

Resistance, Communication, and Community: How Did Former Students From an  
Independent Christian High School Experience and Understand Their Resistance  
to Schooling?

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

In partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Administration, Foundations, and Psychology

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a phenomenological, qualitative study of student resistance and seeks to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between community, communication, and resistance by exploring the social contexts that provide meaning to the resistant behaviours of six graduates of an independent Christian school. In doing so, this thesis takes a transactional perspective of resistance – a perspective that recognises students as having multiple and shifting identities, and schools as being complex, social settings which contextualises student resistant behaviours. Integral to this perspective is a communicative potential of resistance that can be used as a means of signalling, generating, and building dialogue among the various groups of people who make up the school community (Abowitz, 2000). This study suggest that school need to go beyond seeing resistance as purely an expression of political statements or an engagement in power struggles and consider how resistance can be a potential communicative act. Specifically, resistance signals a need for reflection and dialogue on the ways in which the ideals of that community are both intended and experienced.

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis is the culmination of a seven-year journey – a journey that consumed more of my time and energy than I had anticipated, but provide a depth of learning experiences I could not have imagined. My deepest debt of gratitude belongs to my family – especially my wife, Agnes – for giving me the time, space, and encouragement to complete it.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee – Dr. Nathalie Piquemal, Dr. Dawn Wallin, and Dr. Mary Dyck (University of Lethbridge). Your constant encouragement, constructive criticism, and patience are greatly appreciated.

Lastly, I would like to thank the students from Mountainview Christian School who shared their stories with me.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*Paul walked into the staffroom and wearily plunked himself down on the couch.*

*“What’s the matter Paul?”, asked Louise, “You look like you had a rough class.”*

*Paul nodded. He taught social studies and English to grade 10 and 11 students. “Yah, one of those days. No matter how exciting I try to make my classes, the kids just fool around, throw things at each other, and make loud comments about how stupid this stuff is. I’m getting tired of battling with them.”*

*“I know what you mean,” said Louise. She taught calculus math to grade 12 students. “Everyday does seem to be a battle - although, some days are better than others. Actually, I think it is the behaviour of one or two kids that sets the tone for the whole class.”*

*“Send them to the office or give them more detentions. Or, ... take away their basketball privileges,” piped up Don.*

*“That’s easy for you to say, Don, you are the P.E. teacher. Everybody loves P.E.”, said Paul.*

*“I wouldn’t go that far”, Don replied, “They sure aren’t thrilled about the health and fitness classes. They think it is a big joke. I can’t seem to get them to take the issue of substance abuse seriously.”*

*Louise got up to pour herself a coffee. “Don’t they realise that when they get to the real world, they can’t just fool around and avoid getting their work done? They’d be fired within a week.”*

*“Well, it’s our job to get them ready for the real world”, said Paul, “I guess we’ll just have to try harder.”*

Conversations analogous to the above are likely heard in staffrooms of high schools across the country and were certainly heard in the staffrooms of the schools at which I worked. When teachers like Paul and Louise talk about a battle in the classrooms, they are usually referring to student behaviours that oppose and counter the instructional environment of the school. Labelling these kinds of behaviours as student resistance, Peter McLaren (1985) defines resistance as “oppositional student behaviour that has symbolic, historical, and ‘lived’ meaning and which contests the legitimacy, power, and significance of school culture in general and instruction in particular” (p. 85).

This thesis, in its broadest sense, is a study of student resistance as seen through the experiences of six graduates of Mountainview Christian School, a publicly funded Kindergarten to Grade 12 independent school located in Alberta. More narrowly, though, this thesis attempts to add to the discussion on the significance of student resistance by exploring the relationship between communication, community, and resistance at Mountainview. Community is a dynamic process, a work in progress, which is developed and maintained through communication, and resistance can be a significant form of that communication (Abowitz, 2000). Community seeks to be a unifying force, both in values and beliefs as well as in actions and behaviours (Sergiovanni, 1994a, 1994b). However, tensions and contradictions, as revealed by resistance, points to a dilemma of community – between how community is intended and how it is expressed. This dilemma of community becomes problematic for Mountainview because the values and beliefs are being resisted and undermined by those people it was intended to bring together. This thesis, then, argues that schools, especially faith-based schools, need to go beyond seeing resistance as purely an expression of political statements or an engagement in power struggles, and consider how resistance can be a potential communicative act that signals a need for reflection and dialogue on the ways in which community is experienced.

Student resistance appears to be a relatively straightforward topic. As a teacher for over twenty years, I have certainly observed and experienced the range of resistant behaviours that are outlined by McLaren (1986). Behaviours such as buffoonery, joking, anti-teacher remarks, incessant jabbering during instruction time, constant carping at the school rules, inventive obscenities, and the ubiquitous “this is boring” or “this is stupid” were quite common. Other forms of resistant behaviours I have observed include gestures

such as: looking around the room with a bored expression, constant sighing, obeying a teacher but doing so in slow or exaggerated motions, horsing around, jostling in the hallways, skipping classes, going into the areas of school that were restricted, and wearing clothing that did not meet the school's dress code. In some cases, I have also observed extreme forms of resistant behaviours such as vandalism and a blatant disrespect, defiance and direct challenge of a teacher's authority. Not surprisingly, then, student resistance is considered by educators as one of the most important issues in education today primarily because of the negative impact these behaviours have on both students and teachers, as well as on the school itself (Sun, 1995).

However, within an educational setting, the concept of resistance does not easily lend itself to consistent and unified understandings of its significance and meanings. As Colby (2006) points out, the concept is infused with a wide variety of meanings and understandings, each concomitantly supported by various theoretical frameworks. The theoretical framework I utilise in this thesis traces its ancestral roots in the critical theories of Willis (1977), McLaren (1985, 1986), and Giroux (1983) in that resistance is located within the broader framework of ideology, culture, and power. In doing so, this thesis considers the experiences of students in seeking to understand those social processes and ideologies that give meaning to resistance. The works of Abowitz (2000), Colby (2006), Miron & Lauria (1995, 1998), Raby (2005a), and To (2006) exemplify this approach.

There is an added complexity in utilising this framework because I base this thesis on a research study conducted with participants who attended an independent Christian school. Here, the social contexts and underlying ideologies impact somewhat differently

than a mainstream public school because, as I outline later on, this Christian school roots its philosophy of education within a particular religious worldview. Among other things, this worldview not only impacts the attitudes, behaviours, and motivations of students, it also impacts how these are interpreted and understood by the broader school community. Any understanding of student resistance in a Christian school also needs to take into account this particular worldview.

There is a tendency for educators, regardless of type of school, to understand resistance from strictly their own viewpoint. They view student resistance as misbehaviours designed to challenge their authority or the authority of the school (Gibbs & Gardiner, 2008; Houghton, Wheldall, & Merrett, 1988; Little, 2005; Robinson, 1992). This is in part, because our own experiences as teachers inform our definitions of resistance (Hayward, 1998; Moore, 2007). Generally, we teachers tend to cast resistant behaviours within a framework of power struggles between students and teachers. Raby (2005a) points out that understandings of resistance are integrally bound up with power relations – power being something possessed and exerted by a dominant group over a subordinate group. Clark (1991) notes, “power in the classroom is commonly construed as the opposition of teacher and students, with teachers practicing like imperialism, and students practicing mimicry or resistance” (p. 120). In this way, teachers see student resistance as political activities in which the subordinated students attempt to contest the power and authority of their teachers and of their school.

However, a more useful way to conceptualise power and its association with resistance is Foucault’s (1984) view that power is an essential element that exists in all social relationships. Rather than something that is possessed by a single entity and used

against another, power has a relational element. As Colby (2006) puts it, “resistance, as part of Foucault’s power relationship, cannot be solely possessed by either teachers, students, or the educational institution, but can only exist in a complex relational interplay among all three, as well as the surrounding socio-political institutions” (p. 1). Resistance, in this view, challenges us teachers to move beyond a single perspective – beyond seeing resistance as misbehaviours that contest our authority or that engage us in a power struggle.

This multiple perspective is useful in recognising what Abowitz (2000) calls the “communicative potential” of resistance. This communicative potential refers to the extent to which the experiences of resistance foster critical reflection and dialogue among those who are involved which, in turn, lead to a deeper understanding of the various contexts within the school that gives rise to these behaviours. If we teachers interpret resistance as an indication of an insalubrious school environment, then our focus will likely be on developing strategies to extinguish it from our school environment. However, if we teachers can begin to see resistance as a potentially valuable act of communication, then our focus will be on developing strategies to use this communication to foster critical reflection and dialogue among those who are part of the school community.

In order for us educators to realise the communicative potential of resistance and thereby engage in reflection and dialogue, we need to more fully examine and understand the ways in which the various actors, histories, and contexts underpin these behaviours. As Abowitz (2000) argues, “What remains to be understood in more depth ... are the ways in which resistance as a communicative act, is interpreted by educators as well as

researchers, and accordingly assigned meaning with the school setting” (p. 902). By undertaking a qualitative research study, this thesis seeks to contribute to our understandings of student resistance in general and of its communicative potential in particular by exploring those contexts that provide meaning to the resistant behaviours of a specific group of students who graduated from Mountainview Christian School, an independent school located in Alberta.

### **The Research Study – Main Focal Points and Supporting Topics**

In order to explore those contexts, the research question work through in this study is: How did former students from an independent Christian high school experience and understand their resistance to schooling? To develop an answer, I undertook qualitative research using a phenomenological approach and engaged in semi-structured conversations with participants who were members of a group of students whose resistant behaviours significantly affected the learning environment of the school. Through a series of eight open-ended questions, the interview focussed on how these participants themselves experienced and understood resistance to schooling.

In using a phenomenological approach, the emphasis of this research was on the individual subject and their experiences, free from any imposed analytical framework (van Manen, 1990). Thus, after analysing the interviews, two main focal points and several supporting details emerged from the data. These focal points, in turn, provided the means to explore the contexts which give rise to the significance and meanings of resistance and its communicative potential.

The main focal points and supporting details that emerged from the interview are outlined below:

Focal Point 1: The attitudes and perceptions the participants have about Mountainview Christian School

- Relationships with other students
- Relationships with teachers
- Attitudes towards schooling at Mountainview
- The role of the Christian worldview in underpinning their attitudes and perceptions
- How well Mountainview Christian School prepared participants for the post-secondary world
- Junior High and Senior High experiences

Focal Point 2: The participants' perceptions of how teachers and classmates reacted to these behaviours.

- Attitudes towards rules and expectations
- The range of behaviours the participants exhibited or witnessed which were considered to be negative or against the rules.
- Perception of how the rules were enforced
- Role of Christian worldview in underpinning their perceptions
- Role of peer groups in underpinning their perceptions

### **Contexts To Understanding Resistance At Mountainview**

These focal points and supporting details provided the means of exploring three social contexts that gave rise to the significance and meanings of resistance and its communicative potential at Mountainview. These three contexts are: (a) structural, (b) relational, and (c) philosophical.

**The structural context.** This context essentially encompasses the school's learning environment and "...refers to all aspects in the school environment of the learner that influence the achievement of learning goals within a specific content or subject area" (de Kock, Slegers, & Voeten, 2004, p. 144). More specifically, the learning environment at Mountainview Christian School can be understood not only by how learning is structured and organised within the school, but, more importantly, by how both teachers and students perceived and experienced that structure and organisation.

To outline this context, I use Bourdieu's (1977) notion of *habitas*. He delineates *habitas* as

... a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to the analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems, and thanks to the unceasing corrections of the results obtained, dialectally produced by those results... (p. 82, 83 – italics in original).

Two integrally related elements can be extrapolated from this. The first element is a sense of stability and constancy that is embedded within the school's learning environment. As Brady (2004) notes, "Administrators, teachers, and students alike all have predilections as to how they expect their school to operate and find it inconceivable that they could function in any other manner" (p. 353). These predilections exist because students, from the time they enter Kindergarten, are socialised into an environment with its own set of expectations, roles, norms, and behaviours that over time, form the "lasting, transposable dispositions" to which

Bourdieu refers (1977, p. 82). Related to this is the second element, which are the day-to-day activities and tasks that form the actual process of schooling.

These two elements are integrally related because of the dialectical relationship between the “lasting, transposable dispositions” and the “achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82). It is precisely because there is an element of stability and constancy that both students and teachers are able to engage in a diversity of activities. As Moore (2007) notes, in *habitas*, “the social comes to be inscribed within the individual as the structuring principles of consciousness” (p. 126). This occurs, as Barrett (2010) puts it, because “Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of *habitas* serves to link structure and agency” (p. 454). In other words, the external learning environment becomes internalised because a dialectical relationship exists between how learning is structured and organised within the school and how both teachers perceive and experience that structure and organisation.

The extent, then, to which the structural context underpins student resistant behaviours at Mountainview depends on how students perceive and experience its *habitas*.

**The relational context.** This context essentially encompasses the school’s social environment. According to Johnson (2009), “the school social environment captures the nature of interactions that happen in the school” (p. 254). Comprising the nature of these interactions are a wide variety of themes, such as: “Interpersonal relationships, student–teacher relationship, peer relationships, teachers’ beliefs and behaviours, teachers’ communication style, classroom management and group processes ...” (Allodi, 2010, p.

89). This wide variety exists because, as conventional wisdom suggests, schools are complex social organisations. This is no different at Mountainview where the social interactions involving teachers and students are also myriad, complex, and dynamic. These interactions, then, give rise to the social environment, which encompasses the relational context of Mountainview Christian School.

However, the relational context also encompasses the power relations that are inherent within these interactions. Certainly, power relations are key within schools, given they are characterised as “enclosed institutions, organised around disciplinary practices and manifestly hierarchical relations (Pykett, 2009, p. 107). Therefore power relations need to be part and parcel of any discussion about student resistant behaviours.

At the same time, power is not necessarily a key defining feature of social interactions at Mountainview simply because it is a complex social organisation. As I mentioned earlier, I would argue that power exists in all social relationships (Foucault, 1984) and shapes the conditions of actions within social environments (Bourdieu, 1985, 1989). Therefore, fundamental to the relational context of Mountainview Christian School is not only the myriad of social interactions within it but also how these interactions are synthesised by the power relations that inherently exist within the school’s social environment.

The extent to which the relational context of Mountainview underpins student resistant behaviours depends on how students perceive and experience the social environment and its concomitant power relations.

**The philosophical context.** This context encompasses the particular philosophy of education in which schools are steeped. While our western society generally conflates

the terms schooling and education, a conceptual distinction needs to be made between schooling as a process and education as an ideal.

Peters (1967, 1972) argues that education is not a process in and of itself, but rather is the culmination of a process – it is an ideal to be striven towards. What that ideal looks like depends on how the larger school community understands and articulates that educational ideal. For example, John Dewey (1916) understands education as integrally tied up with democracy, social action, and critical thinking. For him, the goal or ideal of education is to prepare children to become adults who are able to work cooperatively, to think critically, and to participate freely in the institutions of society.

That ideal of education is to be realised primarily within the formal school setting. Thus, the processes of schooling, for Dewey, is the means by which students engage in guided experiments with real-life challenges as a way to work towards the ideal of education.

To put it another way, Brandwein (1981) makes the following argument:

Schooling attempts to transmit the concepts, values, and skills prized by a community acting under the constraints of public custom, rule, and law (local, state, and federal). Education on the other hand, is an enterprise that affects all of life and living and comprises all influences, in school and out, that affect and effect changes in the behaviour of the individual – whether of habitation, of character, or of intellect. (p. 9).

In other words, schooling is about transmitting concepts, values, and skills – it is a process that requires intention and design. In our western society, this process, for the most part, takes place within a formal institutional setting. Education, on the other hand,

is an ideal that transcends both process and setting – it is an ideal that is to be pursued. As such, education seeks to impact all of life

The philosophy of education at Mountainview Christian School is certainly about impacting all of life. The educational ideal of Mountainview is integrally tied into Christian values and principles – seeking to prepare students to become adults who live as Christians in all aspects of living. This educational ideal, outlined in more detail later on, is distinctly unique from its neighboring public school, largely because as an independent Christian school, its values are based on a Christian worldview. In terms of schooling, however, there is little difference in the methods and processes by which this ideal is worked out between Mountainview and its public school counterparts. A person walking into a classroom at this school will see the same sorts of pedagogical activities taking place as in a public school.

The extent to which the philosophical context affects student resistant behaviours depends on the students' commitment to this educational ideal – even more so because this ideal is distinct from the public school's ideal. As Barrett (2010) points out, “Such behavioural and attitudinal reinforcements operates particularly through individuals' commitment to and adoption of the goals and expectations of a group, which serves to offer constraints and opportunities in shaping individual action” (p. 451). Given that the process of schooling at Mountainview is similar to that at a public school, it would be reasonable for students to assume that the educational philosophy is similar as well. Thus, the extent to which the philosophical context underpins student resistant behaviours depends not only on the extent to which they are committed to the ideal goals of Christian

education, but also the extent to which they are committed to an ideal that is distinct from the public school.

