations at the school, I came to recognize that the way in which the content is framed with students has an important bearing on their experience with that content. This was particularly noticeable in the high school classes, where big questions and critical thinking are most prominent.

There is a very high level of intentionality at School Cedar, and the school appears to have developed most of its approaches more or less from the ground up. As such, it is possible to draw clear connections between bioregionalism (understood as incorporating environmental and community issues) and many of the contextual factors of the school. Some notable examples include the school's community field trips, its waste reduction practices, and the schoolyard garden. However, the relationship between bioregionalism and other contextual factors, such as the emphasis on individual choice in learning, are less clear.

In practice, the factors I identified as being prominent in the educative context of the school do not seem to coalesce around any particular theme. The approaches used within the school are diverse, and while they add up to a continuous experience for the students, they do not appear to reflect a consistent underlying philosophy. As noted above the school's mandate is, itself, multifaceted, incorporating elements of democracy, socialism, individualism, activism, environmentalism, and communitarianism, among others. Therefore, while a lot of thought and discussion goes into the arrangements that shape students' experiences at School Cedar, the hidden curriculum that results may be somewhat of a hodgepodge.

Overall, a lot of good things can be said about School Cedar, especially in terms of how it is meeting individual needs in an inclusive setting; however, both the school's educational philosophy, and its practices, are quite eclectic. This presents challenges from the standpoint of

managing the hidden curriculum, because in order to be systematic in aligning the various contextual factors with an educational mandate, that mandate must be clear and coherent. While I did not identify any factors that were directly at odds with the school's philosophy, I found the philosophy to be somewhat fuzzy, and there seems to be a lack of congruence between many of the prominent contextual factors. This may be part of the reason why students and some staff had difficulties in describing how their school reflected the principles of bioregionalism, and may also help to explain the wide range of approaches used by different staff members as well.

Although the educational philosophy of the school may have been unclear to me, and the coherence of the hidden curriculum around bioregionalism seems somewhat limited, School Cedar does appear to be delivering an effective educational program in many respects. The teachers are highly committed to the students, and the low student to teacher ratio means that students get a lot of individual support. The students I spoke with love it there, and the school seems to be quite effective in meeting students' individual needs. Students' choices in learning, along with the school's approach to ensuring coverage of the provincial curriculum, also seem to be contributing to good learning outcomes. If I would have been observing at the school without having read first about its aims, I would likely have thought the school's emphasis was on individualization, rather than bioregionalism, as many of the most prominent factors in the educative context have to do with student choice and support.

Transitional Remarks

Chapter Four has provided an overview of the findings obtained from the school-based fieldwork of this research project. These findings have been coded and categorized to describe the most prominent aspects of the educative context in each school. Some preliminary analysis has also been included, related to the influence these factors may have on students, and their relationship to the school's educational aims.

The next chapter will delve into deeper discussion of these findings, including a comparative analysis and meta-analysis based on the data from the three schools collectively. It will also relate the findings back to the literature review presented in Chapter Two, in order to discuss their implications and draw corresponding conclusions.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

Chapter Five presents a discussion on the findings of this inquiry, and their implications for the theory and practice of education. While Chapter Four included some analysis of the data at the level of the individual schools where data was collected, this chapter will discuss these findings comparatively and collectively in order to establish a more comprehensive understanding of the constructs involved. In addition to this higher-level analysis, this chapter will also discuss the implications and limitations of this research.

Comparative Analysis

While all three of the school involved in this study fall into the general category of alternative programs, the three are highly distinct in their approaches, the kinds of experiences they offer students, and consequently, their hidden curricula. From the angle of the educative context, the schools are also quite different in terms of the values with which that context is infused, and the consistency and coherence of the different factors that contribute to students' experiences therein. While this study was not designed to measure or prove the impact of the hidden curriculum, the data in Chapter Four nonetheless contribute evidence to support the assertion that these kinds of tacit factors indeed structure and shape students' experiences, resulting in community norms, the development of habits, and internalized values and perspectives.

Contrasts. Comparing the educative contexts of the three schools, there are certain factors, and categories of factors that stand out as being particularly prominent in each. In School Aspen, many conventional school structures are not present and, consequently, the informally organized social environment plays a relatively more prominent role. In particular, the freedom given to students is conducive to authentic kinds of social interaction which, in combination with other

factors, contribute to powerful and distinctive daily experiences for the students, especially with respect to conflict resolution, peer pressure, and other social conditions that are muted in more controlled school environments. School Birch and School Cedar, by contrast, are considerably more structured. In School Birch, key aspects of students' experiences include the very small and close-knit community, and the close connection between their school experiences and the natural world around them—a connection that is largely absent in mainstream schools that function with ambivalence towards the natural world. In School Cedar, prominent aspects of students' daily experience include the emphasis on individual decisions, and the inclusive and accepting conditions established through the use of non-violent communication.

Each of the three schools is quite unique, and provides rich examples of how schooling arrangements can be tailored to manifest or reinforce unique educational aims and priorities. The approaches and practices described in Chapter Four run the range of conceivable factors, including different physical and material arrangements, different social structures and conditions, different policies and procedures, and very different approaches to the idea of educational content. Importantly, however, the most prominent factors in each school were quite different. Not only were the factors of varying importance from school to school, but more significantly, some of the factors in each given school were entirely absent in the others. The structural arrangements of each school's context create conditions where different contextual factors appear, evolve, and become prominent.

However, while these differences in the educative contexts of the three schools are notable, there is also another important difference related to the educational aims the factors in each school support, as well as the coherence and alignment of the factors more generally. Any aspect of the educational context may, in general terms, be imbued with any number of different values, and may support any number of different educational aims. Taking student assessment as an

example, conventional test-based assessment approaches have important social and political consequences (see Ollman, 2001). School Aspen, in response to this, has almost entirely done away with student assessment. In School Birch, the focus is on student self-assessment. And in School Cedar, the emphasis is on observational rather than judgmental forms of assessment. There are different values and priorities reflected in each approach to assessment, and the influence they exert on students will be different in each case. The same can be said of any of the other general factors presented in Chapter Four, such as pedagogical approaches, social groupings, approaches to behavior management, and so on.

Looking at the sum total of all of the factors in a given school, it is clear that the educative context will have the clearest influence on students when these various factors are aligned, with each one reflecting similar values and priorities as the others. While all three of the schools appear to be working towards this goal, there are differences. Among the three schools, the value orientation of the various contextual factors identified in Chapter Four is the most coherent in School Aspen, and it is relatively easy to identify the connections between the school's democratic or libertarian philosophy, and each individual factor. School Birch seemed to have a similar degree of alignment, albeit with a somewhat broader educational mandate, and consequently, a somewhat less focused educative context. By contrast, in School Cedar, although there still appears to be a high degree of intentionality behind the various factors, the value orientation of these factors is less clear and coherent. Some of the factors are quite communitarian in nature, while others are quite individualistic. Moreover, their alignment with the school's stated aim of bioregionalism is somewhat fuzzy. As discussed in Chapter Four, this may be due, in part, to the eclectic philosophy of the school, which can be contrasted to the more singular focus of School Aspen. It seems natural that a narrower focus of educational aims would be conducive to establishing a more focused educative context, while a broader or more disparate

educational mandate would be more difficult to operationalize, given the likelihood of competing priorities and tradeoffs between different approaches.

It is not surprising, then, that amongst the three schools, the students I interviewed at School Aspen seemed to provide the strongest evidence of the impact of the educative context. From this I inferred that the hidden curriculum at School Aspen, while not particularly hidden, seems to be quite powerful. As noted previously, the students I spoke with at School Aspen all manifested multiple aspects of the school's philosophy, with high degrees of independence, critical-thinking, and social maturity, as well as tendencies towards entrepreneurialism, civic engagement, and activism. In addition to the clear focus of the program, this effectiveness may also be due, in part, to the continuity and length of the program at School Aspen, since those students I spoke with had all been there for at least several years. While there is generally a clear alignment between the educative context of School Birch and its educational aims, the students are only there for a relatively short period of time, and as such, have less sustained exposure to the influence of the educative context. I have previously related the impact of the educative context to the idea of socialization, and this is obviously a process that takes time, and becomes more effective as time goes on.

Commonalities. The comparative aspect of this student was conducive to identifying differences and contrasts between the schools, and indeed they are very different; however, there are also some important commonalities. Most fundamentally, all three of the schools are actively working to shape students' learning experiences in a manner that is consistent with their philosophies and aims. Moreover, all three are doing so by bringing intentionality to the educative context, across a wide range of factors. While the specific factors that are emphasized in each school are different, there are, among them, some that were prominent in all three schools. Perhaps most significant among these is the influence of teachers as role models. In each

of the schools, the influence of the teachers in terms of modeling behaviors, attitudes, communication styles, and so on, was apparent. While the specific type of role modeling—those things being modeled—was different in each school, the intentionality was there in all three cases. The importance of teachers' roles, not only in role modeling, but also in structuring and mitigating other aspects of students' experiences, was reinforced in each school. Other factors that came up in some form in each of the three schools included: intentional practices in student assessment and reporting; degrees of individualization and student choice in learning activities; specific approaches or interpretations of the idea of pedagogy; and the importance of the broader school community. However, the fact that these factors were prominent in all three schools does not necessarily mean they are of greater significance. Their recurrence may simply be a reflection of the fact that these are fundamental aspects of education, which are necessarily present in some form. Or alternately, their recurrence may be due to observer bias, as these are aspects of education that I, as a researcher, was looking for in each school. Nonetheless, these recurring factors may be good examples of starting points for educators in other school who are interested in analyzing and reorienting their hidden curricula.

Another aspect of the comparative analysis that I had originally intended to pursue was the idea of common gaps in the educative contexts of the schools. I had expected that, using the initial model of the educative context as a lens, I would be able to identify factors that were either not attended to, or unintentionally constructed, in the different schools. Certainly there were factors in each school that were not prominent in the others, and certainly, there are factors, such as bells, books, and teachers' dirty looks which were not prominent in any of the three schools. However, while the *specific manifestation* of a factor may differ from school to school, the *general factors* themselves are ever-present. As noted above, a factor like assessment can take different forms, and its manifestation in the form of testing is significant in both its presence and

its absence. As such, it is important to differentiate between general factors, and the specific manifestations of those factors. It is also important to note that some factors that may be prominent in one school may make little sense or be indistinctive in others. For example, one of the prominent aspects of School Birch is that it is a residential program, with students living on-site during the week. This can be considered as a specific manifestation of a more general factor called something like “students’ living arrangements.” However, in the vast majority of Canadian schools, students live at home, and as such, this general factor, while no doubt affecting students’ experiences, is going to be inconsequential in most discussions about the hidden curriculum of most schools. Nonetheless, such factors are still worth noting, as they help to reveal aspects of the schooling experience that may be invisible or hidden from view, in the form of unquestioned assumptions about what schooling is and how schooling is done.

However, while there may not be any gaps in the contexts of these schools, in terms of missing general factors, there are nonetheless some areas where the degree of intentionality may be improved. While the pedagogical approaches used in each of the three schools were strong and appropriate in their own ways, all are somewhat eclectic, and they lack the clarity of purpose-driven approaches such as those described by Postman and Weingartner (1969) and Freire (1993), for example. While this eclecticism may be necessary given the constraints of the broader education system, there nonetheless appears to be room for further reflection on the specific pedagogical approaches and instructional strategies, and their tacit influences on students. Similarly, assessment has been substantially downplayed in all three schools, and in so doing, they have thrown out most of the proverbial baby with the bathwater. While the schools have all reacted against conventional forms of assessment for valid reasons, there is certainly room to explore alternative approaches that may better complement their educational aims, while at the

same time scaffolding and supporting student learning, and providing valuable feedback to guide planning and teaching in the school.

One final aspect of the three schools where further improvements may be made is in terms of the clarity of their educational aims and mandates. This point has been raised previously in relation to School Cedar in particular, but I believe it also pertains to the other two schools. One thing that became particularly apparent in the analysis of data from the three schools was that a major factor limiting the extent of alignment between the educative context and the educational mandate of the schools is the clarity and coherence of their mandates. To put it simply, if the education goals and values of the school are unclear or unfocused, it becomes very difficult to think about what kind of tacit learning is necessary to achieve those goals and embody those values. In turn, that makes it very hard to consider clearly what it would look like to if the educative context were fully aligned with that mandate. In the case of School Cedar, the eclectic and somewhat ambiguous nature of its mandate presents challenges, because it is unclear what exactly the educative context should be reinforcing.

However, even in School Aspen and School Birch where the mandates are more focused, it is also challenging, because those mandates emphasize processes and approaches to education, rather than educational or developmental outcomes. Attempting to align the educative context with a process-oriented mandate becomes self-referencing, because both are talking about very similar things—the educational *process* is part of the educational *context*. Moreover, as noted earlier, process-oriented approaches such as experiential education are process-oriented for a reason, and that reason relates to unarticulated educational or developmental goals. Educators do not focus on experiential learning or student choice simply for their own sake, but rather, as a means to improving the quality and relevance of student learning, among other things. I strongly suspect that the focus on process rather than the outcomes is partly due to the challenges in

describing the desired outcomes using the conventional terminology of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs). And I also suspect, that if the scope of thinking were expanded to include broader developmental outcomes in addition to conventional educational outcomes (i.e., dispositions in addition to KSAs) that a clearer mandate could be articulated for all three schools, which would, in turn, provide a stronger foundation and clearer focus for discussions about how the educative context might be tailored to support those mandates.

Reconstructive Analysis

Up until this point, the analysis included in this paper has been largely deconstructive, in the sense that it has attempted to tease apart the complex phenomena of the hidden curriculum and the educative context into component elements, contrasting different examples in order to identify ambiguities, inconsistencies, and so on, as well as related strengths and effective practices. However, at this point, it is worthwhile to return to the bigger picture, and to begin reconstructing these constructs based on everything the preceding has brought to light.

While I use the term “reconstructive analysis” here, it is important to note that while the methodology of this study drew on the work of Carspecken (1996), this reconstructive analysis will follow a somewhat different approach than that described by Carspecken. Carspecken’s (1996) approach is focused on exploring system relations within the data, and using the system relations to explain the findings of the research. However, while this study has been guided by the critical ethnographic approach, the system relations themselves are not the topic of inquiry. Rather, the focus of this study is on the deeper constructs, like the hidden curriculum, through which things like power relations take expression. Therefore, the focus of this reconstruction is on these underlying constructs, not the system relations themselves. This section will review the initial understanding of these constructs that was developed in earlier chapters, and will seek to refine that understanding based on the data and analysis to this point.