These three contexts – structural, relational, and philosophical – form a matrix for exploring student resistant behaviours at Mountainview Christian School. By contextualising resistance in these three ways, this study seeks to outline ways in which resistance can be understood and interpreted as a potential act of communication that can be used to foster critical reflection and dialogue among members of the school community.

### **My Interest In The Topic Of Student Resistance**

My own interest in deepening an understanding of student resistance to learning stems from two inter-related sources: (1) a reading of Peter McLaren's (1986) *Schooling as Ritual Performance*, and (2) my personal experiences as a teacher and as an administrator in dealing with particularly resistant groups of students.

McLaren's chapter on the Rituals of Resistance articulated what I as a teacher had experienced countless times in my classroom:

The ideological hegemony of school life was not monolithically impregnable – an iron-clad system which held captive students' subjectivities and agency. There were considerable resistances on the part of the students to engagement in the macro and micro rites... The classroom, with all its hydra-like symbolic dimensions, became a highly contested territory – a Homeric battlefield where struggles were continuously waged over existing power relations and symbolic meanings.... Despite the fact that, on the whole, students were compliant and acquiesced to teacher-sponsored rules which were presented as salient, real and

natural, teachers were faced each day with a spectrum of resistances and reprisals to their instruction...designed to rupture and erode the authority of the teacher.

(1986, p. 142)

As a classroom teacher for nearly twenty years, I have experienced the range of struggles and the spectrum of resistances that McLaren notes – some years the range and spectrum was wider than other years. However, I often took resistance as a personal attack and thus tended to lay blame for resistant behaviours directly on the students. It was the work of McLaren (1986) that suggested to me that my students were not necessarily resisting me personally. Rather, their resistance was imbued with ideological and symbolical meanings and therefore these behaviours need to be understood within broader social contexts.

My interest in resistance to schooling was further enhanced some years ago when I was looking for a research project to undertake as part of the requirements for a Qualitative Research Methodology course. By that time I had become an administrator and, as a school community, we were grappling with a particularly resistant group of grade 12 students. The effects of their resistance were significant: tensions between the students and the teachers ran high; many of the teachers were burnt out; and the students were, for the most part, completely disengaged from the learning process. Once this group of students had graduated and were out of the school, the impact this particular group of students had on the overall culture of the high school became obvious. Tensions between teachers and students decreased significantly and teachers, once again, felt that productive learning was taking place in their classrooms.

As a result, the subject of resistance to learning became a natural focus of my research project. I conducted two sets of interviews with six members of this graduating

class – one focus group interview and one personal interview – and explored their perspectives on their resistance to learning. The conclusion I reached for that particular group of students was their resistant behaviours were primarily related to the perceptions they had of their teachers and the learning environment in the classroom. These students felt that teachers, over a period of four or five years, had ‘given up on them’ and therefore teachers had very low expectations of them academically and behaviourally. These students felt, because of that, teachers had simply resorted to designing un-engaging and uninspiring lessons – ‘make-work’ projects and ‘busy-work’ assignments. In other words, these students were resisting a learning environment they felt had largely forced them to become passive recipients of teacher-directed instruction and learning.

Essentially, then, my interest in pursuing research on student resistance is rooted in my experiences as a classroom teacher for fourteen years and as an administrator for nine years. I have experienced the negative impact student resistance has in both the classroom and in the school. I have come to believe that student resistant behaviours need to not only be understood within the broader contexts that give meaning to these behaviours, but also be viewed as potential sites for critical reflection and dialogue among all members of a school community.

### **The Setting Of The Study – Mountainview Christian School**

The participants of this research study have all graduated from an independent Christian school located in Alberta. As noted earlier, the school’s philosophy of education is distinct from its public school counterpart’s philosophy because it is rooted within a particular religious worldview. The school’s vision and mission are extensions of that worldview and therefore impel both its learning environment (structural context) and its

social environment (relational context). In this section I first detail the general features of Mountainview Christian School and then outline the salient features of its particular religious philosophy of education.

**The general setting – students and teachers.** According to Reed-Danahay (2005), Pierre Bourdieu suggests that schools are “... essentially conservative, traditional institutions, aimed at self-preservation and replication (p. 49). Having worked in this school for a few years, I believe that this label suits Mountainview Christian School because it exhibits many of the characteristics of a small-c conservative, traditional school both in the make-up of the student population as well as in the teachers and their teaching style.

The majority of the students who attend Mountainview are descendants of European immigrants – mostly Dutch – who came to Alberta in the 1950s. As Ganzevoort (1998) notes, the Dutch immigrants came to Canada with a strong work ethic and their neo-Calvinist roots shaped their attitudes towards education and social welfare. As a result, they tended to develop an alternate education and social welfare system, which aligned itself with a dedication to a “comfortably bourgeois existence with less government interference in their way of life,” (p. 447). As a result, there is a certain socio-economic as well as ethnic homogeneity to the student population – white, middle-class students. The school draws from a fairly wide radius that not only includes the city in which the school is located but also the surrounding towns and villages. The prevailing perception in the larger community is that this school is still imbued with the rural values of the farming community that once spawned the school.

The teaching staff is essentially a microcosm of the student population and consists of a fairly homogeneous group of people who are ethnically rooted in a neo-Calvinist Dutch ancestry. The average years of teaching experience is seventeen years with most of the staff having taught at Mountainview for ten or more years. This low turnover rate has resulted in a fairly stable teaching force at the school. My perception is that, for the most part, the teachers employ more traditional teaching techniques such as pen and paper tasks, lecturing, and textbook drills but are beginning to interlace their lessons with more progressive approaches. That said, though, an independent research firm has consistently rated the school's quality of education – which follows the Alberta Ministry of Education curriculum – high in comparison to other schools in the province.

In addition to a highly rated academic program, the school also has a variety of other programs associated with it: an extensive sports program, a fine-arts program, and a Career and Technology program. As well, there is a Special Education program that supports students who have been diagnosed with developmental delays, learning disabilities, or cognitive delays.

Since Mountainview is an independent school, it can set its own admission criteria. It considers itself an interdenominational Christian school and accepts members into its school society from all Christian denominations. It has a generally open admission policy; the only restriction is that students and parents must profess to be Christian and regularly attend a Christian church. There are no other restrictive criteria such as socio-economic status or academic standards. While there is a tuition fee associated with attending Mountainview, there is a program in place to provide assistance to those families who desire Christian education but cannot afford it.

**The religious setting – its foundational values and beliefs.** Mountainview Christian School is operated by a legally incorporated society whose membership consists primarily of the parents who send their children to this school. A survey of the school's website reveals that this school society incorporated in the 1960's by parents who had the express intent of operating a Christian day school. The purpose of the school is to provide an education that is based on Christian values and beliefs. According to its website, this school seeks to foster, promote, and provide Christ-centered education for those who embrace a Biblical worldview as summarized in its Statement of Faith, by establishing and maintaining schools from K-12, and by advocating a philosophy of Christian Education.

This school roots its philosophy of education in the worldview of the Reformed Christian theology. This worldview, as Vryhof (2002) points out, seeks to answer the following questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is life for? Christian day schools have a long history in the Reformed tradition and as such tend to be highly valued within the Reformed community (Kang, 2006). This is largely due to the ways in which Reformed theology influences the conceptual principles which underpin the philosophy of Christian education. According to Kang (2006), there are three important principles: the integration of faith and learning, social justice as a goal of schooling, and parental authority and responsibility for teaching children. Of these three, though, the principle of integrating faith and learning presents itself most saliently as a potential point of tension in both the learning environment of and the social interactions in Mountainview Christian School.

This principle, according to Vryhof (2002) has to do with how the Christian school ought to lead its students to "... know God and to respond to him in every dimension of the creation and in every aspect of their lives, to apply the transforming power of the gospel to contemporary society and culture, and to bring the healing power of Jesus to a fallen world" (p. 112). Thus, since the stated goal of the Reformed school is to train children to live as Christians in all aspects of living (Kang, 2006), there is a potential point of tension and resistance between students and school over who determines what it means to live as a Christian and what living like a Christian ought to look like. The questions to be asked, as Burton and Nwosum (2003) suggest, include: Is this integration actually occurring? If so, where is it occurring – is it an act of the teacher or is it an act of the student? (p. 108). Is there agreement "between what faculty members intend as faith-learning integration and what students perceive as the integration of faith and learning?" (p. 110). While the education philosophy of Mountainview Christian School might include as a goal to integrate faith and learning, if and how that integration is played out within the structural context and the relational context can be a point of tension and conflict.

In order to understand this, it is necessary to consider the relationship between attitudes and behaviours. Certainly, the educational philosophy of Mountainview Christian School is that, in the process of integrating faith and learning, students embrace both the attitudes and behaviours of a Christian worldview. As Dorman, McRobbie, and Foster (2002) suggest, it is generally assumed that attitudes govern behaviour. Therefore, if Christian schools expend a great deal of energy in inculcating a Christian attitude

towards living, then it should translate into a noticeable effect on the behaviours of the students.

However, the research on the relationship between attitudes and behaviours within a Christian school is varied. On the one hand, Collier and Dowson (2008) argue, “in the context of an essentially secularized society, and despite the best efforts and intentions of Christian educators, Christian education often appears to make little difference to the 'real-life' attitudes and behaviours of students” (p. 200). On the other hand, ap Siôn, Francis, and Baker (2007) argue that the research in the UK suggests that boys attending Christian schools are more likely to

...be committed to believe in God and in the inerrancy of scripture. They were more likely to hold a positive view of the church, to support the place of religious education in school and to reject superstitious beliefs. They were less likely to hold liberal attitudes toward alcohol, tobacco and sex. They were less likely to be troubled by bullying at school and more likely to respect their teachers. They were more likely to feel good about life and about themselves. (p. 5)

These two examples suggest that the relationship between attitudes and behaviours within a Christian school are complex and are affected by a variety of variables. At the same time, however, it is reasonable to hypothesize that points of tension and conflicts which give rise to student resistance are more likely to exist in a Christian school where there is a disconnect between attitudes and behaviours.

### **Summary**

This study seeks to contribute to our understanding of student resistance by engaging in a qualitative research study that explores the question: How do former

students from an independent Christian school experience and understand their resistance to schooling? The brief foray into the general and the religious setting of Mountainview Christian School serves to outline what Ortner (1995) refers to as the ‘locally and historically evolved bricolage’ that informs the learning environment, the social interactions, and the philosophy of education of the school (p. 182). The importance of this ‘bricolage’ for my research study is the ways in which the setting of the school impacts the three contexts within which student resistant behaviours are embedded.

In the next chapters, I elaborate and detail this study. Chapter Two provides the literature review and then outlines the conceptual framework. The review examines two broad perspectives of resistance, a macro-level perspective and a micro-level perspective. It then concludes with a third perspective, a transactional perspective. This transactional perspective forms the basis of the study’s conceptual framework, which also includes notions of community and communication. Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach I used for this study. Since I have chosen a qualitative method, this section delineates the various facets that make up that method. Chapter Four examines and analyses the findings of the study using the three contexts as a framework. Chapter Five concludes with a discussion on the communicative potential of resistance, an outline on the limitations of the study, and recommendations for further reflection.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

A review of the literature suggests that conceptually, student resistance is understood not only as observable and meaningful behaviours, but also as intricately bound up with power relations. In that way, an understanding of student resistance stems from a classical conceptualisation of power which, as Ortner (1995) points out, sees resistance and domination as essentially opposite sides of the same coin: “Domination was a relatively fixed and institutionalised form of power; resistance was essentially organised opposition to power institutionalised in this way” (p. 174). In other words, resistance, as manifested in specific student behaviours, takes on meaning within a framework of power and domination.

Interpreting what resistance might mean becomes the challenge for researchers. As a start, resistance to learning should not be narrowly conceptualised as simply the manifestation of specific student behaviours. Certainly, teachers and administrators may see it that way and classify as resistant any behaviour that does not conform to the rules or expectations of the teacher or school. While it is true that “young people respond to rules in diverse and frequently uncontainable ways” (Raby & Domitrek, 2007, p. 934), there is no reason to assume *a priori* that all responses are necessarily resistance or that all resistant behaviours are necessarily responses to rules.

At the same time, if resistance manifests itself in specific student behaviours, McFadden’s (1995) question becomes very pertinent: “How do we interpret what is happening in a meaningful framework” (p. 294)? The literature review will suggest that, while there may be general agreement on what resistant behaviours look like, there is no

clear consensus or agreement on how to account for or interpret the significance of these behaviours. A large part of this lack of agreement is because, as Raby (2005a) puts it, “How we conceptualise resistance hinges on our differing theoretical understandings of power and subjectivity” (p. 152). It will become clear in the literature review that the differences in theoretical understandings of resistance will inform the various interpretations of the resistant behaviours. To that end, I have divided the review into three broad sections: the first section takes a look at resistance at a macro level – contextualising student resistance within the broader ideologies that inform the social order in general ; the second section takes a look at resistance at a micro level – localising and isolating student resistance to the social processes within the classrooms of the school; the third section takes a brief look at resistance and how it can be conceptualised as part of the larger social processes embedded in acts of communication.

### **Macro-Level Perspective of Resistance**

**Critical pedagogy.** A macro-level perspective situates student resistance within the broader ideologies that inform the social order in general. This perspective is best exemplified with critical pedagogy, which centralises power and power-relations within the wider framework of mainstream educational philosophy and practice. As Bartolomé (2007) points out, “critical pedagogy is primarily concerned with the kinds of educational theories and practices that encourage both students and teachers to develop an understanding of the interconnecting relationship among ideology, power, and culture” (p. 280). At the core of critical pedagogy is the belief that education must be used as an agent of change – to transform the world into a better place (Giroux, 2007). In the words of McLaren and Jaramillo (2010), “...critical pedagogical principles are ... open pages in

the book of social and economic justice yet to be written or rewritten by people struggling to build a truly egalitarian social order” (p. 259). In that respect, formal education has a dual purpose. First, it seeks to expose to students the ideologies that underpin and maintain the dominant social order. Second, it seeks to educate students to be agents of change with the ultimate goal of freeing people from those circumstances that enslave them.

Researchers based in critical pedagogy have sought to provide insights to educators on how to deal with social injustice and educational inequalities. According to Robinson (1994) this research is “... dedicated to the understanding and alteration of those conditions which prevent people from living fulfilling and satisfying lives” and to the eventual “... emancipation of social classes from oppression and contempt” (p. 58). Paradoxically, however, the very institution whose purpose should be emancipatory and where social justice and egalitarianism should be modelled, becomes one of the key repositories of the dominant cultural ideology and therefore perpetuates social injustices and oppressions. Student resistance, in this view, has to do with ways in which students attempt to actively resist against and liberate themselves from this dominate ideology. Two prominent researchers in the tradition of critical pedagogy are Paul Willis (1977) and Peter McLaren (1986, 2007).

Willis (1977) situates student resistance within the larger framework of ‘school counter-culture’ and suggests that students will engage in resistant behaviours as a way to “... win symbolic and physical space from the institution and its rules and to defeat its main perceived purpose: to make you work” (p. 26). His research among a group of working class British students is considered a landmark case for the aspect of critical

pedagogy that views schooling as a means for the state to inculcate its hegemonic capitalist ideologies. Student resistance to schooling – as manifested in a school counter culture – is to be viewed as a challenge to those ideologies and authority structures that not only underpin schools in particular but also society in general. Paradoxically, as Willis argues, those students who do engage in school counter-culture are actually destined to perpetuate the capitalist ideologies and remain oppressed by them. Walker (1985) summarises this paradox in two points. First, in rejecting the academic and intellectual offerings of the school, students identify themselves with blue-collar occupations in factory-like workplaces. Second, they limit their intellectual resources and thereby render themselves virtually unable to comprehend their oppressed conditions.

McLaren (1986) sees resistance as “oppositional student behaviour ... which contests the legitimacy, power, and significance of school culture in general and of instruction in particular” (p. 143). McLaren’s base is similar to Willis’ and is generally associated with neo-Marxist theories that situate student resistance in schools within the larger framework of class struggles and social change. According to Moraes (1993), McLaren’s understanding of resistance is its “... links with real, concrete human subjects struggling within and against capital and against the structure of oppression that are intimately linked to capital: racism, sexism, patriarchy, and imperialism” (p. 121). His ethnographic research in an inner-city Catholic high school is, as Henry Giroux noted, “firmly rooted in the notion that schools perform the reproductive function of preparing working-class students for the lower rungs of the occupational ladder” (quoted in McLaren, 1986, p. xi). According to McLaren, schools propagate a particular worldview that structures students to think of and to enact upon the world in certain ways, much like

a factory workplace does with its workers. Thus, “students can – and should – become resolute and intransigent of the values that lie at the heart of commodity capitalism” (McLaren, 2007, p. 310). Like Willis, McLaren places student resistance as a manifestation of the neo-Marxist politics of class struggles.

**Recent example using critical pedagogy as a framework.** Thomas (2009) undertook an ethnographic study of eight grade twelve students in a Canadian high school to determine to what extent resistance can be seen as a way in which students reject or transform dominant ideologies present in the education system. Starting with the belief that the goal of a Western education system is to produce students who have the requisite attitudes, skills, and behaviours to become democratic citizens, Thomas outlines three main ideologies that are used to support this goal. These ideologies are: individualism, meritocracy, and social capital. Individualism propagates the view that all people are equal and all should be given equal access and equal opportunities to succeed in school. Meritocracy propagates the view that those who work hard and achieve academic success will get further ahead in society. Social capital believes that the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours learned through schooling will provide social mobility and access to the good life. All three ideologies are integrally bound up in the philosophy of education in our Western society.

However, as Thomas (2009) points out, there are many contradictions and inconsistencies in this bundle of ideologies and resistance is a way for students to expose them and possibly challenge them. Take, for example, the ideology of individualism. The reality is that the North American education system is inherently unequal.

This reality is often overshadowed by the educational system's emphasis on the mythos of the individual. This mythos is expressed as equality of opportunity. Concepts of difference such as race, gender, and wealth are replaced with educational criteria in an attempt to level out any impediments to equality (Entwistle, 1977)... This romantic perception of the individual hides in "plain view" the inequality present within the education system and society as a whole. (p. 86)

Students, of course, are faced with this contradiction and their resistance is a way of "penetrating" this ideology (Thomas, 2009, p. 9 – see also Willis, 1977). Their resistant behaviours are their attempt to "try to hold the system to the promise of equality while acknowledging that nothing is ever fair" (Thomas, 2009, p. 87). Like Willis and McLaren, for Thomas, resistance takes on meaning within a framework of ideology, power, and dominant culture.

**Criticism of critical pedagogy and resistance.** Studies steeped in critical pedagogy like Thomas (2009) are valuable for their ability to expose the inconsistencies and contradictions that exist in the ideologies that comprise the philosophies of education in our Western society. At the same time, there has been some criticism of the critical pedagogy of resistance. I will outline two main ones. The first one has to do with the tendency of critical pedagogy to generalise resistant behaviours as the result of a student's rational and conscious thought process. As Davies (1994) argues, "resistance theorists over-generalise the experiences of a small number of disaffected youth to the bulk of working-class students" (p. 333). Based on these generalisations, the implication is that students have some understanding of their oppressed state and their resistant

behaviours are manifestations of the ways in which they actively resist that state – either physically or symbolically. However, in many cases, students are unable to articulate reasons for their resistance. As Warren (2005) points out, this poses a problem for critical theory: “If we can not know with certainty that students' performances tell us what they intend, how we are able to categorise them in relation to a normative standard of resistance” (p. 248). The second criticism has to do with the assumption that “...power is coercive which can only be contested through liberation” (Raby, 2005a, p. 156). In other words, critical pedagogy tends to see student resistance singularly as a response and reaction to power relations. However, as Raby (2005a) points out, power is multifaceted and diverse, especially in the lives of the youth, and there are other ways of negotiating power than simply through resistance. These two criticisms of critical theory – its tendency to over-generalise and its focus on power relations – suggest that resistant behaviours do not necessarily need to be about attempting to transform an inherently unjust society.

This is a point that McFadden (1995) makes when he argues that resistant behaviour need not necessarily be about transformation. He suggests there could be at least three other possibilities. First, resistance as a behaviour or an attitude may have as much to do with teacher's perceptions and labels rather than what students are actually intending. Reda (2007) also makes this point when she suggests that what is defined as resistance depends largely on who interprets what behaviours.

Second, resistance may be simply a reaction to poor teaching and have little to do with any particular intent to transform the ideological underpinnings of society. For example, Davidson's research found that a significant number of students “... mention

pedagogical factors that inhibit their willingness or ability to perform in certain classes” (1999, p. 353). Specifically, students resist the rigid pedagogical environment where they are expected to remain focused, write notes while listening to the teacher, and sit down for extended periods of time without talking. In that sense, resistant behaviours by students are somewhat inevitable because it is inherent in the school environment.

Third, and related to this, McFadden (1995) suggests that students may not necessarily be resisting ‘education’ (which encompasses the whole notion of social reproduction), but resisting ‘schooling’ (how the process of education is engaged by students in day-to-day activities). As he puts it, “What students are constantly rejecting, or sometimes at best, merely complying with regardless of class, gender, race, and ethnicity is schooling which depowers them” (p. 297). Mateu-Gelabert and Lune (2007) also distinguish between attitudes towards education and attitudes towards schooling. Most students would agree that education, on the whole, is a good thing – to be desired as a way to get ahead in life. However, those same students reject a particular school's ability to produce an 'educated' student. Mateu-Gelabert and Lune (2007) suggest this is one significant reason why a number of students enter secondary schools with a belief in education and a commitment to schooling and then leave without finishing the process.

McMillan (2004) elaborates on this argument by noting that many students, while maintaining their belief that education itself has intrinsic value, continue to display resistant behaviours towards schooling. She argues that as people live out what they believe, these beliefs are embedded in the narratives people construct to represent the truth about social reality and their place within this reality. This led McMillan to conclude that for those students who display resistant behaviours, their narratives of education

contradict the direct lived experiences they have of schooling. She asks, “Is it possible that people's narratives shape inequalities in educational outcomes where outcomes are measured more in terms of access to life chances than in terms of marks (p. 126)?” In other words, she asks if it is possible that student resistance to schooling is a result of a particular narrative that informs their educational experience? If students have come to understand through narratives perpetuated both at school and within society at large that education is the key to success, then these students measure the reality of their lives according to this narrative. However, for some students, this narrative directly contradicts their lived experiences of schooling and the resulting dissonance can lead to student resistance. Thus, student resistance may have less to do with social change and more to do with a way of dealing with a conflict between a set of beliefs about schooling and the lived experiences of schooling.

Aggleton and Whitty (1985) propose a further argument to account for why resistant behaviours should not necessarily be considered transformational. They suggest that it is helpful to distinguish between “resistant intentions” and “resistant effects” (p. 62). Some behaviours may, at first glance, be seen as resistant in that the intention may be to contest the legitimacy of the schools authority, but the effect of the behaviour is to continue the reinforcement of the authority. This argument closely parallels McLaren’s (1986) argument that student resistance to authority further entrenches their subordinate position in the ideological framework of a capitalist society. Further, Aggleton and Whitty (1985) suggest that a distinction also needs to be made between behaviours that are directed against schooling in general and those behaviours that are directed against specific or localized aspects – for example against a specific school rule. In other words,

resistant behaviours need not necessarily be contextualised within the framework of class struggles and social change. These behaviours may quite simply be about resisting a particular school rule or a particular teacher's authority.

In a recent work on critical pedagogy, McLaren reflects on his writings over the past thirty years: "The broader context for these writings has been my work in critical pedagogy that involves, among other things, publishing critiques of mainstream educational policy and practice and revealing how such policy and practice is underwritten by the politics of neoliberal capitalist globalisation" (2007, p. 300). He is critical of modern American educational practices which have been underpinning a capitalist worldview that not only hegemonises itself against a more left-wing socialist ideology, but also continues to advance class, race, and gender oppression. Student resistance, within this context, is ultimately about the larger struggle to become free from these oppressive ideologies. As Zine (2000) notes, both Willis and McLaren are examples of classical resistance theories – theories that define resistance "... through a dual manifestation of oppositional or anti-school behaviours ... which is grounded in specific political objectives of critical consciousness raising and collective critical action" (p. 296). This macro-level perspective of resistance searches for meaning and significance within the broader ideological struggles at work within society as a whole.

### **Micro-level Perspectives of Resistance**

A micro-level perspective, on the other hand, searches for meaning and significance within the social processes that are at work within the local school culture. I will outline several examples of this perspective.

McFarland (2001) defines resistance as “a type of non-conformist behaviour that publicly questions the legitimacy of the classroom social order” (p. 613). He is concerned with illustrating how resistant behaviours can be a strategy used by certain students to transform the social situation within the classroom. He distinguishes between passive resistance and active resistance. Passive resistance is those behaviours that would be considered as mildly rebellious and are not aimed at transforming the classroom – behaviours such as “harmless jokes, whining, and private socialising” (McFarlane, 2001, p. 613). Active resistance, on the other hand, are behaviours that are intended by students to transform the social situation in the classroom. The key to distinguishing the two is: (1) the behaviours are intentionally selected by students, and (2) the behaviours are publicly recognised by both students and teachers as having the intended effect of initiating change (McFarlane, 2001).

Of value to my study is his argument that resistant behaviours, in their attempt to alter the social situation within the classroom, “... reveal the social processes by which classroom order is constructed, maintained, and altered” (McFarlane, 2001, p. 613). According to McFarlane, resistant behaviours take on meaning within the social interactions of the classroom. For example, the success of such behaviours in effecting change to the learning environment depends on a number of social factors such as the friendship networks within the classroom, the gender and social status of the students engaging in resistant behaviours, as well as the instructional strategies used by the teachers. Thus, the social interactions within the learning environment give meaning to the resistant behaviours of students.

Mateu-Gelabert and Lune (2007) conceptualise resistance as “anti-social behaviour” and see it as “a response to an unsafe and disorganized school environment” (p. 172). Using a dual framework of Ogbu’s Cultural model (1992) and critical pedagogy, Mateu-Gelabert and Lune (2007) suggest that many students, particularly those with a minority ethnic or social background, have certain underlying expectations about the ways in which formal education enhances the quality of their lives. When their lived-experiences with schooling, due to an unsafe or disorganised learning environment, does not fulfil their underlying educational expectations, these students are faced with a dissonance. At that point, they are likely to engage in resistant behaviours that are designed to protest their schooling. In other words, Mateu-Gelabert and Lune’s (2007) position is that a student's decisions about their behaviour are greatly influenced by their particular school culture’s views of schooling and education. In this case, resistance is not seen so much as an effort by students to effect changes to the social order as it is an indicator or predictor of dissonance within the social order.

Nakhaie, Silverman, and Lagrange (2000) situate their theory of student resistance within general theories of crime control. In this theory, deviant behaviours – which student resistance would be considered a category of – are explained in terms of “... weak internal control mechanisms developed in early childhood in combination with weak or absent social rules” (p. 445). According to this theory, individuals with low self-control tend to be impulsive, risk-seeking, careless, restless, present-oriented, and have a bad temper (p. 446). The researchers then set out to determine the extent to which low self-control can be used to predict general responses to structure and authority within a school setting. Their general conclusion is that self-control is a more accurate predictor

of resistant behaviours than ethnic or social background. Those students who lack a certain level of self-control are more likely to engage in resistant behaviours than other students.

Langhout (2005) defines resistance as "...intentional acts of commission or omission that defy the wishes of others" (p. 124). Her general theory is that schools are inherently oppressive social structures and will, because of that, generate a certain amount of student resistance. Other factors such as ethnic background, socio-economic status, and gender may further exacerbate resistance largely because it is seen to be a way for oppressed or marginalised students to gain some measure of control over their self and identity. In a similar vein, Grant (1997) sees student resistance as stemming from the power relations that are inherent in and systemic between person and structure – in this case, between school and student. She suggests that student resistance is about the ways in which students "... contest the dominant meanings and oppressive positions..." that are inherent within a school's authority structure (p. 111). While her research is done primarily with university students, her general conclusions could also be transferable to a high school setting.

Miron and Lauria (1995) view student resistance as inherently political because it is about "... the expression of power in the everyday life of student culture" (p. 31). Specifically, this expression of power is embedded in the student's struggle for identity. Identity, as they see it, is conceptually about two parts. First, it has to do with social relationships. A student's identity does not exist in a vacuum – it is not simply a label that is attached to a particular individual by virtue of his or her ethnic or social background. Rather, it has to do with the wider social and cultural relationships in which the

individual student is embedded. Second, identity is socially constructed. Identity is not external – rather it comes out of the lived experiences of the individual. Students do not experience identity as single and completed – rather, they experience it as multiple, incomplete, and partial (p. 32). As Miron and Lauria (1995) put it, “students collectively resist because acts of collective resistance are involved in their identity formation” (p. 32). Resistance as an expression of power comes in when external forces attempt to ascribe a particular identity on a student. For example, the school may identify a student as at risk because she is a member of a particular ethnic or social group. Resistant behaviours are the manifestation of a student’s challenge of that identity label.

To elaborate their argument, schools are repositories of competing and contradictory identity factors – ethnicity, socioeconomic status, academic expectations – through which students attempt to come to terms with who they are and their place in the world. Identity politics is, in part, defined by the academic expectations of the teachers and not necessarily by any racial stereotyping on the part of the teachers (p. 50). Interestingly enough, academic success does not predict resistance. It is reasonable to hypothesize that students who are doing well academically would be the least likely to engage in resistant behaviours while those students who are doing relatively poorly in their school work would adopt a more resistant approach. However, as Miron and Lauria (1995) found out, students do not necessarily equate academic success with quality of education. In other words, students who do well academically do not necessarily believe they are receiving a quality education. As a result, students who are academically successful also engage in resistant behaviours. Their conclusion is that “students choose who they want to be” – they, in effect, choose their own identity among the myriads of

identities ascribed to them (p. 50). They are aware that their identities are under siege and therefore engage in identity politics in order to preserve their identity.

In a similar argument, Garber (2002) views student resistance as a choice that is made by students in response to their individual circumstances and perceptions. She notes that educators typically associate resistance with low academic achievement and are more likely to explain resistance in terms of either external socio-economic factors or internal motivational factors. However, in order to further explore resistance from a student perspective, she undertook extensive interviews with a select group of students and teachers at an inner-city high school. She suggests that four broad factors contribute to students choosing to resist. These factors include: (1) personal and family issues that interfere with learning, (2) extra-curricular jobs or activities that take up a significant portion of time, (3) elements of the school environment that students find psychologically oppressive, and (4) the perceptions and experiences that students have of their teachers.

Stevens (2000) suggests the inherent nature of student resistance needs to be understood within the school's overall authority structure. Stevens categorises school as a 'compelling institution' – an institution that

...imposes its rules upon its members on a temporary basis according to predetermined expectations. It gathers temporary members, places temporary restraints on them, demands compliance to pre-set standards, and establishes its own goals and systems without the consent of its members. (p. 62)

Schools essentially compel students to conform to particular rules and regulations and school authorities thereby define as resistant those behaviours that contest the rules and regulations. Stevens suggests that student resistance is, in many ways, a matter of how

schools perceive it: “Student resistance is the compelling institution’s perception of student activity. Student activity is not necessarily inappropriate outside the school grounds nor is the student behaviour regulated consistently” (2000, p. 72). Sekayi (2001) makes a similar point when he suggests that the “... source of student resistance was about much more than students simply rejecting the value of education. Their resistance was often reduced to this by many of the adults involved” (p. 420). From this perspective, then, student resistance has to do with the ways in which schools, as authority structures, define certain behaviours.

### **Summary: Macro-Perspective and Micro-Perspective**

There is a fundamental difference in the understanding of and accounting for student resistance between a macro-level perspective and a micro-level perspective. A micro-level perspective tends to focus on the manifestations of student behaviours and accounts for their emergence from within a set of specific causes. For example, resistance could emerge as a result of a struggle for identity (Miron & Lauria, 1995), poor self-control (Nakhaie, Silverman, & LaGrange, 2000), unsafe or disorganised school environment (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007), or simply as part and parcel of the authority structure of schools (Grant, 1997; Langhout, 2005; Stevens, 2000). A macro-level perspective, on the other hand, tends not to focus so much on the specific behaviours as on the ideological and social processes and contexts that give rise to those behaviours. Critical pedagogy, for example, is less concerned about the expressions of resistant behaviours and more concerned with outlining the ways in which those behaviours manifest the reproduction of an inherently flawed and unjust social order.

At the same time, however, both the macro- and the micro-perspective of resistance conceptualise it as integrally bound up with power relations largely because both perspectives connect resistance with power and domination. In the next section, I outline two positions that relate power and resistance – a modernist and a post-modernist position. I conclude that a post-modern position is more useful to understand the communicative potential of resistance.

### **Resistance and Power**

#### **A modernist position of resistance and power.**

Both the macro- and the micro-perspective of resistance conceptualise resistance as integrally bound up with power relations largely because both perspectives connect resistance with power and domination. Raby (2005a) suggests that this view of power is a modernist position because it delineates a clear binary distinction between the dominant and the subordinate and sees resistance as a medium by which the subordinate can attempt to effect changes to the social order. However, within the modernist position, resistance can also be classified along a continuum usually according to the severities of the behaviours or their intended effect. For example, behaviours can be classified as rebellious, contestations, rudeness, or resistance depending on the target of the behaviours as well as on how these behaviours are conceptualised by the various parties involved. Researchers attempt to examine questions such as: How is resistance defined and identified? Who identifies it and defines it as such? Who are the targets of resistance? What are the forms of resistance?