While the initial topic of interest in this study was the hidden curriculum, the study itself focused on a pair of constructs related to it—the educative context, and the idea of tacit teaching. The school-based data collection consistently reinforced this basic conceptual framework, drawing clear connections between each school’s educational mandate, and the various factors that are prominent in the educative context of each. This, in itself, is noteworthy because there has been relatively little research on the idea of tacit teaching to date, and the idea of the educative context is entirely new. The intentional work done by teachers and administrators to tailor the contextual factors in their schools to their educational mandate is what I have been referring to as tacit teaching, and their contribution to the hidden curriculum in each school was quite apparent. However, while this general conceptual framework was validated by the data, a number of issues presented themselves with respect to the preliminary model of the educative context that I had proposed in Chapter Two.

It became clear early in the study that the initial model was based on relatively conventional thinking about school structures, which were not at all consistent with the approaches of the three alternative schools I studied. The model assumed (tacitly) that students would be arranged in classes, and those classes would be led by teachers, and those teachers would in turn be part of a larger hierarchy involving the school administration, and the higher authorities in the education system. While that model could easily be adapted to accommodate simple variations, such as having multiple teachers for a given class, the tidy arrangement of nested levels and distinct categories of factors broke down substantially in the face of real data from the three alternative schools. These schools are intentionally working outside of conventional norms, and are actively working to challenge the boundaries and assumptions of conventional schooling models. This is why these schools were invited to participate in this study, and this issue serves to validate their inclusion as appropriate research sites. However,

because I am also seeking to challenge the status quo, it is therefore important to ensure that any conceptualization of the educative context, of tacit teaching, or of the hidden curriculum, emerging from this research remain open and flexible in order accommodate and embrace ever bolder alternatives to mainstream schooling. The preliminary model of the educative context from Chapter Two was sufficient for the purposes of my initial data generation and coding, but at this point it is worth reexamining the basic elements of that model in light of the findings and analysis.

The preliminary model of the educative context consisted of two dimensions. The first dimension was a set of nested levels of the education system, with the student at the center, as the focal point of all the arrangements and conditions presented by the higher levels. The second dimension was a set of categories of contextual factors that comprise students' daily experiences. The basic premise of the model was that students' experiences are shaped by these factors, and that factors at each level of the system have a bearing on factors at other levels of the system. Generally speaking, those in closest proximity to the students, namely their teachers, have the most direct influence on the factors affecting students, and therefore, the most direct bearing on students' experiences. However, what are considered reasonable and tolerable practices, conditions, and so on at the classroom level are determined at higher levels of the system. Thus, while teachers have considerable freedom, control is exercised at the school level, the district level, and beyond in order to ensure some consistency in students' experiences.

The nested system. None of the schools in this study presented clear evidence of a nested system like that depicted in the preliminary model (classroom, school, system). The classroom structure is essentially nonexistent at School Aspen. At School Birch, there is only one class, and hence, there is no differentiation between the classroom level and the school level. Moreover, while both School Aspen and School Birch are public schools and belong to a public educational

district, I saw relatively little evidence of the ways in which the district affected the schooling experience day to day, save the existence of the schools (since, arguably, the schools may not exist were it not for the district's embrace of alternative programs). School Cedar, on the other hand, is an independent school, and does not have a district administration at all. While the school's non-profit society may be considered a proxy for the district, I had a clear impression that the board's role was largely symbolic. It is for these reasons that most of the factors I identified in Chapter Four, for all three schools, were at the *school* level, as this appears to be the primary unit of organization in all three. Moreover, it is also worth noting that my research was directed at the school level, rather than classrooms or districts, and it is therefore natural that I tended to observe more factors at that level.

Nonetheless, while the nested system I observed was not neat and tidy, there is still value in retaining the idea of levels in a model of the educative context. In all schools, there was some evidence of higher levels (district, provincial, or even school networks) having a bearing on lower levels, in areas such as professional development, curriculum priorities, and hiring practices for teachers. Moreover, while the school level organization of School Aspen, for example, is not neatly based on conventional class groupings, and the teacher's role is not as central to students' experiences as it would be in a conventional school, teachers still play an important role in the daily experiences of students, and the school still has a number of related factors, including classrooms, advisory groups, classes being taught by teachers, and informal groupings that are at least partially determined by age. The idea of levels in the system prompts an observer to look upwards for factors beyond the school level that may be influencing life in the school, as well as downwards to lower or smaller scale forms of organization within the school that might similarly be impacting students' experiences. As such, the notion of nested

levels shaping the educative context can be retained, provided the boundaries and relative weights of the different levels be viewed flexibly.

Categories of factors. I encountered similar messiness in the data related to the different categories of contextual factors. The preliminary model included three categories of factors: physical, social, and institutional. However, many of the factors that I identified did not fit clearly into one category or another. For example, the use of rooms in School Aspen, discussed at length in Chapter Four, is certainly related to the physical context, because there are physical rooms involved; however, the school has policies and procedures related to room use that make this unconventional room allocation possible. Similarly, factors as complex as teaching styles or pedagogical approaches are highly social, but also include many small routines and procedures that could be classified as institutional. Most of the factors could arguably be placed into more than one of the categories in the model. However, I still found the categories useful for elaborating the construct, and scaffolding my observations so that I was attending to different aspects of the context. Rather than letting the whole model implode, I opted to accept the messiness involved as part of the naturalistic research process, and to just classify the factors in the manner that seemed most appropriate.

The most significant challenge to my preliminary model came early on in the data generation process. I had been quite adamant about differentiating the educative context from any explicit educational content, and was intentionally omitting content-related factors in my preliminary analysis because I wanted to focus on context alone. Explicit content was not of interest to me, because it is not generally considered to be part of the hidden curriculum. However, as my data generation continued, I was compelled to accept as important, factors like the way in which explicit content is structured and presented, the interplay between content and other factors, and the types of content that are emphasized and deemphasized. By the time I had

completed my data collection in School Cedar, I had accepted that I would need to frame the educative context in terms of four categories of factors, including content-related factors, rather than just three as I had originally intended.

Another issue related to the categories of factors, which I had also not considered previously, was their relative weighting or importance in different schooling contexts. Initially, I had envisioned a fairly static list of factors that would likely be present in some form in all schools, such as, discipline systems, assessment practices, teaching strategies, and so on—factors commonly associated with the hidden curriculum. I had imagined that while the specific manifestations of these factors would vary from school to school, the general factors would be present and similarly important in all schools. That is not what I found. While one could still support the claim that all general factors are present in all schools (as discussed above, either in presence or absence), the relative importance of these different factors and categories across schools seems to vary substantially. In School Aspen, for example, social factors are particularly prominent, whereas in School Birch, physical factors seemed relatively more important. As such, while my initial model divided the educative context into evenly sized categories, suggesting that the different categories were equally important, this is probably not the norm.

The factors themselves. For the purpose of further refining the model of the educative context, it is worthwhile to return to the point raised earlier about differentiating between the specific manifestations of a contextual factor, and the general factor itself. The many factors discussed in Chapter Four were simply those aspects of the educative context that appeared most prominent in each school, and in most cases, these refer to specific manifestations rather than general factors. Therefore, in order to further elaborate on the educative context model, it is necessary to step back from these specific manifestations, and determine the general factors that

lie behind them. The table below presents a list of all of the factors mentioned in Chapter Four, and the general factors related to each.