Certainly, as Raby (2005a) points out, “There are indeed some aspects of modernist theories of resistance that are attractive: the subject is whole and thus has a

clear source of agency. The enemies are easy to spot and avenues for social change are more clear-cut” (p. 161). At the same time, however, a modernist position also raises some challenges largely because resistance cannot always be so neatly and cleanly delineated along the lines of subject, agency, and social change. To do so would produce a narrow conceptualisation of student resistance and would not be able to capture or understand the nuances and complexities that not only inform resistant behaviours but also contextualise them within the social processes of the learning environment.

**A postmodern position of resistance and power.** As I outlined so far, both a macro-level and a micro-level perspective conceptualise student resistance as integrally bound up with power relations that stem from positions of domination. While a modernist position of resistance is predicated on a classical conceptualisation of power and domination, a postmodernist position, according to Raby (2005a), is wrapped in Foucault’s view of the fluidity of self-construction. In this view of resistance, the focus shifts away from the behaviours to the subjects of the behaviours. More specifically, the shift is to an understanding of the ways in which the subjects actively and continuously create or construct their identities in response to their environment, their circumstances, and / or their lived-experiences. In this position, then, power plays a key role on the creation of self-identity.

In a post-modern position, power is not conceived as a commodity – as something that is possessed by a particular group of people and welded against another group of people. Rather, power is viewed as having a relational character because it exists in every social relation. In this view, all of social life is a network of power relations. Since all of social life is a network of power relations, it is argued that power produces reality. As

Raby (2005a) summarises, “Power is productive, flowing through the language we use, how we come to understand ourselves, practices of governance, the organisation of time and space, and so forth” (p. 161). Thus, individuals are not seen as agents of power, but rather as being effected by power relations.

Resistance in this position is viewed not as something external to power but rather as something intrinsically part of power. As To (2006) argues, “Power and resistance coexist intrinsically and it is not necessarily true that the presence of resistance can lead to a change of power relations, but it is a matter of the possibility and potential to resist” (p. 781). Therefore, while a study of resistance within a postmodern position may start at the macro-level perspective of analysis, it does not end there. Power also exists within social relations and self-identity. Thus, at a micro-level perspective, it also involves understanding how the patterns and practices of power have developed social relations and have constituted the individual. Understanding resistance, therefore, is about understanding how individuals (subjects) actively and continuously create or construct their identities in response to their environment, their circumstances, and / or their lived-experiences.

There are, of course, some challenges in using a postmodern position to understand resistance. Foucault’s concept of power can be problematic because it does not account for the fact that collective resistance does occur. If the level of analysis is to be on the individual, then it becomes more difficult to account for how a group of individuals can organise themselves and collectively resist. Furthermore, while a modernist position may be criticised for being a bit too neat and tidy, a post-modern position can be confusing and disjointed.

**Summary: resistance and power.** Given this complexity of defining resistance, it may be tempting to suggest that the concept of resistance is devoid of any meaning and therefore not a very useful analytical tool. However, there are aspects of both a modern position and a post-modern position that can provide useful insights into understanding student resistance. On the one hand, power and domination as conceived in a modernist position is integral to the school system. Given that the key characteristics of schools are “enclosed institutions, organised around disciplinary practices and manifestly hierarchical relations” (Pykett, 2009, p. 107) means there is a clear binary distinction between the dominant and the subordinate. On the other hand, student resistance is far too complex, nuanced, and inconsistent to be neatly wrapped into an agentive function of social changes. In fact, the life of a student is far too complex to be able to meaningfully categorise certain behaviours as being resistant. As Raby (2005a) points out,

Young people occupy a specific location in relation to power and identity as they experience a temporary inequality that intersects with other significant identifications, are framed in ways that negate their existence in the present, are shaped by discourses of a fluid, becoming self, and are also diversely shaped through the material inequalities of their diverse lives. (p. 168)

In that respect, any understanding of student resistance needs to take into account issues of power and identity as they are imbedded in the social relationships and the learning environment at school.

The challenge for us teachers, though, is to move beyond seeing resistance as primarily an issue of power. Once we begin to consider how resistance is also about identity and social relations and about potentials and possibilities, we can begin thinking

about how resistance might be a communicative act. To that extent, if we teachers see resistance as a potentially valuable form of communication, we then can focus on how we might use this communication to foster critical reflection and dialogue among those who are part of the school community.

### **Conceptual Framework – Communication and Community**

**Resistance as an act of communication.** Abowitz (2000) conceptualises student resistance as a communicative act and focuses on the social processes by which messages are communicated and on the context in which these messages are embedded. She distinguishes resistance from mere opposition to authority – resistance is “opposition with a social and political purpose” (p. 878). It is a communicative act because “it is a means of signalling, generating, and building dialogue around particular power imbalances and inequalities” (p. 878). Abowitz appropriates Dewey's theory of inquiry and communication to inform her concept of resistance as communication.

According to Abowitz (2000), Dewey distinguishes between three modes of inquiry: self-action, interaction, and transaction:

self-action describes the state in which things are viewed as acting under their own power, and interaction refers to the state in which a thing is balanced against another thing in causal interconnection. Transaction is the condition of seeing things not in isolation, nor in terms of their "true" nature or essence, but in terms of their systemic context, their tentative and preliminary status as points of inquiry, their places in an organic world of expanding space and time. (p. 878-879)

Of the three modes, the transactional mode of inquiry broadens the perspective of student resistance by not narrowly focussing on the actual behaviours themselves but rather on the social contexts in which the behaviours are embedded.

Abowitz (2000) argues that resistance theories tend to conceive 'resistance as communication' in an interactional perspective rather than a transactional perspective. In an interactional perspective, resistance is seen as interactions between two independent entities in a casual relationship. Specifically, the two independent entities would be the students and either the school or the teachers. Students communicate messages of their dissatisfaction or their opposition to schooling through words, gestures, and actions. These messages, in turn are usually received and enacted upon by the teachers. In this situation, the two entities remain further entrenched in their perspectives and fundamentally their relationship remains unchanged.

A transactional perspective, on the other hand, goes beyond this and opens up multiple perspectives of the resistant behaviours:

In a transactional reading of resistance, the closed system is opened up to recognise multiple and shifting identities... cultural institutions are consequently seen as complex, shifting social settings that conceptualise our human dramas. Human relations are understood to shape self-perceptions and actions, and our larger society is recognised as the socio-economic and historical backdrop upon which opposition is enacted and shaped. (Abowitz, 2000, p. 882)

In this perspective, consideration is not only given to the ways in which resistance is perceived and interpreted by both parties but also to how a dialectical relationship develops between the parties which shapes and informs future interactions. Herein lies

the notion of the 'organic world' – student resistance is not an aberration of the social order or social structure but rather a fundamental part of it. Resistance, like other forms of interaction, dynamically construct, shape, and inform the social order. Thus, from a transactional perspective, it becomes important to understand resistance as a dynamic and fluid concept that shifts in meaning and significance among those affected by it.

This point is foundational in understanding resistance as a way to engage in critical reflection and dialogue. A transactional perspective understands resistance as a form of communication in which a dialectical relationship develops between the parties involved that, in turn, shapes and informs future interactions. This opens the door for critical reflection and dialogue as the parties involved can seek to learn from each other, question each other, and explore ways to respond to each other. As Kim (2010) argues, in a transactional approach, “teachers can not only seek to understand student resistance as an act of meaning making, but also use the inquiry into student resistance as a springboard to question their own classroom practices” (p. 266). On a larger scale, a transactional approach can also be used by the broader school community – teachers, students, parents, and administrators – to use the inquiry into student resistance as a springboard to reflect on who they are as a school, what do they value educationally, and how are those values actually experienced by all parties. Admittedly, this does not come easy in school settings where power relations are entrenched and teachers and administrators see conflict as an attack on their authority.

The truth of this statement can be seen in schools where zero-tolerance policies are used ostensibly to provide a safe environment for students. More often, however, zero tolerance policies tend to result in not only encouraging teachers and administrators to

seek ready-made solutions for complex issues, but also in exacerbating existing points of tension and conflict (Giroux, 2003; Skiba, 2000, 2004). In such schools, there is a tendency for teachers and administrators to “punish students rather than listen to them and work with them in order to provide meaningful educational experiences” (Kim, 2010, p. 262). A transaction perspective, by contrast, would seek to transcend these types of policies and engage teachers and administrators in communicating meaningfully with resistant students to seek solutions to conflicts and tensions.

This was the goal of Kim’s (2010) ethnographic study of an alternative high school in Arizona. This particular school was set up by the state education board as an alternative to the regular high school program. Its main goal is to serve students who have been identified by the attending school as either at risk for dropping out, as poor academic achievers, or who have a history of failing grades. Its student population comes from a variety of ethnic backgrounds with most of them from low-income families. Students are disciplined on a zero-tolerance policy. Based on these factors, it comes as no surprise that student resistant behaviours are high and there are many points of conflicts and tensions between the students and teachers.

In employing a transactional to view of resistance for a theoretical framework, Kim (2010) identified three themes: (1) Resistance can be communicated as a self-defense mechanism; (2) Resistance can be communicated as a way to demand a meaningful instruction; and (3) Resistance can be communicated as a way to affirm one’s agency and self-empowerment. In these three themes, it was clear that through resistance, students were communicating a view of themselves and their world to the school authorities that could have been used to strengthen the relationships between the two

groups. For example, teachers may view student disruptions during instructional time as a message that students are not interested in learning. However, this resistance may have little to do with a lack of interest but more about a desire for lessons that are engaging and meaningful:

Data show that low-level disengaging instruction may trigger student resistance... Rote memorisation of discrete facts and filling-in blanks on a worksheet are typical classroom activities at Borderlands. Students mechanically copy the answers from a textbook. Lessons focus on ‘the basics’ needed for entry-level jobs while understanding the material is not encouraged. Students work on the same worksheet repetitively for a week before they take a test on it. (Kim, 2010, p. 270-271)

As Kim (2010) argues, if teachers understand resistance as a communicative act, they would be able to understand why conflicts and tensions occur within their classrooms and to work at ways of minimising them.

To explore resistance as a communicative act at Mountainview, it is necessary to consider the relationship between resistance and community. As Abowitz (2000) argues, communication is at the heart of community. Community, in a transactional perspective, is “created and maintained through a process of communication understood not as peaceful, perfectly coordinated exchanges of views which result in common purposes, but as human webs of relation and meaning that undergo the inherent conflicts, contradictions, and bondings of shared life” (Abowitz, 2000, p. 884). An analysis of the three contexts – structural, relational, and philosophical – of Mountainview, as expressed through the participants, reveals the existence of contradictions, conflicts, and bondings

in the shared life at school. However, before considering the relationship between community and resistance, I first need to consider the concept of community as applied specifically to Mountainview Christian School.

**Mountainview as community.** The concept of community is one of those vague and ambiguous terms that tends to evoke an emotional response. As Smith (1996) put it, community is a “motherhood word in that it produces a warm glow in the listener and elevates the speaker to a higher moral ground” (p. 250). Over the past twenty or so years, the notion of community has entered the educational discourse in a variety of ways, primarily in the form of school-as-community (Furman-Brown, 1999). In this discourse, the argument tends to be that schools ought to be reshaped or redrawn from school as an organisation to school as a community. While it is not my intention in this study to contribute to that particular educational literature, it is necessary to briefly outline two ways in which school-as-community accurately describes Mountainview Christian School.

One of the significant proponents of the school-as-community discourse is Sergiovanni (1994a, 1994b). He suggests that the dominant metaphor of school-as-organisation needs to be redrawn to school-as-community:

Communities are social organised around relationships and the felt interdependencies that nurture them. Instead of being tied together and tied to purposes by bartering arrangements, this social structure bonds people together in special ways and bind them to concepts, images, and values that comprise a shared idea structure. This bonding and binding are the defining characteristic of schools as communities. Communities are defined by their centre of values,

sentiments, and beliefs that provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of we from a collection of I's. (1994b, p. 217)

Thus, for Sergiovanni, schools should work towards adopting the ideals of community – close social relations, a sense of working together, and a common set of values and beliefs.

Embedded within this school-as-community discourse is an articulated theoretical perspective of the three social contexts that describes Mountainview Christian School. The first context, the structural, is found in Sergiovanni's notion of a 'shared idea structure'. According to him, this has to do with a social structure that binds people to shared concepts, images, and values. The relational context is found in Sergiovanni's idea that communities are organised around relationships. The last context, the philosophical, can be found in his argument that communities are defined by their centre of values, sentiments, and beliefs. Thus, in a significant way, there seems to be a clear congruence between Sergiovanni's theoretical concept of school-as-community and the three contexts that exist at Mountainview.

Another way in which school-as-community discourse describes Mountainview can be found in Strike's (1999) argument that in order for a school to be seen as a community, there needs to exist constitutive values that underpin the ideal of community. According to him, constitutive values have two important properties. First, they must "generate a conception of the ends of a good education" (p. 47). This means that, as a school community, there must be an articulated idea of the ultimate purpose or goal of education and it is towards that goal that the community strives for. Related to this is the second important property of constitutive values and that is they must "forge common

projects” (p. 47). Encompassed in this property are the ideas of cooperation and collaboration because community ultimately means people need to work together to achieve that end goal of a good education.

Strike (1999) does, though, underscore his belief that both properties are essential ingredients of community. For example, most people would agree that the end goal of education is to prepare students to be active, contributing citizens. However, that goal, in and of itself, will not produce community unless there is something else that will bring people together to work cooperatively and collaboratively to achieve that goal. As Strike (1999) put it, “The bonds of community are forged because we share some common project, rooted in a common outlook, that we can pursue together” (p. 48). In other words, the ideals of community can be realised only through both shared values and common project.

The foundational basis of Mountainview is clearly built on both aspects of the constitutive values of community. First, there is evidence of a clear and articulated conceptualisation of the end goals of education. Briefly, since I outlined that in more detail earlier in the overview of Mountainview Christian School, the goal is to prepare students to become adults who live as Christians in all aspects of their lives. Second, there is a strong sense of common purpose where everybody needs to work together to achieve the goal. By its very nature – a faith-based, private school – there is a core spirit of cooperation and collaboration among parents, teachers, and students.

So, in both ways – in the discourse and in the constitutive values – Mountainview Christian School can be considered a community. However, in order to relate this to the communicative potential of resistance, I need to take this one step further to explore the

notions of intended community as opposed to experienced community. For, it is in the tension and contradictions between these two that resistance at Mountainview takes on significance and meaning.

### **Intended community and experienced community.**

It is true that having the ingredients of community – constitutive values and all – does not necessarily mean that a school will be experienced by those involved as a community. In other words, community is more than the sum of its parts. Community as envisioned by Sergiovanni and others, for all intents and purposes, has an experiential component and, thus, is more of feeling and a sentiment than it is a set of criteria. That being the case, it is further useful to make a distinction between community as intended and community as experienced.

In order to explore this distinction, it is helpful to use the concept of ethos because of the parallels between it and community. At the outset, the concept of ethos, like community, is difficult to define largely because it tends to belong to the realm of subjective experiences. Ethos, according to Glover and Coleman (2005) is the atmosphere of the school and an expression of the relationships between people and the values and principles that underpin the school's policies and practices. Allder (1993) argues that ethos is recognised initially as experiential rather than cognitive and is bound up in perceptions of spirit, ambiance, atmosphere, and climate. McLaughlin (2005) suggests that ethos is a form of educative influence that is part of the entire educational experience of schooling. Thus, when Sergiovanni talks about community as being defined "...by their centre of values, sentiments, and beliefs that provide the needed conditions

for creating a sense of we from a collection of I's" (1994b, p. 217), there is a close parallel to ethos.

In outlining the distinction between community as intended and community as experienced, I continue to draw on a parallel to ethos. Donnolly (2000) distinguishes between two views of ethos: a positivist view and an anti-positivist view. A positivist view sees ethos as something that prescribes social reality. It is, according to Donnolly (2000), a "formal expression of the authorities' aims and objectives of the organisation" (p. 135). This view sees ethos exerting an indirect, unconscious influence on people to cause them to think and act in acceptable ways. Thus, for schools, ethos is about a formal prescription of how especially students, but also teachers, ought to behave and why they ought to behave in that manner. McLaughlin (2005) refers to this as the aspirational or intended expression of ethos because ethos is almost always linked to a set of core beliefs: "An ethos ... must, if it is to be explicitly justified educationally, relate the elements of the ethos to an articulated and defensible set of educational aims and values and to an overall vision of education" (p. 312). In other words, from a positivist view, ethos cannot exist outside of some external and articulated principles.

By contrast, an anti-positivist view of ethos is more informal and emerges from social interactions and processes within the organisation. According to Donnelly (2000), ethos, in this view, "emanates from individual and group interaction and in this sense is not that which is formally stated or documented but is a process of social interaction; it is not independent from the organisation but inherently bound up within it" (p. 135). McLaughlin (2005) refers to this as 'experienced' ethos and suggests that in this sense,

ethos has an established “taken for granted feel to it” (p. 314). In other words ethos, apart from any existing external principals, also has a subjective element to it.

There is a sense in which the ideal of community in schools can be conceptualised in a parallel way. As Sergiovanni (1994b) and Strike (1999) point out, community needs to be referenced to some external goal of education. At the same time, there is also an informal, experiential aspect to community – whether it is expressed as a common project (Strike, 1999) or in the “we’s to a collection of I’s” (Sergiovanni, 1994b, p. 217). This leads to the point I am trying to make: resistance reveals the tensions and contradictions of community. Donnolly (2005) refers to the dilemma of ethos when community members not only do not accept the external principles – the intentional ethos – but also actively resist or subvert it. This leads to a discrepancy between the intended ethos and the lived reality or experiences with it. McLaughlin (2005) also makes this point when he argues that both forms of ethos – intended and experienced – must form some coherence and congruency otherwise conflict, inconsistency and fragmentation will undermine it. In the same way, community seeks to be a unifying force, both in values and beliefs as well as in actions and behaviours. However, tension and contradictions between the two – intended and experienced – can exist and create a dilemma of community so that the values of cooperation and collaboration, the accompanying sentiments of belonging and the shared values are being resisted and undermined by those people it was intended to bring together. This becomes part and parcel of the communicative potential of resistance.

**Summary of conceptual framework.** This thesis is a study of student resistance and seeks to explore the relationship between communication, community, and resistance

at Mountainview Christian School. This thesis is based on the theoretical framework of Abowitz (2000) who suggests that a transactional perspective of resistance recognises multiple and shifting identities of students and that schools, as cultural institutions, are complex, social settings that provide a context for student resistant behaviours. In this perspective, resistance is not seen primarily as either issues of power or as political statements by students designed to reveal and transform oppressive practices and ideologies. Rather, resistance is seen as integrally bound up in notions of community and communication.

Community, from a transactional perspective, is a process and not a state of being. An integral part of that process is the communication that creates community. However, as Abowitz (2000) argues, community from a transaction perspective is not created through a process of communication that is a passive and perfectly coordinated exchange of information, but rather as “human webs of relations and meaning that undergo the inherent conflicts, contradictions, and bondings of shared life” (p. 884). Thus, community, as it exists at Mountainview, is also dynamically shaped, constructed, and informed by resistance.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Design**

This study is a qualitative research study that asked various participants to talk about their experiences and perceptions of schooling at Mountainview Christian School. In this chapter, I outline how the study was designed and structured to interview these participants in a way would produce sufficient and appropriate data to explore resistant behaviours.

#### **Methodological Framework**

At its broadest level, this thesis is based on qualitative research, which as Frankel and Devers (2000) point out is "...best characterised as a family of approaches whose goal is understanding the lived experiences of persons who share time, space, and culture" (p. 113). The goal of this particular research study is to gain a deeper understanding of how the participants experienced and understood their resistance to schooling. In keeping with that goal, I decided to use a qualitative methodology as a formalised means to ask people about their experiences.

More specifically, within the family of qualitative research, I chose to utilise a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, according to Saha (1978) "... focuses on the manner in which individuals perceive their physical and social environments" (p. 50) and as such, the emphasis of this approach is on the individual participant and his or her lived experiences. This methodology is appropriate for two reasons. First, a phenomenological approach seeks to analyse behaviours from the point of view of the individual participant. This approach accorded well with the intent of my research – attempting to understand resistant behaviours from the perspective of the students

themselves, outside of any imposed analytical framework. Second, a phenomenological approach allows the researcher to consider a variety of perspectives and thus enabled me to incorporate and analyse seemingly disparate data.

This second point is important because, as van Manen (1990) points out, with phenomenology “... the researcher comes to understand the multiple possibilities that connect to essences and meanings of experience rather than pursuing a single inroad to truth” (p. 250). As I outlined in the literature review, the difficulty in defining the significance of resistant behaviours is its inherent complexity – although most educators would agree that students exhibit resistant behaviours, its multiple meanings and individual significances defy a single framework of understanding. It was, therefore, essential to choose a methodology, such as phenomenology, that is not necessarily determined by a single analytical framework but would provide latitude in pursuing answers to a range of questions.

To provide this latitude, I chose a hermeneutic phenomenological approach because it could offer the necessary analytical framework for not only exploring how particular individuals both experienced and understood their resistant behaviours, but also how collectively these experiences might contribute to a deeper understanding of resistance in general and its communicative potential in particular. In order to understand how a hermeneutic approach is an effective method to accomplish this, I provide a brief overview of its roots in Husserl (1962) and Heidegger (1953).

The German philosopher Edmund Husserl outlined a key characteristic of the phenomenological approach. In rejecting the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, he argued that the external world can be only known through individual experience. In other

words, humans can be certain about the truths of the world only through their own experiences. As Husserl (1962) put it, “natural knowledge begins with experience and remains within experience” (p. 46). Thus, a phenomenological approach does not separate individual experience from external reality. Rather, it concerns itself with an objective understanding of that world from the perspective of individual experience.

At the same time, however, a strict adherence to Husserl’s approach does pose some significant issues because of its strict focus on objective description as the key to understanding the lived experiences of the participants. A core issue is whether or not the self can be singularly isolated from the world in which they live in. Is it possible to separate meaning from the cultural and historical background of both the participant and the researcher – to objectively bracket the background in which the lived experiences are embedded in order to arrive at meaning? Martin Heidegger (1953), a student of Husserl, believed it was not.

For the most part Heidegger agreed with his teacher on the broad strokes of phenomenology – the focus on the lived experiences of people and the rejection of a separation of individual reality from the external world. However, where Husserl’s phenomenology sought to isolate the self from its worldly experiences, Heidegger (1953) believed the self is inextricably linked to the world – the “being-in-the-world” self. Rather than focusing on description as Husserl did, Heidegger’s phenomenology focuses on interpretation. Thus, his brand of phenomenology has been labelled as hermeneutic phenomenology due to its emphasis on interpreting the ways in which people make meaning of their lived experiences.

The key to Heidegger's phenomenology is interpretation rather than description because he believed that the self cannot be singularly isolated from the world and therefore meaning cannot be separated from the cultural and historical background of both the participant and the researcher. In other words, Heideggarian phenomenology, because of its focus on understanding the being as it interacts in the world, attempts to interpret the significance of both the lived experiences of the participant and the cultural situation in which those experiences are embedded.

For that reason, I adopted a methodology for this research study that aligns itself with hermeneutic, or Heideggarian, phenomenology. This methodology accords well with a transactional perspective of student resistance – a perspective that sees resistance as part of the dynamic and organic web of human relationships. A transactional perspective on resistance is not about isolating the individual – it is about understanding the lived experiences of individuals as they interact within the learning environment.

### **Selecting Participants For the Study**

In selecting individuals to participate in the study, I was guided by Lavery's (2003) suggestion that the aim "...is to select participants who have lived experience, and who are diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience" (p. 18). The participants of this study come from a target group of former grade twelve students who graduated from Mountainview Christian School. This target group exhibited those qualities as outlined by Lavery (2003) specifically because the group consisted of a significantly large and formidable group of students whose behaviours, while at school, were perceived by both the teaching staff and the larger school community as particularly challenging and difficult.

Considering this, I believed that this group of former students had the potential to provide a deep and rich source of data with which to conduct the research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Since I conducted research with individuals with whom I already had a prior relationship, there were significant ethical issues that needed to be considered. One of the issues had to do with power relations and the necessity of drawing a clear line between my dual roles of administrator and researcher. While they were students at Mountainview, I was their principal; now, as potential participants in this study, I am now a researcher. Therefore, at one level, there were ethical concerns with power and recruitment because I recruited participants who have resisted and challenged authority in a school in which I was an administrator and, as a result, may still feel vulnerable. In order to mitigate this, I needed to ensure throughout the process that I maintained a separation between my role as administrator and my role as researcher.

At another level, there were also ethical concerns with power in regards to my relationship with my colleagues. This study is about resistance and, while it primarily involves participants who are no longer students at the school, it also involves many of my colleagues who taught these students and were affected by their behaviours and activities. There was a chance that I, as researcher, would be hearing stories about my colleagues that could potentially place me in a conflict of interest with my role as their administrator.

Another ethical issue had to do with consent and confidentiality. As with all research with human subjects, confidentiality and privacy are important and need to be established rather concretely and specifically (van Manen, 1990). Despite the fact that

the participants have graduated from school and are no longer under my authority, their decision to participate needed be made freely and voluntary, without feeling any undue pressure or compulsion by me. In order for the participants to be able to provide informed consent, it was critical that an environment of trust be created where confidentiality and privacy are paramount

To address these ethical issues surrounding informed consent as well as confidentiality and privacy, the University of Manitoba Ethics Board approved the research study (See Appendix A) with the following details:

- Participants are to sign a Letter of Consent form (see Appendix B) in order to be subjects in the study. The letter of consent outlined the intent and purpose of the research as well as the details concerning interview location, procedures, privacy, and confidentiality.
- Confidentiality and privacy would be safe-guarded in the following ways: (a) nobody other than myself would know who would be participating in the interview - the participant's name and identity would not be used at any stage of the research process; (b) pseudonyms would be used to disguise the identity of the participant, the staff, and the school in the final report; (c) all data pertaining to the study – including the digital recordings, transcriptions, and field notes – would be securely locked and destroyed at the conclusion of the study.
- Participants were told, both in writing and verbally at the interview stage, that they have the right to withdraw at anytime, the right to refuse to answer any

question, and the right to ask for more information before they answer any question.

### **The Participants of the Study**

**Sample size.** With the target group consisting of forty-four students, I needed to determine an adequate sample size. While the aim is to select participants who could provide a rich and diverse range of stories, there does not seem to be any sort of consensus on how many participants would constitute a valid sample for a phenomenological study. Considering the size of the target group and considering that Groenewald (2004), Morse (1994), and Cresswell (1998) all suggest that a sample size of between two and ten would suffice, I decided to recruit a sample size of six participants.

**Selection of participants.** In view of the ethical considerations outlined earlier, the selection of participants proved to be a challenge. Considering those issues, purposeful sampling was not possible, but yet it would be highly desirable to obtain a group of participants that would constitute a representative sample of the larger class. To that end, prior to recruitment, I outlined four characteristics that would be used as a guideline in recruitment. These characteristics included:

- The participants have experiences in engaging in resistant behaviours.
- The participants are able to articulate those experiences verbally.
- The sample contains both males and females.
- The sample is representative of the social groups that existed at the time the participants were in grade 12

Once I had recruited the participants, I then compared the actual outcome with the ideal and determined the extent to which my sample included as wide a range as possible of participants who could provide the depth of data that would be needed.

I found that I met almost all of the characteristics I had outlined prior to recruitment. The group of participants included an equal gender distribution (three females and three males) and a reasonable representation of the various social groups that existed at the time; most of them had the ability to articulate their experiences (all but one); and all of them had experiences in engaging in resistant behaviours.

**Recruitment of participants.** In order to recruit participants, I contacted members of the target group through Facebook™. I used this social networking site as a vehicle for initial contact because direct contact of the participants or use of privileged information contravened ethical guidelines. Of the forty-two graduates, I managed to find approximately twenty-five on Facebook™. The initial contact message briefly outlined the details of the study – purpose, time commitments, and privacy / confidentiality issues – as well as included a link to the official Letter of Invitation (see Appendix B). The message ended with an invitation to respond if they were interested in participating. Eventually out of this process, seven people responded and indicated interest in participating. Only six were interviewed because one of the initial respondents did not respond to any of my follow-up messages seeking a day, time, and place to meet for the interview.

**Overview of the participants.** An overview of the participants, demographically, looked as follows (to protect the identity of the participants, all names are pseudonyms):

- Katie – female, who had attended Mountainview Christian School since Kindergarten. She is a middle child whose siblings had previously attended MCS. Both parents grew up in this community and had graduated from MCS themselves.
- Will – male, who had attended MCS since grade nine. Previous to that, he had attended an independent Christian school in another city. He is a middle child whose older sibling had also attended MCS. One of his parents grew up in this community, the other came from a different province. However, neither of them had attended this school.
- Jon – male, who had attended MCS since Kindergarten. He is a younger child whose older siblings had attended and graduated from MCS. Both of his parents did not grow up in this community and had not attended this school.
- Hilda – female, who had attended MCS since Kindergarten. She is the youngest child whose older siblings had attended and graduated from MCS. Both parents had not grown up in this community and had not attended this school.
- Naomi – female, who had attended MCS since junior high. She is the oldest child. Both parents had not grown up in this community and had not attended MCS.
- Luke – male, who had attended MCS since grade 5. He is a middle child, some of whose siblings had attended MCS. Both of his parents did grow up in this community and had graduated from MCS.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

**The interview process.** I conducted the research through in-depth interviews – a process that, as Cornett-DeVito and Worley (2005) point out, is in keeping with a

phenomenological approach. At the same time, however, an interview process is only effective if it is conducted within an environment of safety and trust (Laverty, 2003). I sought to establish this type of an environment in three ways. First, the interviews were held at a time and place of the participant's own choosing. In that way, I was able to hand over control of the timing and location of the interview directly to the participants. It turned out that all of the interviews were held in a neutral, public place – usually a local restaurant. Second, in order to establish my role as researcher rather than former administrator, I started the interview process with small talk usually centred around post-secondary life. I purposefully avoided any references to the former school days. Third, I went over the Letter of Consent and paid special attention to how I would ensure privacy and confidentiality.

When it came to the actual interview, I was mindful of what Diekelmann (2001) notes, “The role of the interpretive researcher in the unending conversation is to listen to many narratives...” (p. 57). In order to achieve this, I used a semi-structured interview approach, which on the one hand, provided a framework to the conversations, but at the same time allowed some flexibility in allowing the participant to take the conversation into other interesting and relevant areas. The interview was structured along eight open-ended questions (see Appendix C) that were intended to explore their experiences at Mountainview Christian School with an emphasis on their experiences with rules and authority.

The interviews lasted anywhere between forty-five and ninety minutes – most of them were just over an hour – and were digitally audio-recorded. Within a day or two of the interview, I transcribed them and checked for accuracy of transcription. I also kept a

small number of field notes on the interviews, including the participants' reactions as well as my own thoughts about the interview.

**Data organisation and analysis.** As Gelo, Braakmann, and Benetka (2008) point out, “qualitative data analysis is carried out on the previously collected text data...through content or thematic analysis” (p. 276). When it comes to phenomenological studies, Creswell, Hanson, Clark-Plano, & Morales (2007) suggest three steps to this process: reduce the information to significant statements; combine the statements into themes; and from the themes will emerge phenomenological descriptions. I decided later to use the terms: ‘focal point’ rather than ‘theme’ as a term to label the identifying patterns that I extracted from the interviews. I wanted to avoid confusion when outlining the findings of the interviews along the three social contexts – relational, structural, and philosophical. These three contexts are the organising structure of the findings and not the themes that emerged from the data.

In order to determine the phenomenological descriptions, I used the following steps:

- When transcribing the interview, I formatted the transcription to be double-spaced, numbering each line, and leaving a fairly wide right margin. This format allowed me ample space to jot notes and to code the information.
- Since I transcribed the interviews myself, I was able to become deeply immersed in the interview and thus orientated to the data it produced.

Immediately after the transcription, I jotted down some initial impressions and thoughts.

- I read through the transcript again a couple of days later to determine the extent to which my initial impressions had changed. Again, I jotted down some notes in the margins.
- Once the transcriptions of all the interviews were completed, I read through the interviews several times to look for significant statements and common themes and topics. I jotted down summaries, associations, connections, and interpretations on the transcriptions.
- At this point, I was able to determine similarities, differences, echoes, amplifications, and contradictions and thereby extract two major focal points. In addition to extracting focal points, I also determined various details that supported them.
- The next step was to develop a summary table that outlined the main focal points and supporting details. From this summary table, I was to connect the points and details to the three contexts of student resistance – structural, relational, and philosophical.
- The last step was to use these connections to analyse their relationship to student resistance at Mountainview Christian School.

**Issues of validity.** A primary concern with qualitative research methods is its seeming lack of a uniform standard of rigour when it comes to reliability, validity, and bias. Lavery (2003) points out that “issues of rigor in interpretive inquiry are confusing to discuss...as there is not an agreed upon language used to describe it or one universal set of criteria used to assess its presence” (p. 24). There is, however, a tendency in qualitative research to view validity as a set of *a priori* criteria that can be met by

utilising specific strategies. If those strategies, such as member checking, triangulation, and audit checks, are properly employed, the study is considered valid (Cho & Trent, 2006; Cresswell & Miller, 2000; Ortlipp, 2008).