Table 5

General factors suggested by the specific manifestations of those identified in the analysis of school-based data

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
Physical	Aspen	Use of designated rooms	• Rooms for specific groups or purposes
		Use of undesignated rooms	• Approach used for allocating rooms
		Conventional school building	• Type of school building(s)
		Student ownership	• Degree of student ownership for physical spaces
		Use of informal spaces	• How informal spaces are used
		Permeable and expanding boundaries	• Permissions for use of different spaces
		Availability of learning materials	• Availability and types of learning materials*
		Visual environment	• Nature of the visual environment
	Birch	Geographic setting	• Geographic setting of the school
		Physical site	• Nature of the physical school site
		Outdoor exposure	• Amount of students' outdoor exposure

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
		School buildings	• Type of school building(s)*
		Main building	• Primary space used by students
		Visual environment	• Nature of the visual environment*
		Student dorms	• Nature of student dorms
		The Little School	• Other physical sites used regularly
		Physical Learning Materials	• Availability and types of learning materials*
	Cedar	School furnishings and décor	• Nature of furnishings and décor
		School buildings	• Type of school building(s)*
		Variety in classrooms	• Differences between classrooms
		Movement between classrooms	• Mobility during the school day
		Crowdedness	• Degree of crowdedness
		Schoolyard	• Nature of schoolyard
		School location	• Location of school, and type of surroundings
Social	Aspen	Diversity in some dimensions	• Degree and types of diversity in the school community
		Inclusive and accepting culture	• Degree of acceptance of diversity

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
		Management of incoming students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process for selecting, accepting, and orienting new students
		Behavior management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach and procedures for behavior management
		Social friction and conflict resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree and type of conflict in the school community • Approaches used to resolve conflicts
		Lack of formal groupings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type(s) of formal student grouping arrangements
		Egalitarian structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational hierarchies • Status and authority level of teachers compared with students
		School identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinctiveness of identity associated with the school
		Special vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinctive terms and colloquialisms
		Staff presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of staff responsiveness and attentiveness to student needs
		Teacher selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process for selecting, hiring, and orienting new teachers
		School community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of parent participation • Degree of alumni involvement

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networks and relationships with other schools
	Birch	Small scale community living	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size and intimacy of the school community • Students' living arrangements
		Close personal relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prominent characteristics of student relationships
		Pedagogical relationships, role modeling, and mentorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of pedagogical relationships • Role modeling of relevant attitudes and behaviors • Formal or informal mentoring arrangements
		Pedagogical approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General pedagogical orientation • Instructional strategies used
		Acceptance and diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree and types of diversity in the school community* • Degree of acceptance of diversity*
		Changing community composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stability of school community
		Group activities with varying structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency and type of group activities

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
		Down time and authentic interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of unstructured time for students
		Acceptance in the broader community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of acceptance of student body in the broader community
Cedar		Individual responsibility for behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type and firmness of expectations for student behavior • Degree of enforcement of behavioral expectations
		Individual responsibility for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student responsibility in managing their learning
		Nonhierarchical structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prominence of staff hierarchies
		Nonviolent communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special communication approaches used regularly
		Norming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff emphasis on community norms and orienting students
		Small multi-year groupings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type(s) of formal groupings • Multi-aging in primary groupings
		Low student to teacher ratio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student to teacher ratio • Class sizes
		Variety in teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and variety of teachers • Teaching styles

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
		Pedagogical relationships	• Authenticity and formality in pedagogical relationships
		Mixed-age opportunities	• Opportunities for mixed-age interaction
		Varying interests of school population	• Similarities and differences in the priorities of community members
Institutional	Aspen	Room councils	• Special procedures for room usage
		Loose institutionalization	• Extent to which rules, routines, and policies are adhered to
		Process orientation	• Relative importance of outcomes and processes
		Assessment practices	• Types of assessment practices used • Communication of assessment results to students and parents
		Credit and graduation	• Expectations regarding academic credit and graduation • Curriculum priorities and requirements
		School council	• School-wide decision-making process • Student participation in school governance
		Judicial council	• Student involvement in behavior management

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of peer pressure in behavior management
		Rules and procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School and classroom rules • School and classroom procedures
		Mitigation of district policies and initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher level policies and initiatives • Training programs and initiatives of the district
	Birch	Ecological approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility and responsiveness of institutional structures
		Imposed but flexible scheduling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type of scheduling used
		Weekly flow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly routines
		Duties and responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student responsibilities in caring for their community
		Routine activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common or recurring activities
		Conservation practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach to material resource and utility usage/ conservation
		Waste management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waste management practices (proactive, composting, recycling)
		Evaluation of students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extent to which self-evaluation is used
		District policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy priorities within the district

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
	Cedar	Activity tracking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Method of monitoring student activities and progress
		Expectations, guidelines, and procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type and level of expectations on students • Behavioral guidelines and related systems • Procedures for routine tasks
		Consensus-based decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach used for making decisions
		Hand signals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative communication methods
		Community meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency and substance of school-wide meetings • Degree of follow-through on student input and ideas
		Community contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student responsibilities in caring for their community
		Waste free operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waste management practices (proactive, composting, recycling)*
		Schedule of activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach to scheduling daily activities • Duration and variation in time blocks
		Financial constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available financial resources

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relative compensation of teachers and other staff
		Funding sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding sources and corresponding obligations
		Overlapping programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional programs on school campus • School-supported extra-curricular activities
		Non-judgmental assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of assessment practices used* • Nature of assessment feedback provided to students
		Independent governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of school-level autonomy
		Adherence to regulatory requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of compliance with district or higher level policies • Course credit policies • Administrative requirements • Curriculum priorities
Content-related	Aspen	Integrated formal curriculum content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum subject/ topic distribution • Degree of curriculum integration
		Individual learning and tutoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extent of program individualization • Availability of individual learning support

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
		Activities as content	• Perceived value of free time and open-ended activities
		Core curriculum	• Presence and type of curriculum priorities
		Responsive content	• Readiness of teachers to provide responsive content
		Teachable moments	• Use of teachable moments, and types of incidents used
		Simulation activities	• Use of role playing and simulation
		Civic engagement and activism	• Importance attached to civic engagement and local issues
Birch		Experiential learning	• Emphasis placed on experiential aspects of learning
		Individualization rather than choice	• Extent of program individualization*
		Place-based outdoor education	• Relevance of content to local natural environment
		Informal and ad hoc content	• Informal and supplementary content matter
		Cognitive apprenticeships	• Apprenticeship or mentoring programs
		Critical reflection	• Emphasis on critical reflection and

Category	School	Specific Manifestation	General Factor(s)
			debriefing
		Life skills	• Focus on life skills
		Academic skills and lifelong learning	• Focus on academic skills and lifelong learning
	Cedar	Community fieldtrips	• Type and frequency of field trips
		Project-based learning	• Use of project-based approaches
		Consistent development of core skills	• Focus on select core skills • Types of skills and content prioritized
		Choice within parameters	• Types of choices provided to students
		Integrated workshops	• Extent to which content areas are integrated
		Bioregional content	• Degree of local relevance in content

* Repeated item

The general factors identified in the table above should not be taken as an exhaustive list of everything that the educative context consists of. Certainly, there are many other contextual factors operating at each school. Some of these may include things I noticed in my observations, but did not feel were significant enough to include in this analysis. However, there are also, no doubt, many additional factors that I did not notice. While tools like the conceptual framework I developed to guide this research may help with revealing some factors, there are almost certainly other factors that remained hiding in plain sight. Notwithstanding these concerns, the factors in the table above provide good insight into the kinds of things that can be considered important or significant in shaping the daily experiences of students. It is important to bear in mind that these

factors are not simply one person's conjecture. Rather, each of the factors in the above list has a strong evidence base, and has been identified through the course of school-based observations and interviews to be a prominent feature of the educative context in one or more of the schools.