However, this study did not easily lend itself to using these neat and tidy strategies for ensuring validity. The fact that this study was based on subjects with whom I had a prior relationship and in a school setting in which I am employed, injected a subjectivity into the process that made it more problematic to use these strategies to manage validity. This concern was certainly expressed by the University of Manitoba's ethics board precisely because of the impact this process would have on the issues of validity. For example, the use of member checks, it was pointed out, could compromise the separation of researcher and former administrator because it acknowledges a prior relationship and could also potentially compromise confidentiality and privacy.

Defining validation as a process through which trustworthiness of observations and interpretations are evaluated (Mishler, 1990), I addressed the issue of validity in this research study by using three of deWitt's and Ploeg's (2006) 'expressions of rigour' as a framework to outline the steps I took to ensure the research process and its findings met a standard of trustworthiness. Those three expressions are: (1) balanced integration, (2) openness, and (3) concreteness.

***Balanced integration.*** This expression refers to way in which the research and the findings strike a consistent balance between its philosophical underpinnings and the voices of the participants. In the case of hermeneutic phenomenology, the participants take the researcher on a journey of multiple interpretations in search of the meanings of human experiences (deWitt & Ploeg, 2006). That journey, though, needs to be shaped and

guided by the philosophical framework of phenomenology. In particular, this essentially means that the design of the research must allow the participants to explore and express their experiences in their own way and in their own words. By using open-ended questions, I provided opportunities for the participants to explore and express their experiences without restricting them or confining them to any particular focus. At the same time, I also intentionally asked for clarification or rephrased what they were saying as a means to confirm the accuracy of my understanding of how they answered the questions.

*Openness.* This expression refers to the way in which the research and its findings are open and transparent. As Freeman (2001) argues, it is impossible to separate the researcher from the experiences that embed the researcher in the process; thus, openness is an important way to ensure that the researcher's experiences, preconceptions, and biases are clarified and become part of the study's findings (deWitt & Ploeg, 2006; Lavery, 2003). According to them, openness is enhanced when researchers explicitly account for their decisions regarding the design, execution, and analysis of their research.

As I outlined earlier, I have direct experience with the resistant behaviours of the group of students of which the participants are members. I became the administrator of the school when this group was in grade 12. Therefore, I had one year of experience in working with them. I had no previous history with this group, nor had been given any background history about this group. I entered a relationship with this particular group of students without any preconceived ideas.

It did not take me long to determine that there was a group of grade 12 students who clearly exhibited resistant behaviours both in the classroom and in the school at

large. I quickly realised that within this grade, there was a particularly large group of students who all seemed to get along with each other and all seem to encourage each other in negative behaviours. Within the first week of school, I had already two office referrals from teachers who needed the support of the administration to deal with some of these students.

As the new administrator, I spent the first two or three months of the school year trying to get to know both the teachers and the students – especially the grade 12 students. I found it very difficult to discipline students when I didn't have any sort of a relationship with them. I specifically did two things to assist me in getting to know this group of students. First, I took an active role on the Graduation Committee – a committee that was comprised of grade 12 students who were mandated to plan and organise their graduation class trip and ceremonies. Second, I made a point to visit the classrooms on a regular and frequent basis as a way to assess the interaction of the students and their teachers.

By the middle of the school year, for various reasons, it became necessary to make a switch in teaching assignments and so I took on the responsibility of teaching a grade 12 compulsory course. One of the benefits of this was directly experiencing the resistant behaviours of this class as a classroom teacher. Thus, not only did I experience the resistant behaviours of these students as an administrator, I also had the opportunity to experience them as a classroom teacher.

Clearly, then, I have close personal experiences with the target group of my research study. In accounting these experiences, I attempt to disclose my biases towards and experiences with the participants of the study.

*Concreteness.* This expression has to do with the way in which the findings are able to situate the reader “concretely in the context of this phenomenon and also link with experiences in their life world” (deWitt & Ploeg, 2006, p. 225). This expression has much more to do with how the findings are written up than how the research is undertaken. However, it is true that the quality of the findings depends heavily on the research methodology. To that end I deemed it important to ensure that the participants have sufficient time to express themselves and to reflect on their experiences. Since all sessions were recorded and transcribed, I was able to analyse the experiences of the participants in their own words. Therefore, when I outlined the research findings, I used verbatim quotations to support those finding. Using verbatim quotes gives the reader a broader context to understand the actual experiences of the participants and it also enhances the credibility of a qualitative research study (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997). At the same time, I also was mindful of confidentiality and therefore tried to ensure that none of the verbatim quotes revealed information that could potentially identify the participant (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006).

The problem of validity in qualitative research remains a challenge for the researcher largely because, as Ortlipp (2008) points out, “There is a lack of agreement on the amount and type of researcher influence that is acceptable, and whether and how it needs to be “controlled” and accounted for’ (p. 698). I attempted to address this by using deWitt’s and Ploeg’s (2006) expressions of rigour to ensure that my influence as the researcher was not a hindrance to understanding student resistant behaviours at Mountainview Christian School.

### **Summary of Research Design and Methodology**

This qualitative research study utilised a phenomenological method to exploring student resistance at Mountainview Christian School. A hermeneutical approach was used because this resistance is conceptualised as an integral part of the dynamic and organic web of relationships that make up the learning environment of the school. Six participants to this study were recruited and appropriate ethical considerations were taken in order to ensure voluntary and informed consent. Open-ended interviews were conducted, digitally recorded, and transcribed, after which the data was organised into focal points and supporting details. Issues of validity and bias are a particular concern with qualitative research. However, with due consideration to rigour, an attempt was made to mitigate these concerns.

## Chapter 4

### Findings And Analysis

Having delineated the methodological framework of this study, this chapter goes on to detail and analyse the findings from the interviews with the participants. I have divided this chapter into four sections. The first section briefly outlines the focal points and supporting details that emerged from the interviews. The remaining three sections explore the three social contexts of Mountainview that provide meaning to the participants' experiences with resistance. Thus, the second section explores the structural context; the third section explores the relational context; and the fourth section explores the philosophical context.

Since a phenomenological approach to qualitative research seeks to analyse social phenomenon from the point of view of the individual participant outside of any imposed analytical framework, the focus of this chapter needed to remain on the experiences of the participants and on their own words. In detailing the findings, I have kept the responses of each participant separate and have used verbatim quotes. At the same time, in order to develop a sense of the extent to which the participants' responses reflect an individual perspective or a more widely held perspective, I used the suggestion of Lincoln and Guba (1985) to classify three types of perspectives: (1) consensus type – when the majority of participants mention the same idea; (2) supported type – when approximately half of the participants mention the same idea; and (3) individual type – when an idea is mentioned by only one participant.

## **Focal Points and Supporting Details**

After a careful reading and analysis of the interview transcriptions, I extracted two main focal points and several supporting details that deal with the experiences the participants had of resistance at Mountainview. These two focal points and supporting details form the core for exploring the three social contexts of Mountainview and the participants' experiences with resistance. These focal points, supporting details, and alignment with the social contexts are outlined as follows:

Focal Point 1: The attitudes and perceptions the participants have about Mountainview Christian School

- Relationships with other students (relational context)
- Relationships with teachers (relational context)
- Attitudes towards schooling at Mountainview (structural context)
- The role of the Christian worldview in underpinning their attitudes and perceptions (philosophical context)
- How well Mountainview Christian School prepared participants for the post-secondary world (structural context)
- Junior High and Senior High experiences (structural context)

Focal Point 2: The participants' perceptions of how teachers and classmates reacted to these behaviours.

- Attitudes towards rules and expectations (structural context)
- The range of behaviours the participants exhibited or witnessed which were considered to be negative or against the rules (structural context)
- Perception of how the rules were enforced (relational context)

- Role of Christian worldview in underpinning their perceptions (philosophical context)
- Role of peer groups in underpinning their perceptions (relational context)

In the next three sections, I explore each social context by embedding the relevant focal points and the supporting topics.

### **The Structural Context of Mountainview Christian School**

The structural context essentially encompasses the school's learning environment and can be understood not only as how learning is structured and organised with the school, but, more importantly, also as the ways that students actually experience that structure and organisation. These two are inter-related because how students experience a specific school's structure and organisation is affected by the expectations students have of school in general. As noted in Chapter 1, Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitas* can be used as a conceptual tool to understand this dialectical relationship between how students expect their learning environment to be and how they actually experience it.

Five of the following supporting details are related to the structural context: (1) the range of behaviours that participants either exhibited or witnessed which were considered negative or against the rules, (2) the participants' attitudes towards schooling, (3) the participants' beliefs about how well the school prepared them for post-secondary life, (4) the participants' attitudes towards the rules and expectations of the school, and (5) the differences between the participants' junior high and senior high experiences. I expand on how these details can be used to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which the participants experienced the *habitas* of Mountainview Christian School.

**The range of behaviours the participants either exhibited or witnessed which were considered negative or against the rules.** One of the interview questions was: “Can you recall any examples of behaviours that either you or your classmates were involved in which clearly went against the rules or expectations of the school?” The purpose of asking this question was to gain a sense of how the participants, themselves, understood the concept of resistant behaviours. The question focussed the participants on two inter-related aspects of resistance – the behaviours themselves and the oppositional nature of these behaviours. In not having the question predefine who might consider the behaviours negative or against the rules, the participants were left with making that decision. Overall, there emerged five distinct categories of behaviours: (1) intentionally disrupting classes, (2) a refusal to be engaged in class, (3) destruction of school property; (4) pranks, and (5) use of illicit substances.

*Disrupting classes.* Behaviours in this category centre around deliberate attempts by students to disrupt instructional time. This response by the participants was of a consensus perspective since all but one talked about how groups of students deliberately set out to disrupt the classes of teachers – especially the ones they did not respect.

Katie: ... a lot of times there was one or two or maybe three people in the class that would get almost the whole class to join them in rebelling against the teacher or rebelling against a project they had to do.... The whole class would simply refuse to do something. [The teacher] would tell the class to do something and a couple of them would be, “Well, this is dumb and I don’t want to do it”, and everyone would kind of egg each other on, and you’re just like: Let’s all not study for this quiz... And, pretty much everyone would do it, and it would be like three

to five people who wouldn't, but they would be outnumbered and it wouldn't matter anyway.

Jon: There was one teacher, you'd go to their class and the whole class would just make as much noise as they could.

Luke: Classes would start to get out of hand – we'd start talking amongst ourselves and then got louder... If people don't like a teacher, they will definitely will try to get them riled up. Get into a big fight with them in class and get the whole class yelling. We've had that a few times.

While there was consensus that this category of behaviour was especially present in the classrooms of teachers the students particularly did not respect, there was supported responses that also indicated that these behaviours were present in the classrooms of all the teachers. Luke noted that "Every one of our classes, it doesn't matter what teacher was there, in my grade it was always something... actually, even the ones that normally don't get it, still got it." Naomi also remarked that "the teachers who were so – everyone loved and respected, we still found ways to hurt them. It was all conscious. Everybody knew what they were doing."

***Refusal to be engaged in the class.*** This category centres on behaviours where students seemingly made a choice to be disengaged from the lesson by finding ways to not participate in the class. While there wasn't a consensus perspective to these types of behaviours, there were supported responses that indicated students intentionally decided not to be engaged.

Jon – Some days we'd just go in and everyone's tired, cold morning, everyone sitting in their desks, hoodies on... You can tell by the way they [students] act if they want to be there, if they are interested. If they are not interested, who cares?

Luke – Sometimes we'd tell teachers we have to go to the bathroom and then we'd be gone for a long time... or, people think it is cool to skip the assemblies, like that kind of stuff, and not get caught... they wanted to see how good they were at getting away with it.

***Destruction of school property.*** Behaviours in this category centred on various ways in which students damaged school property. There was a consensus perspective that indicated these behaviours were intentional. When asked to provide specific examples:

Jon: We had a tendency to wreck things... spray-paint something, throw dumbbells from the weightroom through walls.

Naomi: Putting an apple in the microwave and then throwing it at a wall... putting shoes in the microwave. Like, anything to destroy stuff.

Luke: Horsing around in the hallways, and there's always stuff being broken.

***Pranks.*** This fourth category of responses has to do with behaviours that were not so much intended to destroy property, as it is was to produce reactions and responses from teachers. While there wasn't a consensus perspective to this category, there were supported responses that indicated certain groups of students engaged in these behaviours. Two of the participants provided examples:

Jon: Once in awhile we would plan our reckless moments – pranks, doing stuff to teacher’s cars... Once in awhile, it would be like, okay, {Mr. Smith} [one the administrators] would be pissed if he caught us right now.

Naomi: Putting breadcrumbs and toast crumbs in all the teacher’s pencil things so that it would rot... putting mice in the school.

*Use of illicit substances.* This last category centres on behaviours that involves students using illicit substances such as alcohol, drugs, or tobacco products. This category takes on a special significance because it involves behaviours that not only break school rules but also potentially cross legal boundaries. Provincial laws in Alberta prohibit young people under the age of eighteen to consume alcohol or use tobacco products in public places. There was a consensus perspective that these behaviours were exhibited at Mountainview Christian School and supported responses further indicate that these behaviours carried a special meaning. Some participants felt that these behaviours were meant to prove a point – the point being that a group of students could engage in behaviours that are deemed serious, by both the school and by society as a whole, without anybody doing anything about it.

Katie: I think it was in grade 12, when a group of people in our class, when they all were drinking and they put all the, like, coolers, and stuff in the common area and they just lined them on the benches and stuff like that just to make a point – we did this on campus, we brought them in here, nobody noticed it, nobody did anything... [another example:] There were players on the basketball team who would come to practices drunk because they knew they could get away with it.

Hilda: I knew of one student who came to school drunk, and I'm sure she was drunk all through our class... And smoking, especially when they are 18 and they can prove their point. 'What are you going to do about it?'

Naomi: ... drugs and alcohol, ummm – no one ever stopped us. There was nothing – no one ever said anything. And I know for a fact that kids were drinking in class. And, everyone just ignored it.

Will: I know that, a couple incidents were people, yeah, came in high, or whatever.

These five categories of behaviours provide a window into how the participants themselves conceptualised their resistant behaviours. While this certainly is not an exhaustive list of the behaviours their class was engaged in, at the same time, there emerged a sense in which the participants have penetrated the reality of their resistant behaviours. In using the term 'penetration', I am using Paul Willis' (1977) idea that people, under certain circumstances, are able to perceive the ways in which social organisations are able to present a version of reality that places limitations on their lives. The participants have an impression that these resistant behaviours were designed to make specific statements about students' experiences at Mountainview Christian School.

To elaborate, as an analytical concept, penetration "... explores the more or less conscious movement of the participant(s) through the projections of the institutional setting ... and behind to see the real function of the system" (Hadberg, 2006, p. 6). The

participants, for the most part, expressed the ways in which these resistant behaviours were intentionally designed to contest the authority of the teacher and the legitimacy of the rules. For example, intentionally disrupting the learning environment of the classroom indicates not only an understanding of the ways in which the classroom represents the focus of school activities, but also of how teachers can become powerless in the face of strong resistant behaviours. Clearly, there is some evidence to suggest that these participants understood the oppositional aspects to their resistant behaviours.

**Attitudes towards schooling and preparation for post-secondary life.** The next two topics I dealt with together because they became very much inter-related. I wanted to explore the feelings the participants had towards the schooling they had received. In order to explore that topic, the participants were asked two questions: (1) What are your expectations of a good school? (2) To what extent did Mountainview meet your expectations of a good school?

For the first question, out of the six interviews, two distinct paths emerged. Some of the participants focussed their discussion of a good school on the extent to which it can foster a positive learning environment while others focussed their discussions of a good school on the extent to which it can prepare students for post-secondary life.

For Katie, Luke, and Jon, their primary expectations of a good school were bound up in how well a school could foster a positive learning environment. In general, they felt that a positive learning environment was fostered when teachers related well with the students and could make a connection with them.

Katie: I guess you really have to, the teachers have to really connect with the kids and the kids have to want to please their teachers....I guess a lot of it is relationship and not just simply content.

Jon: A friendly atmosphere, you're not scared to walk into class. Talk to people. Not scared to talk to your teachers, to ask questions.

Luke: A good school should be a place where you feel safe and are – everyone has an equal chance of learning – the same possibilities for everyone. Should be, yeah, I guess, fair, like you shouldn't have teachers be more fair than to other students.

For Hilda, Naomi, and to a lesser extent, Will, their primary expectations of a good school were bound up in how well a school used its resources to prepare them for their post-secondary future.

Naomi: I expected a good school to prepare me for life after school. Either university and life in general. So, I expected being given the opportunity to try new experiences and to try different learning styles. Just preparation for future relationships and learning... I expected a good school to teach you the basics of everything. To give you a good foundation.