This list of factors is simply intended to help elaborate on the concept of the educative context. It is not intended as a prescription for tacit teaching, but rather, as a list of the kinds of factors that educators might conceivably work with in order to bring more intentionality to the hidden curriculum. It is worth acknowledging that some factors, like teaching styles, are things that teachers have relatively direct control over, while other factors develop through the involvement of multiple players and other conditions. Things like school identity and the type of conflict that may be prominent in a school are not in any one person's direct control, and would require more concerted effort on the part of a larger number of school community members to change. The nature of the educative context is such that it is not the result of one person's efforts alone, and while each individual in the school community can have a relative impact on certain factors, bringing intentionality to the broader schooling context is best viewed as a collective project.

The personal nature of experience. All of the issues discussed above can be accommodated by a model of the educative context that is sufficiently flexible to respond to differences in schooling situations; however, the model I have been developing has one inherent limitation—it is focused solely on external factors. Rather than focusing on students' internal experiences, this research has focused on and emphasized those factors in the school setting that shape and influence those experiences. Nonetheless, I fully acknowledge the importance of students' backgrounds, perspectives, and personal conditions, and how these internal conditions may interact with external factors resulting in vastly different experiences from one child to the next, even within the same classroom. Every experience is an interactive one, based on

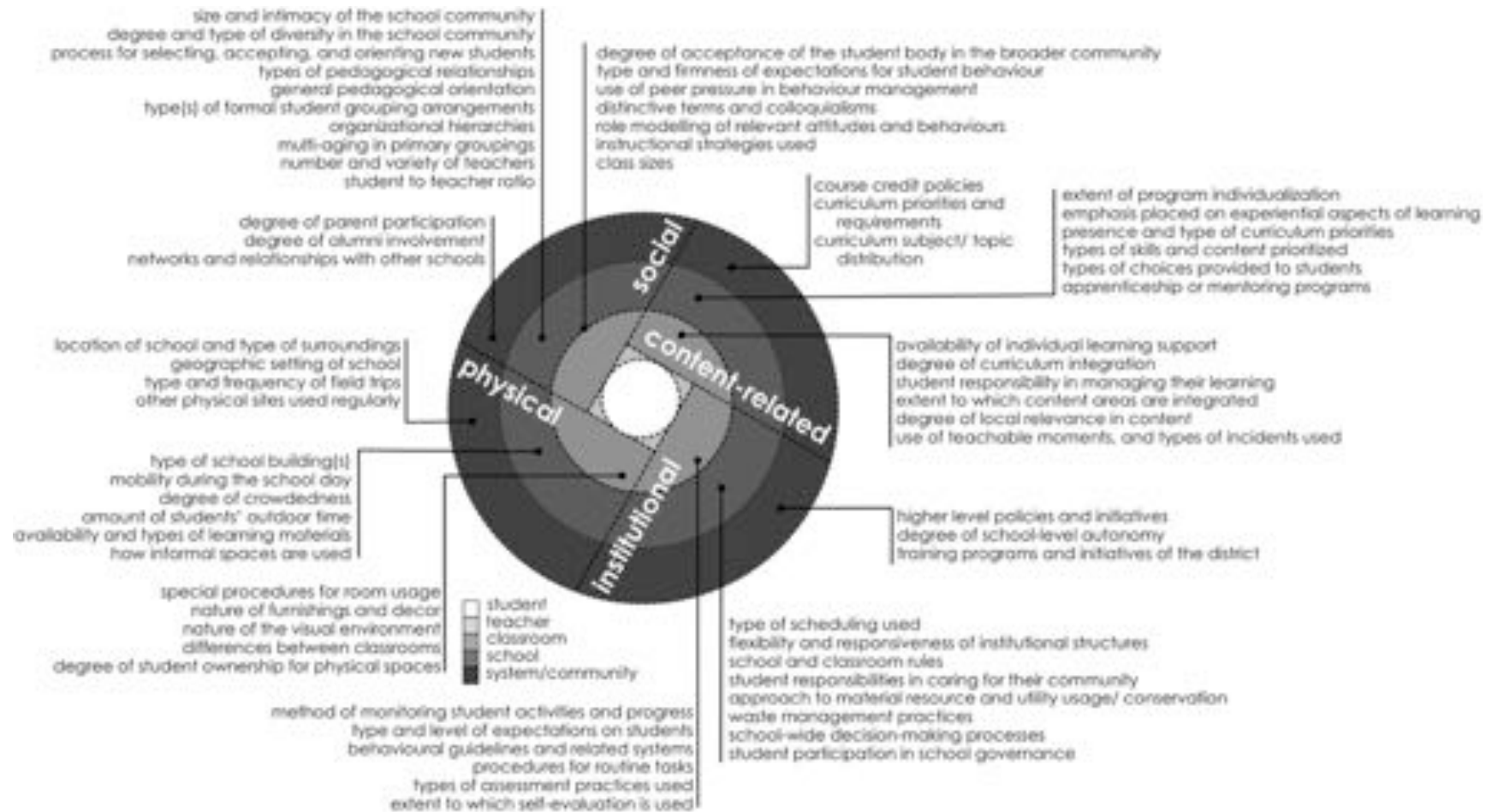
transactions, as Dewey (1929; Dewey & Bentley, 1949) writes, between external conditions and internal reflective processes, and while this research has focused on the external, I nonetheless want to stress the importance of the internal.

Each student's unique personality, history, and other characteristics will play an important role not only in determining the way they experience the educative context, but also, its impact on them. A context that inspires one student to become more civically engaged may contribute to the alienation of another student, and the apathy of a third student. However, this does not mean that the entire project is futile. Schools exert a steady socializing effect on students, as a result of the many factors listed above, and more. Just as the personal nature of students' experiences cannot be forgotten, neither can the influence of those factors. The educative context is an external construct, and while the model is limited by the fact that it does not fully take into consideration internal experiences, it nonetheless helps to provide an enriched understanding of the external elements that inform those experiences.

Reconstructed model of the educative context. Building on the preceding discussion, the initial model of the educative context has been reconstructed, and is presented below. This refined version takes into consideration the permeability of the different levels of the education system, as well as the fuzzy boundary between different categories of factors. These two dimensions of the diagram have nonetheless been retained because they have demonstrated their usefulness in elaborating the construct and guiding observations in relation to it. In addition, the model has been adjusted to include content-related factors as part of the educative context. Illustrative examples of the general contextual factors presented in the table above have also been plotted on the diagram, in order to further elaborate on the construct and provide a sense of the kinds of factors involved with the educative context. It should be noted, however, that an important aspect of this research has been the identification of educational approaches and

practices which manifest each of these factors—those described at length in Chapter Four. The figure below, on its own, is somewhat reductive, and the findings in Chapter Four serve complement this figure, to provide an evidence-based description of how the hidden curriculum is taught and learned, and practical examples of how teachers and schools can work intentionally to bring that hidden curriculum in line with their educational mandates.

Figure 2. Reconstructed model of the educative context, including illustrative examples of the factors involved. This model provides a systematic mapping of factors associated with the educative context, based on the findings of this study.



Implications

The implications of this study, and the constructs developed within it, are potentially quite profound. Superficially, this research has simply catalogued some of the non-academic practices of three alternative schools. However, the purpose behind this is significant. These practices were identified, through the analysis of a great deal of data, as being prominent and meaningful in the contexts of these schools, and in this sense, they shape and influence the experiences of students within them. Day after day, the students are immersed in a schooling environment that is characterized by these factors, and their experiences and development take place in relation to them. The factors help to determine how students spend their time, what they work on and work towards, what gets treated as important and unimportant, how their behavior is constrained, how validation is earned, how their needs and motivations are satisfied, and so on.

These factors, therefore, comprise the main features of the context in which socialization and enculturation takes place at school. They are important to students' development, and they are inescapable, which suggests that there is a responsibility on the part of educators to not simply leave these factors up to chance, or to let them be determined by the status quo or other competing forces. However, these factors, and the kind of deep learning associated with them, are usually considered to be part of the hidden curriculum, and they are treated informally, if at all. They tend not to be planned or measured or reported on. Since these factors clearly matter and impact students' experiences, and since they are an inescapable part of the educational process, the quiet implication of this research is that there would be considerable value in pushing to expand the idea of what it means to educate, and consequently, what it means to teach, towards something more akin to socialization than the narrow focus of conventional thinking. Jackson (1968) made this case nearly half a century ago in his book *Life in classrooms*,

where he is credited with coining the term hidden curriculum. In the context of the present discussion, it is fitting that his most recent work has the title of the simple question *What is education?* (Jackson, 2012), in which he advocates for a much more profound understanding of the education process than what is conventionally understood, along with a far more powerful view on what is learned in school. This research contributes to the evidence base supporting Jackson's position. Practically speaking, the findings suggest that teaching, and education in general, entail a far broader range of activities and arrangements than are usually considered. The teacher's job is far bigger than what we usually mean by the word "teach."

As discussed in Chapter Two, while there is plenty written about the *importance* of the hidden curriculum, there is very little in the literature around the mechanics of how it is taught and learned, and even less regarding how one might go about making the hidden curriculum something purpose-driven and beneficial. This study has taken an important step towards developing a systematic approach to this aspect of education. Because most of the literature on the hidden curriculum originates from the field of critical educational theory, this research is probably most directly relevant to that field. The constructs and ideas presented in this research comprise a set of tools that can be used to deconstruct any educational context, in order to clearly analyze and understand the hidden curriculum operating there. More importantly, these tools also equip educators with a means for creating change in those contexts. In the related fields of education for democracy and education for sustainable development, I have had opportunities to begin applying some of these concepts in my own work (Hiebert, 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c), and have been pleased with the positive response to the idea of transforming the hidden curriculum systematically into something purpose-driven.

This research is also quite relevant to more general discussions on the philosophy of education, because it questions some fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning. One of the most cited works in Chapter Two's literature review was Burbules (2008) article entitled Tacit Teaching, which provided a thorough introduction to the idea, and drew a convincing connection between tacit aspects of teaching, and the learning of the hidden curriculum. This article appears to be the seminal work on the subject, as evidenced by the long citation drawn from it for the relevant entry in the recent *Encyclopedia of the sciences of learning* (Seel, 2012). Other recent work, such as *The tacit dimensions of pedagogy* (Bergstedt, Herbert, & Kraus, 2012) tends to be highly phenomenological in nature, as opposed to the more pragmatic approach shared by Burbules' (2008) article and this research. It makes sense, then, for discussion about the implications of this research to refer back to that article and explore how the research can further inform the construct. Burbules's (2008) depiction of tacit teaching can be expanded in three regards based on the findings of this research.

First, and foremost, although Burbules (2008) drew a clear connection between the tacit teaching and the hidden curriculum, the article provides very little insight into the mechanics involved. The handful of tacit teaching approaches discussed in the article relate only to a small subset of teachers' activities—those involved with their in-class performance, like role modeling and demonstrating. This is quite a constrained notion of tacit teaching, and it does not take into consideration the wide range of other factors associated elsewhere with the hidden curriculum (see Martin, 1983; Ollman, 2001). This research bridges the gap between tacit teaching and the hidden curriculum more thoroughly, by introducing the idea of the educative context, consisting of a wide range of contextual factors, and not just in-class teacher behaviors. While not all of the factors involved with the educative context are directly controllable by

teachers, the idea of tacit teaching can be expanded, based on this study, to include all of the teacher's efforts to bring more intentionality and purpose to the educative context. In everyday usage, the management of many of these factors, such as assessment, student behavior, classroom routines, and so on, are already considered to be part of a teacher's job. This expanded notion of tacit teaching simply builds on this by focusing attention on the intrinsic educative value of these factors, rather than just their instrumental value in achieving conventional educational outcomes (as is currently the case).

Second, Burbules's (2008) discussion of tacit teaching draws heavily on the work of Polanyi (1966) regarding tacit knowledge, and in so doing, limits the discussion largely to the teaching and learning of procedural knowledge within a given domain of practice, an orientation shared by Seel (2012). However, as the literature on the hidden curriculum demonstrates, tacit learning goes well beyond this, and involves fundamental moral development, as well as attitudes, habits, and other personality traits. The factors discussed in Chapter Four provide a good evidence base for understanding how other aspects of students' tacit learning and socialization take place at school, including the development of a wide range of dispositions, perspectives, attitudes, assumptions, and so on. These kinds of learning and development are closely associated with the hidden curriculum, and by linking them with the idea of tacit teaching, by way of the educative context, this research makes a case for a broader formulation of tacit teaching with a much broader range of educational outcomes—not constrained to a given domain of practice. In fact, far from being constrained, the logical conclusion of this research is that tacit phenomena are ubiquitous, permeating not only all educational contexts, but all other human contexts as well. The research inadvertently suggests that the tacit dimension of human experience is potentially much more significant than what is conventionally thought, and this has

potential applications in other social environments, including workplaces, families, religious institutions, and so on.

Third, while Burbules (2008) acknowledges that tacit teaching need not be entirely tacit or entirely unintentional, his discussion focuses on its informal or inadvertent aspects—a perspective common to much of the literature on the hidden curriculum. However, this research has provided numerous examples of how the educative context is established through intentional decisions on the part of teachers and others in the school community. Since contextual factors can be controlled or at least mediated intentionally, and since this will result in tacit learning on the part of the students, it seems reasonable to conclude that tacit teaching has the potential to be an intentional act. This is not to say that it will be always or completely intentional, since even the most conscientious teachers cannot attend to all factors all the time. However, since the conventional idea of teaching implies an intentional activity, and since the modalities of tacit teaching can be understood systematically, there is certainly no need to relegate it to an informal space. To the contrary, given the importance of the hidden curriculum (Cuban, 1994; Eisner, 1994; Posner, 2003), it would be a worthwhile endeavor to formalize and systematize it to the greatest extent possible, thereby bringing more intentionality to the outcomes of the “hidden” curriculum.