Hilda: Well, to me, a good school should prepare you for either a secondary education or like, college or university, and – or it should prepare you for an introduction to, you know, an apprenticeship into one of the trades. You know, and

I think that a good school would have classes like, you know, if you are into architectural design, a good art class, or a good computer class, stuff like that.

Will: [a good school has] more options. Yeah, I need hands-on courses. That's where I – I am a hands on guy.

While these were the two general expectations, there were some additional individual expectations as well. For example, some other factors that were mentioned included: competent and effective teachers and the development of morals, character, and critical thinking skills.

For the second question, which asked the participants to determine the extent to which Mountainview measured up to their expectations, there was a consensus perspective that the school did well in preparing students for post-secondary life. For example, Naomi felt that “Mountainview actually did a very good job” of preparing her for life after school. She cited examples of skills and experiences that she felt were valuable in helping her make the transition to post-secondary studies. Will, who considered himself a “hands-on guy”, felt that the school was “as good as it could be” considering that few high schools in the area have a well-developed career and technology program. Like Will, Hilda thought the school did as good a job as it could given its limited resources: “In retrospect, Mountainview did prepare me... I wouldn't say entirely though, the equipment at school is vastly outdated.”

However, the school did not measure as well when it came to the expectation of fostering a positive learning environment. Most of the participants suggested that within the learning environment there tended to be a disconnect between the teachers and the

students and further, there was a lack of desire and motivation by students to be engaged in learning. Of the participants, Katie articulated this concern the clearest:

I guess what I want to say is that teachers should have, like, maybe more focussed on the relationship side of – with their students. I think what Mountainview is lacking was, you know, respect, in a lot of ways, the students did not have a lot of respect for the teachers, like they should have... people just had no desire to learn... It is almost like that Mountainview is lacking the link between relationships and the material, or just simply, learning and life.

Hilda and Luke further felt that it was a challenge for them to effectively learn within that environment:

Hilda: You know, just the attitude and just fighting every step of the way... honestly, that may have been part of why I didn't do so well in school too. Just because there were a lot of distractions from every one around me. Because they wouldn't listen.

Luke: I know, like, basically just a lot of kids that are worse than others and that sometimes it is harder to learn yourself when you have people like that in your class.

There was a consensus perspective that felt the school should have and could have done more in the way of fostering an effective learning environment:

Naomi: There was absolutely no control over the people... I think the students just did whatever they wanted... No one had really – no one had any motivation.

Katie: Maybe the rules weren't set in stone as much as they should have been, that students know they have a little bit of leeway to do as much as they can to push it... I mean, you learn more because the class is more under control, it's just a better environment for students to be in.

Luke: I think harsher punishments and then stick to them.

So, while there seemed to be a consensus that Mountainview measured well in the expectation to prepare students for post-secondary life, it did not do as well in developing and maintaining a positive learning environment.

At the same time, there was evidence that the participants felt there were mitigating factors that impeded the school from fully meeting that particular expectation. Two factors emerged: (1) the lack of parental support, and (2) the lack of student motivation.

***The lack of parental support.*** There was a consensus perspective that a general lack of parental support was partly responsible for the school's inability to maintain a positive learning environment. Essentially, the participants generally felt that the parents should have done more to support the teachers when disciplining students. Hence, there was a feeling that the parents need to shoulder some of the responsibility for the state of the school's environment.

Naomi: I feel like teachers tried everything. But it wasn't just the students, it was also the parents... parents thought their kids were angels. But they weren't. Or parents, when a kid was kicked out of class, parents would come in and yell at the teacher... At Mountainview, parents sided with their children. Every time.

Katie: And a lot of the problems was that parents didn't do anything about it [disciplining their son/daughter]... Why would you send your kids to this school, paying this much extra money, if you're not even going to obey the rules?

Luke: I know some kids were like, get suspended, or whatever, and get their parents to talk the teachers out of it... A lot of kids didn't care about a letter home or a phone call, because a lot of the kids' parents didn't care.

*The lack of self-discipline.* Not only did the parents need to shoulder some of the responsibility, there was also a consensus perspective that the students themselves did not have the self-discipline to take their share of the responsibility for their learning. Thus, some of the blame for the school's learning environment also rests with the students.

Hilda: You know, no one was willing to step up and take responsibility for their actions, ever.

Katie: ... people just had no desire to learn. I think that a lot of them felt like their parents, you know, threw them in this school, like, you know, put them in this Christian school so that like Mountainview can fix their problems and many of them are like, you know, independent, and I don't need to be fixed, I can still do it my way.

Will: There was some people in the class who really did not want to be there... They're high on themselves. Like things gotta go their way, or they're not happy.

They're not willing to do stuff differently. It has to be done how they want it done, and if it's not, well, then screw this, right?

To summarise, the perceptions the participants had towards the schooling they received at Mountainview reveal two distinct views. First, there is the view that the school did a reasonable job in preparing the participants for post-secondary life; but second, there is also the view that the school did not do well in fostering an effective learning environment. Although, it is true that some of the participants recognised two mitigating factors that constrained the school from fostering a more positive environment.

These two views seem somewhat paradoxical. The participants felt, on the one hand, that the school provided a reasonable quality of education but on the other hand, felt that the classroom environment was not conducive to learning. The obvious question is: How can there be a reasonable quality of education within a disruptive learning environment? The research tends to show an inverse correlation between the learning environment and student behaviour. For example, there is a high correlation between higher academic achievement and lower disruptive behaviours when teachers create the right classroom conditions for students to become engaged in the lessons (Cheng, 1994; Dart, Burnett, Purdie, Boulton-Lewis, Campbell, & Smith, 2000; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, and Feinberg, 2005; Kaplan, Gheen, and Midgley, 2002). In these situations, the argument is that students will tend to become less disruptive and resistant if they are motivated and become engaged in the lessons. However, what is not so clear is the reverse – what is the effect on student's academic achievement when they are forced to learn in a disruptive environment? Haroun and O'Hanlon (1997) did note from their study that some students believe it is the school's responsibility to enforce discipline so

that their learning needs would be met. This accords with what Naomi, Luke, and Hilda felt about why their learning needs were not being met by being in a disruptive environment. Yet, at the same time, they seemed to support the view that the school did a good job in preparing them for post-secondary life.

**Attitudes towards the rules and expectations.** The fourth topic emerging from the interviews that developed an understanding of the participant's perceptions of the *habitas* had to do with the attitudes they had towards the rules and expectations of the school. "School routines, or rules, are the habitual behaviours that allow an organization to 'conduct business as usual'"(Conley and Enomoto, 2005: 16), and as such should be considered an essential part of the *habitas* of the school. To explore that aspect, the participants were asked the following two related questions: "Let's talk about the rules and the expectations the school placed on you. (1) What were some of the positive aspects of those rules and expectations? (2) What were some of the negative aspects of those rules and expectations?"

It turned out that exploring this topic was a challenge because there was a surprising lack of articulated responses to these questions. The participants found it difficult to even start the conversation because they really could not think of any specific rules or expectations. After some prompting, four out of the six participants were able to articulate two rules – one that was considered positive and one that was considered negative.

The positive rule or expectation was the school's dress code:

Jon: Dress code is a good one. Like, even I wasn't interested in disgustingly short shirts or skirts, boobs hanging out all the time.

Hilda: I really felt that... the dress code was a good idea – you know, no really short skirts, no spaghetti straps, no tube tops, no belly shirts, no really low cut pants, you know, where you see your bum crack... Things like that. And that applied to men too. You're not allowed to have your pants half-way down your butt, exposing your butt crack. Things like that. I thought that was a really good idea.

The positive aspect of this expectation had to do with how the dress code enforced a moral standard that the participants felt was necessary and was equally applicable to both male and female students.

The one rule that two of the participants considered negative was the rule against school dances:

Will: The only one that I think a lot of us was, why we weren't allowed to have a school dance.

Naomi: Oh, I found one...the rule for dancing.

The negative aspect of this rule, ironically, also seemed to have to do with a moral standard. According to both Will and Naomi, there were no reasons given, the school simply made that decision because it did not want to offend the parent community. Thus, there was the feeling that the rule was based on religious grounds and not really connected with any rational explanation. Other than those two rules, the participants were unable to provide any more examples that they felt were either negative or positive.

I was surprised that they had a difficult time with this line of questioning. Their class was known for exhibiting persistent disruptive behaviours. This is usually interpreted as a solid rejection of the school rules (Deed, 2008). According to the research, the methods schools use to formulate and enforce school rules can become a primary source of conflict and tensions between teachers and students which manifests itself as student resistant behaviours (Brown & Beckett, 2006; Kupchik & Ellis, 2008; McLaren, 1985; Raby, 2005b, 2008; Raby & Domitrek, 2007; Steward, 2003). I expected the participants would have little difficulty in listing a plethora of rules and expectations that they found oppressive and used to justify and rationalise their resistant behaviours.

In fact, a few individual comments suggested that the rules themselves at Mountainview were not a source of conflict and tension between students and teachers. When Jon was asked if he felt stifled by the rules at school, his response suggested he was minimally affected by them: “It felt like it sometimes. There were a couple of times when somebody gave me crap for no good reason. There was a reason, just not a good one.” Further, when asked about any of the negative aspects of the rules or expectations, neither Hilda nor Will could find any negatives.

Hilda: There was still quite a bit of freedom. I didn't see any downsides to rules myself.

Jon: Nope, I didn't have a problem with any of them.

While the participants had some difficulty in articulating positive and negative aspects of the rules, they had little trouble expressing how they felt about the enforcement of the existing rules and expectations. Though, again, their discussions did not take a

direction I expected. Several studies regarding student engagement with school rules indicate that students are less likely to engage in resistant behaviours if they feel that the rules are fairly applied, collaboratively developed, or reasonably justified (Aggleton & Whitty, 1985; Garber, 2002; Leung & Lee, 2005; Raby, 2005b, 2008, 2010; Raby & Domitrek, 2007). However, the participants in this study had little to say about the rules themselves or how these rules were developed, applied, or justified. Rather, the consensus of the participants tended to be on the belief that there should have been stricter enforcement of the rules because the stricter the rules are enforced, the greater the likelihood of compliance.

Katie: Rules become a problem when they are not enforced properly... If rules had been enforced really strongly right from the beginning, it wouldn't have got to that point [i.e. rebellious behaviour]... So, as much as you don't want to hold these kids to super, really strict rules and have them rebel against them, in a lot of ways, I think that is necessary.

Hilda: [on what could be done to stop misbehaviour] Hit them where it hurts.  
Crack the whip.

Luke: Like in my class for sure there should have been harsher, harsher penalties. I think that would have helped some behaviour problems for sure.

Thus, the participant's perception of the rules and expectations at Mountianview did not appear to be a source of conflict and tension that would lead to resistant behaviours. Contrary to what the research suggests about student engagement with rules

and its relation to resistant behaviours, these participants simply felt that a stronger enforcement of the rules would have led to greater compliance and less resistance.

**The differences between junior high and senior high experiences.** The last topic that emerged from the interviews that can be used to develop an understanding of the *habitas* of Mountainview Christian School had to do with the differences between their junior high (grades 7-9) experiences with their senior high (grades 10-12) experiences. There is some research that suggests the experiences students have in middle school are predictive of motivations and behaviours in high school (Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000; Wiess & Baker-Smith, 2010). While there wasn't enough discussion in the interviews to fully explore this potential connection, there seemed to be a general agreement that resistant behaviours were exhibited already in the junior high grades. Jon noted that his class "was just as reckless in Junior High as in Senior High", and neither Hilda, Luke, nor Naomi could locate a year or grade in which there was a change in the way in which the class treated the teachers. At the same time, there were some individual differences between Junior and Senior high that came out. For example, Katie noted that in the Senior High years she became a lot more serious about her academic work because of its importance to her future education. Luke remembers feeling more rebellious in the Senior High grades because he wasn't so scared of his teachers and parents as he was when he was in Junior High.

There is an extension to this topic that could be further researched and explored. This has to do with an historical perspective of this class' resistant behaviours and asking the question: What is it about this particular class of students, as opposed to other classes, that gave rise to resistant behaviours? Certainly, the behaviours exhibited by this

particular class of students were perceived by some of the participants as an aberration.

For example:

Luke: I know how bad our class was... it was ridiculous.

Researcher: So, any thoughts as to why? What was it that made that class a daily challenge?

Luke: Just – I guess it's just – it's just full of kids that are disrespectful. I think they don't care about teacher's authority, and because I can't see why – what you guys do differently from that class to the next, right?

Hilda makes a similar point when she says "... like I saw [the rules] being enforced with other grades, but for our grade – we were so resistant to following rules that they really weren't enforced."

That this class is seen by some as an aberration, leads to a question that would need further exploration: What made this class exhibit particularly resistant behaviours while other classes who work under the same teachers, administrators, rules, and expectations did not exhibit the same degree and range of behaviours? In order to find answers to this question, there needs to be some exploration from a longitudinal perspective as well as a latitudinal perspective of this particular class. For example, these perspectives would seek to answer questions like: Has this group been particularly resistant through the years? Is it possible to determine the roots of the behaviours? What historical factors contribute to this situation? What are the factors in this particular group that contributed to a high degree of resistant behaviours that do not seem to exist in the other groups?

While there is not enough data to make any claims about the connection between the junior high and the senior classes, there seemed to be the feeling among the participants that this class of students tended to always be resistant. It is possible this is connected to a self-concept issue that suggests that students are what they believe themselves to be. As Haynes (1990) argues, "...if children viewed themselves negatively—as incorrigible, lacking discipline, and ill mannered—they were likely to behave that way" (p. 205). The extent to which this particular group of students felt that way about themselves is not entirely clear, but some of the participants made references to how bad their class was.

**Summary of structural context of Mountainview.** Somewhat surprisingly, the participants did not have much to say on some of the key aspects normally associated with the learning environment. For example, little was said about the pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning – on course content, assessment, or teaching styles. The participants tended to focus on the overall aim of their schooling as well as on the enforcement of the rules. Generally, the participants expressed positive feelings towards their experiences with how Mountainview was preparing them for post-secondary life. There was no indication that the participants felt the school did not give them a quality education. As well, the participants discussed the extent to which the school authorities and teachers enforced discipline. Overall, the rules themselves were not a living issue among the participants, but certainly the enforcement of the rules was an issue. On this discussion, the participants expressed some negative feelings towards their experiences. Generally, the participants felt there could have been stronger sanctions and more disciplinary actions taken to ensure compliance with those rules.

## **The Relational Context of Mountainview Christian School**

The second context to be explored is the relational context. This one encompasses the relationships generated by the various social interactions involving both students and teachers at Mountainview Christian School. This next section explores the participants' perceptions of and their experiences with the relationships in which they found themselves embedded. First, I explore the participants' relationships with their peers and, second, I explore their relationships with their teachers.

**Relationships among students: The high school peer group.** One of the primary forms in which student relationships are manifested is the high school peer group (Kiruru, Nurmi, Aunda, & Salmela-Aro, 2009; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991; Ryan, 2000; Stone, Barber & Eccles, 2008). Given that affiliation with a particular high school peer group holds significant potential to influence members' attitudes and behaviours in school (Kindermann, 1993; Ryan, 2000; Wentzel, 1993), it is important to explore the participants' experiences and perceptions of the various peer groups that existed at Mountainview Christian School.

I use this term 'high school peer group' somewhat arbitrarily because there does not seem to be a consistent approach to distinguishing a high school peer group from other forms of social relations (Kiruru, Nurmi, Aunda, & Salmela-Aro, 2009; Ryan, 2000). Various defining labels such as cohort, crowd, clique, peer group, and dyad have been used as one way to conceptualise the adolescent peer group (Ryan, 2000). Based on the perceptions the participants had on the peer groups that existed in their particular class, I view the high school peer group at Mountainview Christian School as a set of individuals who usually show similar behaviour patterns and personality characteristics

and who interact on a regular basis (Brady, 2004; Pokhrel, Sussman, Black, & Sun, 2010).

There was a consensus from the participants that three main peer groups existed in the class. While there was some variation in description and terminology, there was close agreement on what constituted the groupings.

Will: Well, I guess three. The guys and girls that were in sports was one group. And then there was guys that were more into – quiet guys in school are in one group. And then the quiet girls in school. That were the three groups.

Jon: That's, you know, there's some people, you know, they don't like to be in class, and there's some people who like their books, and there's people who decide to have fun and get out with their friends.

Hilda: There was the jock group. The jock, popular, beautiful people. Those three always went hand in hand... then there was the academic girls – really smart, always succeeded – nice to everybody... Then there were the academic boys who still thought girls had cooties... they'd all just kind of huddle off in their own corner of the work and just do their own thing... Then there were the social outcasts.

Naomi: I think there were three groups. There were the people who had ambitions in life, the people who didn't really care what anyone thought of them – well, they did, they wanted to impress people, but they didn't care what teachers and adults

thought of them. And there were the people who were just there. They were their own group. They didn't get in anyone's way.