Bringing together these points, I would suggest that the tacit domain in general is more important to student development than is generally recognized, and that the idea of tacit teaching is, in turn, more important and more widely applicable than what has been previously considered. While this is relevant to the hidden curriculum, and consequently, to critical educational theory, I would argue that it is also highly relevant to learning theory in general, and to the philosophy of education. The hidden curriculum is usually talked about in terms of its

negative effects and hegemonic tendencies, but this research has emphasized the connections between the hidden curriculum and more general aspects of students' socialization and development. In particular, the research has focused on the deep aspects of students' learning, such as the development of dispositions, perspectives, habits, and assumptions. As touched on above, these aspects of learning may be particularly resonant in fields such as citizenship and democracy education or environmental/ sustainability education, because these fields are particularly concerned with students' morals and actions. However, thinking more broadly, whether the aim is to cultivate excellent scientists, police officers, philosophers, or sales people, these deeper aspects of learning and development probably matter at least as much as knowledge and skills. While this research has been focused on K-12 learning environments, the implications can be extended to all kinds of education and training contexts, including online environments.

As recent publications suggest, the idea of the hidden curriculum has gained traction in other fields as well, ranging from education technology (Anderson, 2002), to higher education (Margolis, 2001), to teacher education (Rennert-Ariev, 2008) and other professional programs (Lempp & Seale, 2004; O'Brien, 2007), to early childhood education (Rietveld, 2010). Yet the common feature among these publications is a relative lack of direction around how to improve the hidden curriculum. This research provides a solid first step towards identifying strategies for reorienting negative hidden curricula to more positive directions by illuminating the process by which it appears to be taught and learned. Moreover, it provides numerous examples of aspects of the educative context that the participating schools have managed to successfully reorient themselves in order to bring more intentionality to students' daily experiences. While this research has not sought to identify best practices in this regard, the examples discussed in

Chapter Four can be thought of, at least, as “proof of concept” illustrations of how this approach works in practice.

Two of the areas where the findings of this research might be applied most directly and fruitfully are in pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher professional development (PD). While the concept of the hidden curriculum is already well known in profession, the limitations of this concept (on its own) have been discussed throughout this paper. Developing teachers would likely benefit from having the concept of the hidden curriculum presented and critiqued alongside the complementary concepts of tacit teaching and the educative context. While the idea of the hidden curriculum provides a powerful critique of mainstream education, on its own is a bit of a dead end because the focus is on what is hidden. However, the ideas of tacit teaching and the educative context present exciting possibilities for student development and deep learning that may be brought about by harnessing the power of the hidden curriculum. With this in mind, it would be useful in teacher education and PD to discuss tangible examples of the hidden curriculum that are related to contextual factors such as student assessment (or any of the other contextual factors discussed in the preceding chapter), and how different types of assessment practices embody different values and can lead to very different student experiences. Reflection on such examples can lead to an enriched understanding of what it means to teach, and the profound significance of educational practices that may otherwise be taken for granted.

While introducing these ideas to developing teachers would be valuable for enriching their understandings of education *in general*, the ideas are most valuable when they are applied *in relation to a particular value set*. In this paper, most of the discussion has been around values related to citizenship, democracy, and sustainability. These values are not unique to alternative schools, and even the most mainstream public schools have, or in my opinion *should* have, an

interest in supporting these values. As such, in teacher education and professional development, it would be useful to proliferate not only the basic concepts (tacit teaching and the educative context), but also, examples of how these concepts can be applied to establish a coherent hidden (or perhaps more accurately, experiential) curriculum that is aligned with these values. Some work has already begun in this area, and one of the activities I was involved with during the time I was completing this research, was the development of a handbook for Iranian educators on how to incorporate democratic principles into their schools and classrooms (Hiebert, 2013c). This handbook expanded on 21 different contextual factors, and discussed how they might be reoriented away from traditional authoritarian approaches, towards more democratic ones.

This example leads to another important point related to the application of these ideas. Because tacit teaching is tacit in nature, and because the hidden curriculum is generally hidden, these ideas may be applied to support positive social change in contexts where political will may be lacking. In authoritarian regimes, for example, where explicit teaching about democracy may not be tolerated, educators can still go a long ways towards supporting the development of a culture of democracy in their classrooms, while remaining “under the radar” of intolerant authorities. Or to take a more moderate example, environmentally engaged teachers need not wait for the very slow process of curriculum reform to address concerns about climate change. Instead, they can focus on this deeper level of student development, by working to make their classrooms and schools more sustainable, and by cultivating student engagement with environmental issues. Tacit teaching and the educative context provide tools and opportunities for educators at the leading edge of social change, and because formal curricula tend not to

include outcomes related to student dispositions, or to prescribe specific pedagogical approaches, classroom routines, and so on, teachers have considerable freedom within these spaces.

At this point, it is worth acknowledging the relationship between the educational approaches being discussed here, and more extreme projects of indoctrination or brainwashing. Education is essentially a social engineering project, because, as this paper has discussed, every aspect of education is infused with values of one kind or another. This might be hard for some to accept, but this conclusion is unavoidable if we accept that through education we are trying to achieve something (regardless of what that something is). The question is not *whether* education constitutes social engineering, but rather, *in what way* are our educational institutions engineering our society? The ideas discussed in this paper can be understood of as a kind of “thought technology” related to this social engineering project, and as with any technological innovation, they may be applied in different ways—some of them positive, some of them negative. For example, while most of the examples in this paper have been positive ones, an authoritarian regime seeking to increase its control over a population could just as easily apply this conceptual framework to analyze the educative context of its schools in order to identify and squeeze out any remnants of civic engagement or democratic values, and to replace them with something else. Similarly, these ideas might be used to increase materialism, elitism, intolerance, or radicalism.

This does not mean, however, that the conceptual framework presented in this paper is value neutral. It is not. This research emerged from my own dissatisfaction with the status quo in education. And the ideas of tacit teaching and the educative context were developed through this research specifically to address the issue of a negative hidden curriculum—with most of its

determinants being left up to chance, to tradition, or to market forces. The introduction of this conceptual framework can help to expose the hidden curriculum and the processes behind it more systematically. This framework makes it easier to discuss the hidden curriculum and to see how educators are contributing to it. While it is possible that some educators may apply the ideas for negative goals, the opportunities for the improving education's role in social development are far greater than any risks, and exposing the process behind the hidden curriculum will help to mitigate any risks because it makes it easier to monitor the hidden curriculum and understand what educators might be trying to do.

While most of the discussion in this paper has been about K-12 education, the ideas are relevant to all sorts of educational contexts, and even contexts that are not focused on education at all (such as corporate environments or family homes). One of the particularly relevant applications of this research outside of the K-12 education system is in the area of professional programs such as medical and legal education. Some of the most incisive recent literature on the hidden curriculum has come from reviews of medical education and legal education programs (see Lempp & Seale, 2004; Moss, 2013; O'Brien, 2011), and the negative consequences of these high-stress competitive learning contexts on our legal and medical systems. A similar lens could be used to critique other professional programs, such as those training teachers, social workers, or even entrepreneurs, based on the kinds of learning experiences the students in those programs undergo, and the kinds of dispositions cultivated through those experiences. In each field, the tendency is to focus on the knowledge necessary to do the job, and in some cases, skills are also practiced. However, there is little evidence to suggest that much consideration is given to how such programs help their students to develop things like patience, empathy, ability to handle stress, entrepreneurial spirit, and so on. These are exactly the kinds of things that tacit teaching

appears suited for. In all cases, the implication of this research is to broaden idea of educational outcomes to include such dispositions, to clearly define them, and then to design an educative context that will help to cultivate them.

Limitations

While this study is grounded in many hours of school-based research, there are, nonetheless, a number of potential limitations to the relevance and applicability of the findings. First, the study was based on only three schools, and all three are alternative programs. The selection of these programs was quite intentional, in order to gain maximum insight into ways in which the hidden curriculum might be intentionally reoriented. However, this is a very small sample, representing only a small subset of the broad array of educational approaches around. While reference has been drawn to conventional school models throughout this paper, the relevance of the findings to mainstream school settings may nonetheless be somewhat limited—mostly due to limitations of conventional norms and expectations in mainstream settings.

A second, and more serious limitation of this study is that the methodology and findings have not fully reflected the importance of personal factors that affect each students' experience of the educative context. While a group of students may be immersed in the same general context, each of those students will experience that context differently due to differences in their frames of reference, personalities, involvement, and so on. While the context may consist of external factors, the experience itself is largely personal and internal. Rather than looking at this internal experience, this study has focused on the external conditions that shape and influence it. However, I recognize that a full account of the hidden curriculum must also take into consideration these internal factors.

A third limitation of this study is that it is primarily theoretical, which is to say, the constructs have only been applied in observations, and the findings do not provide a clear direction for educators interested in reorienting the hidden curricula of their own schools. The main objectives of this research related to the development of the constructs involved, but ultimately, the value of the research will be in the application of these constructs in practice. While the findings presented in Chapter Four provide some indication of the kinds of practices associated with tacit teaching, and the learning of the hidden curriculum, these practices are all quite specific to the schools in which they were observed, and I acknowledge that most could not be directly carried over to other educational settings. A related issue is that this study has not evaluated these practices in terms of their overall efficacy, and has only delved superficially into an evaluation of their alignment with each school's educational aims. As mentioned above, while they are presented as examples of tacit teaching practices—in the sense of being intentional manipulations of the educative context—they are not presented as “best practices.”

Finally, while not necessarily a limitation of the study, it is important to also acknowledge here the possibility that this study has been affected by observation bias. Specifically, the data generation and analysis were guided by the constructs identified at the outset of the research process, and their original formulation. While I worked to mitigate this bias by regularly critiquing the constructs and their components, and revising them throughout the research process, it is certainly the case that the starting point for the study influenced the final destination.

Suggestions for Further Research

This research has taken a somewhat novel approach to looking at the issue of the hidden curriculum, and the approach appears to show promise for uncovering new insights into how

educators might improve the hidden curriculum being learned by their students.

However, this research has only taken a first step in this new direction. Further research along similar lines is certainly warranted. In relation to the limitations mentioned above, it would be worthwhile to pursue additional school-based research in other educational contexts, including mainstream K-12 classrooms, higher education programs, and training environments, as well as in other alternative programs. Particularly suitable programs would include Montessori schools and Waldorf schools, as discussed in Chapter Two, as well as successful charter schools such as KIPP and YES Prep that have established very strong institutional cultures along quite different lines. Similarly, the educational approaches of other countries may yield unique insights because of their contrast with the approaches we are accustomed to. Religious schooling environments such as Hutterite schools, monastic schools, and madrasahs would also be excellent research sites because of the continuity between the educational content and the context in which it is learned, owing to the strong religious narrative of these school communities.

Another interesting avenue for research in this area would be to explore the methods applied in more aggressive programs of education and indoctrination, such as the propaganda and education programs of totalitarian regimes, First Nations residential schooling, cults and cult-like sales and marketing organizations, and even military training programs. Many of these could be considered blatant projects of social engineering, and while some are controversial, there is no denying their relationship to the gentler form of democratic social engineering (see Popper, 1945) characteristic of conventional educational institutions. Certain phenomena, strategies, and risks involved with working in the tacit domain may be more apparent when studying programs like these that are extreme in nature, than in more conventional educational settings.

However, in order to further test and refine the constructs involved in this research, it will ultimately be necessary to go beyond simply collecting new data from new groups using the descriptive and theoretical approach used in this study. The greatest potential value of this research is in its application to support the reorientation of hidden curricula, and to this end there may be the most value in pursuing action research in this area—working with educational institutions to help transform their hidden curricula. Such research could include differentiating between factors relevant to individual teachers, and those more relevant to the school or district level, and then working with the respective groups to identify new approaches that might better support their explicit educational goals. Ultimately, similar approaches may be used in settings that are not principally educational, such as work places and civil society organizations, each of which has something akin to a hidden curriculum in its ways of operating. There is scope in all of these cases to make adjustments in different policies, approaches, and practices, in order to fully reflect and reinforce the values and goals of the organizations.

In addition to action research, further insight on these topics would also be gained through more in-depth personal research approaches such as phenomenology or oral history. As noted above, this research has been focused on the external conditions affecting students' experiences and development, and complementary research on how these conditions are actually experienced by students would be well warranted.

Conclusions

As discussed in Chapter One, the origins of this research trace back to my own teaching experiences, and my struggles in thinking about how to teach more effectively from the standpoint of cultivating engaged citizenship and sustainable behaviors among my students. This led me, increasingly, to reflect on the hidden curriculum in my teaching, and in the schools

where I worked. Ultimately, this research project was formulated in response to general questions about how we might understand the influence that school and classroom contexts (rather than content) have on students, how the factors involved in student experiences might be identified and discussed, and what insights might be gained from the experiences of schools that have already been working with these factors to intentionally design, at least to some extent, their hidden curricula. The findings and analysis presented in this paper provide well-grounded responses to these questions, and provide a good basis for further work in this area.

My concerns for issues related to sustainability, civic engagement, and social justice have developed further since this research project was conceived, and in the years since I was a teacher myself, related issues such as environmental degradation, civic apathy, intolerance, and conflict have persisted, or in many cases, worsened. My hope is that this research may contribute to new and improved educational approaches, particularly in areas such as education for sustainable development, civic education, and so on, that may in turn contribute, in a small way, to alleviating some of these issues.

Unfortunately, this comes at a time when the scope of educational development seems to be getting narrower. There are frequent reports of cuts to non-academic programs in schools, and extra-curricular activities. Meanwhile, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) are increasingly being emphasized, and “back to basics” programs focusing on core academics and seat work are enjoying a resurgence. Moreover, in many cases, the importance attached to standardized assessments is leading to an unintentional narrowing of the curriculum to focus on essential knowledge and skills, rather than students’ comprehensive development. Through all of this, the hidden curriculum remains strong, but distorted, exerting

its influence on students day after day, and year after year, reinforcing the real (as opposed to the stated) priorities of the education systems and schools they attend.

However, while the educational pendulum swings slowly, it always swings. I have confidence that, in time, the preoccupation with exams and core academics will subside, and education systems will show a renewed interest in broader aspects of students' development. There is already some cause for optimism in this regard. The current fascination with technology in education has prompted a strong interest in peripheral skills that run much deeper, like media literacy and critical thinking. In addition, recent research on non-cognitive factors in education, including constructs like grit (see Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), adaptability, initiative, and curiosity (see Wagner, 2010) has helped to reinforce the importance of cultivating key dispositions in our education systems. While the existing research goes a long ways towards demonstrating the value and importance of these dispositions, the findings of this research project are well placed to support those interested in developing effective methods of cultivating them in schools.

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