Luke: There were the 'goody-goody' ones. They'd do all their work. There was the popular ones – you kind of like had to be that bad.

The consensus of the participants that three distinct peer groups existed at Mountainview confirms Brady's (2004) argument that one purpose of peer groups is to differentiate social status or significance among the student body. However, contrary to Ryan's (2000) belief that the boundaries of peer groups tend to be rigid and once formed, difficult for students to transcend, the boundaries of the peer groups at Mountainview were more permeable and less restrictive.

Luke: People were free to hang out with whoever they wanted.

Will: Most of the people could go hang out with whoever... I could walk into any crowd, whatever, and talk to whoever.

Katie: I was friends with everybody.

There was a consensus that these peer groups formed early on. Those participants who started their schooling at Mountainview in kindergarten indicated that they stayed in the same social groups for much of their entire schooling. Those who came in later found it difficult to 'break in'. Katie, Luke, Jon, and Hilda all indicated that their social group was pretty much the same as it was in the elementary grades, although Jon did note that "there were a couple of people who you hung out with more, like one year as opposed to

the next year. On the other hand, Will and Naomi, because they had not started their schooling at Mountainview early on, found it more difficult to fit into a particular group. Will noted that "... it was hard to break into the groups", while Naomi said that by the time she arrived at Mountainview, "... everybody knew each other from kindergarten and so they already had their friendship group."

Since the three peer groups were not equal in size, it came as no surprise that the largest group was by far the most influential in stimulating a climate of resistance within the school.

Hilda: [on the group that had the most influence] The jocks. I can say that without even blinking twice because not only was it the largest clique, but, you know, if they didn't like something they saw to it that it was different. You know, they were in charge of everybody. They could swing anything they wanted to. Because there were so many of them, that even if all the groups joined up together, they'd still would come to half.

Though Hilda was one who articulated this most clearly, there was a consensus perspective that this group was quite influential in promoting a climate of resistance. Naomi made the comment that "most people who were disruptive were athletic". Will said that the sports group were the "cool guys... with their noses too high up in the air" and who had to have things go their way. Even Luke, a self-identified member of the group, suggested that "just too many of the bad people in one class". Jon, also a self-identified member of the group, noted: "I think there were a bunch of us with stupid ideas who instigated things. Got everyone going. There were definitely a bunch of people just

following.” Lee, Bryk, and Smith (1993) capture this relationship between the high school peer group and resistant behaviours when they argue:

In general, it appears that during adolescence peer influences operate strongly to either promote or inhibit positive educational outcomes, depending on the student's position in the peer group, whether the group approves or disapproves of academic effort, and the amount of time devoted to peer social activities that detract from academic outcomes. In addition, the social structure of student interaction may operate either in synchronization with or in opposition to the orientation of the school. (p. 223)

This seems to be confirmed in Mountainview with the evidence that the peer groups – particularly the large group – played a significant role in underpinning resistant behaviours.

**Relationship with teachers:** Garber (2002), in a qualitative study of student resistance, determined that a teacher’s instructional style and personality can affect resistance to schooling. Her study found five perceptions that students have of teachers that tend to positively influence the students’ classroom behaviours. These perceptions are:

- Teachers who enjoy their jobs,
- Teachers who have a good relationship with their students,
- Teachers who have high academic expectations for their students,
- Teachers who are able to control their classes,
- Teachers who know their subject matter and are able to effectively teach it.

She concluded that teachers who are perceived to exhibit these qualities are less likely to face resistant behaviours; conversely, teachers who are perceived to lack some or all of these qualities are more likely to face resistant behaviours.

In order to explore the perceptions that the participants had of their teachers, I asked the following three questions:

1. What are some of the qualities of teachers you respected?
2. What are some of the qualities of teachers you did not respect?
3. Was there a difference in the way students treated the teachers they respected as opposed to those they did not respect?

When asking these three questions, I emphasised that the participants needed to focus on actual perceptions and experiences with their teachers and to avoid identifying actual names.

In terms of the qualities of teachers that the participants respected, there was a consensus perspective on three: caring, passionate, and respectful. Teachers who were caring were those teachers who took a genuine interest in the well-being of their students.

Katie: I think the relational aspect of their teaching... you felt as a student they really cared about you and they wanted you to do well in their subjects.

Luke: The ones I respected were ones who you could tell really cared about you – you could tell they were happy when you got a good mark and didn't get upset if you didn't... They really cared about it and really strived harder for you to do better too.

Naomi: They cared about you. You weren't doing your homework, they would call you out on it. And they wouldn't just say, 'do your homework', they'd ask 'why are you not doing it' and then would try to help.

I had the impression that many of their teachers exhibited this quality because the participants had no trouble making references to a variety of teachers.

The second quality that came up was passion. Teachers who were passionate loved their jobs, were excited about their subject material, and could relate the material to the everyday lives of their students.

Jon: ... the teacher wasn't there just to teach, they were kind of there because they wanted to be there. They liked their students and they like teaching... most teachers were like that.

Katie: I think a lot of it is just really them showing passion for their jobs and making that link between school and life.

Hilda [on giving an example of a teacher she respects] She had such passion for her job... She'd just be absolutely on fire to teach something new every day. And she made it fun.

The third quality that came up was respect. Teachers who respected their students could relate on a personal level with their students and could accept them for who they are.

Will: Pretty much the biggest thing for me is that a teacher can relate to you.

Jon: Teachers should respect their students – if you screw up one day, the next day is a clean slate. There were many teachers at Mountainview that were like that.

Naomi: I found that teachers really respected us, and they were respectful to other types of people... I found teachers really open. You could go talk to a teacher about stuff and they'd give you an honest answer. And they wouldn't tell another student.

The second question asked the participants about the qualities of teachers they did not respect. Unlike the previous question, the participants were not as united on their perceptions and experiences and therefore there were only individual perspectives rather than consensus perspectives. The qualities of teachers they did not respect include: teachers who don't seem to care about their students; teachers who are on power-trips; teachers who don't get excited about their job, and teachers who have lost control of their students.

Katie: It felt like they were out to get me... like, they don't care, they don't care how well I do on this test, they just want me to do it.

Hilda: I'd look at them and think. "You had a passion for this at one point, but you've lost it. You're just in it now because you know you are too old to do something else."

Naomi: They didn't know how to control us and there really wasn't anything done about bullying. There was no control at all... Teachers did not stand up for themselves.

Jon: There were a few teachers that were kind of on power trips. They'd tell you not to do thing things not because they are necessarily wrong, but because they don't want you to.

I was surprised that the participants did not have more to say about the negative qualities of teachers or their teaching styles. Given that the class exhibited strong resistant behaviours, I would have expected them to make a direct link between their resistant behaviours and the negative qualities of teachers (Davidson, 1999; Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007; McLaren, 1985; Thomas, 2009). In fact, very little was mentioned about the ways in which teachers taught or presented their materials. After some prodding, only two participants made comments related to this topic and both of them had to do with teachers who they considered lazy. Their definition of lazy was putting up notes on the board and having students copy them:

Hilda: Lazy – when they put examples on clear plastic sheets on the projector – taking the easy way out.

Naomi: [on teachers that weren't so good]... putting up the overhead and just getting us to write because we'd get bored.

Given that there is some evidence to suggest that teachers' instructional styles can contribute to resistant behaviours and given the extent of the resistant behaviours of the

class, I also would have expected that teachers' instructional styles to be a central point of discussion.

There was, however, some evidence that the participants felt that resistance to schooling was shaped more by the teachers' personality rather than the teachers' instructional styles. This came through in a variety of individual comments that focussed on personality rather than instructional style – especially in the comments that were made about the teacher's moods and emotions.

The emotional disposition of teachers and its effect on classroom control and student behaviours is documented in the research (Little, 2005; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Miron & Lauria, 1998). This connection was brought up by two of the participants when they noted that student resistant behaviours tended to be exacerbated by teachers who were in a bad mood:

Jon: Like there are teachers who you would walk into class and you know how the day is going to go... You can walk in and tell just by the way they talk and how they pose themselves. I think if they had a crappy day, you know it's going to be fireworks.

Naomi: A lot of it was the teacher's demeanour. If the room is perfectly neat, that means they've been ticked off – walking around picking up everything, "I can believe those stupid kids, there is a mess in my class." – If they [students] come in and it's "Okay, everyone sit down and shut up, open your textbooks", then you know, they've got a stick up their butt.

When this was discussed further, both Jon and Naomi felt that it was important for teachers to do two things in order to deal with and minimise resistant behaviours. The first thing is to maintain an emotional balance when dealing with resistant students.

Jon: So, maybe, I guess, just not let their mood or attitude affect the way they change, day to day, with their attitude... Just stay, kind of, consistent.

Naomi:[Teachers] gotta have patience and at the same time, they can't have so much patience do deal with everything all the time, eventually, it seems like they are a punching bag... [They] gotta have a good balance.

The second thing is to display a higher level of self-confidence when dealing with those resistant students.

Naomi: ... That's something a lot of teachers need – you need to be oozing confidence. I think a lot of teachers lacked that, you know. They'll raise their voice, they'll look at you, but there is nothing backing it. It's more or less, 'please don't start a fight with me.' And, I think a lot of it has to do with fear, and to be honest, standing in front of ten to twenty-eight teenagers, mouthy, hormonal, teenagers would be pretty scary.

Jon: [on discussing a teacher who seem to let their classes get out of control]

Well, it was a lack of discipline... you go to class, learn the bare necessities... we learned what we needed to learn, and that was it. Leave the class with not really anything. [The students would] sit and talk all the time and nothing would be done about it, just didn't care less... I don't know, not like he didn't care about

school, maybe scared to get mad... I don't know if he was just timid or if he just knew the way he got treated – tried everything else.

Two of the participants also noted that their class sometimes exploited the lack of self-confidence to make teachers cry. This was perceived as a victory if that would happen. As Naomi pointed out, “We learned how to make every teacher in that school cry. That’s when we started controlling teachers.” According to Hilda, “I define a teacher giving up when they walk out of the classroom, you know, for ten minutes to cry.”

The third question asked the participants about whether or not they could see a difference in the way students treated the teachers that were respected from the way the students treated the teachers that were not respected. According to some of the participants, there was a clear difference. In most cases, this difference had to do with the extent to which students could restrain their compulsion to act out in class.

Jon: Oh yeah, easily. It was a couple of two, three teachers who – people would get riled up just because nobody cared... They [The teachers students did respect] were treated better. Not necessarily good all the time. They [the students] wouldn't get into a big mess in class, you know, just kind of pay attention, keep to themselves, or, I don't know, they just wouldn't cause any trouble. Just – they would do their homework on time, they would listen to the teacher until the teacher was done.”

Luke: Oh yeah. Definitely. For sure, like, you could tell the majority of the students liked the same teachers... Well, they [the students] would definitely like,

give the teachers the time of day, or listen in class, or just behave better, I guess – as well as we did behave.

The participants, though, were quick to note that this restraint was qualified. Jon added:

“Then you would get some days when it was not like that, no one is paying attention.”

Luke also added to his: “I still think that – every one of our classes, like, it doesn’t matter what teacher was there, in my grade, it was always something.”

The perceptions and experiences the participants had of the relationship with their teachers is characterised by contradictions and anomalies. A general impression was that the participants had fairly positive comments about their teachers – for the most part they were perceived as caring, passionate, and respectful. At the same time, there was also a consensus that the participants felt the teachers did not enjoy this particular class of students. When asked if the participants had a sense of what the teachers, in general, felt about their class,

Naomi: They hated us.

Hilda: Yeah, “here is that nasty brood of gargoyles” - everyone now and again.

They would get this look of despair – “Haven’t they graduated yet?”

Luke: I think they [teachers] just got really frustrated and get all, like, panicky.

The participants generally felt that by the time their class had reached the last year of school, the teachers and the administration had pretty much given up on them. To them, ‘giving up’ meant that the teachers and administrators did not enforce the rules and expectations in the way they should have. Three of them made reference to grade nine

when there was a concerted effort to enforce discipline. In grade nine, there was a ‘three strikes and you’re out’ policy towards misbehaving students. However, this effort did not seem to have a lasting effect because by the time the class was in the senior years, there was little being done to enforce the rules. In response to the question, “What were your perceptions of how teachers and administrators tried to enforce the rules?”

Katie: They didn’t

Hilda: They didn’t really enforce a lot.

Naomi: They weren’t enforced.

These cryptic responses reveal, on the surface, an initial criticism of the school with the way in which discipline was enforced. However, as the discussion progressed, it became clear that the participants also felt that there really was not much the teachers or the administrators could do to enforce the rules.

Hilda: Like I said before, if the students do not like the teacher, it’s not going to work – nowhere fast. It’s just going to be a downward spiral for both because the teacher is going to be expending a lot of energy trying to, you know, reign all those people in. And they’re just going to be fighting all the more... it is a lose-lose situation.

Naomi: By the time we were in grade 11 and 12, everyone had just given up. There was no hope... By the time we were in grade 12, there was nothing they could do. We had all been suspended, we had all been sent to the principal’s

office, we had kids who were doing school out of school. There was absolutely no control... I feel like the teachers tried everything.

Luke: I think in our class it was, just kept happening so much that teachers kind of get sick of it.

**Summary of the relational context of Mountainview.** The relational context of Mountainview Christian School provided rich, but complex, understandings of student resistance at the school. On the one hand, the relationship between the high school peer groups and resistant behaviours became evident through the ways in which various peer groups influenced the attitudes and behaviours of students. The most influential peer group tended to exacerbate student resistance with their ability to negatively affect the learning environment in classrooms of teachers they both did and did not respect. Part of this was due to the relative stability and permanency of the peer groups which ensured that the resistant attitudes and behaviours were difficult to understand and dissipate by the teaching staff and the administration.

On the other hand, the complex nature of the relationship of teachers and students was also a factor in understanding student resistance. While it is true that the participants had a lot of positive comments to make about the teachers – teachers were generally perceived as caring, passionate, and respectful – yet, this general positive perception of teachers did not convert into a lessening of student resistant behaviours. In fact, the opposite seemed to happen – the resistant behaviours increased to the point that the teachers were perceived to have given up on them and lost control of their students' behaviours.

### **The Philosophical Context of Mountainview Christian School**

The third context to be explored is the philosophical context. This one encompasses the particular philosophy of education in which Mountainview Christian School is steeped. This context has to do with ‘the big picture’ perspective – the ideals, goals, and values that drive the purpose of the school and that influence its teaching and learning. As outlined in the first chapter, these ideals, goals, and values are rooted in a Reformed Christian theology and are realised in the vision of Christian schools: leading students to “... know God and to respond to him in every dimension of the creation and in every aspect of their lives, to apply the transforming power of the gospel to contemporary society and culture, and to bring the healing power of Jesus to a fallen world” (Vryhof, 2002, p. 112). Thus, the ways in which the educational philosophy contextualises student resistant behaviours depends on the extent to which the students both perceive and experience that philosophy.

During the interviews, the participants’ understandings of the school’s particular philosophy were adumbrated through the discussions surrounding both their perceptions of schooling as well as their perceptions of how resistant behaviours were dealt with. It was not always clear in the interviews the extent to which the participants would be able to articulate the school’s philosophy of education, much less understand its implications. Based on my own experiences working in religious-based schools, I would suspect that most students at Mountainview would not be able to articulate the particular values and vision of the school they attend – they generally attend school because their parents make them. Katie made that point when she said: “At Mountainview Christian School there are

people who want to be there – there’s people who want to glorify God. And then there are other people who are there because their parents made them be there.”

To explore the extent to which the participants experienced and perceived the particular philosophy of the school, I have delineated four distinct points based on the way in which the Christian worldview underpinned the participants’ attitudes and perceptions towards the school. Each of the four points have to do with the ways in which a Christian worldview is embedded in: (1) the curriculum; (2) student behaviours; (3) dealing with resistant behaviours; and (4) relationships with peers.

**Christian perspective in curriculum:** When it comes to curriculum, Ornstein and Levin (2009) define it to be any planned learning that takes place in the school. According to Alberta Education, one of the purposes of the curriculum is to “provide learners with attitudes, skills and knowledge that will enable them to become engaged, active, informed and responsible citizens” (Alberta Government). A Christian school, then, by its very nature, seeks to embed a distinctly religious perspective in its curriculum (Walford, 2002). When teachers plan and execute learning activities in a Christian school, they connect their various subjects to a Christian perspective and, in this way, the curriculum becomes the medium through which students acquire the attitudes, skills, and knowledge of the Christian worldview.

There seemed to be relatively little understanding of the participants on this view of the relationship between curriculum and the Christian school. Of the six participants, there were only four comments that could be considered relating the school’s educational philosophy to the curriculum. All the comments were made when the participants were exploring the question of what makes a good school. Luke directly mentioned that a good

Christian school ought to teach a Christian curriculum: “This is what my parents expected and this is what I expected too.” Katie also mentioned that “Some of the teachers did an awesome job of incorporating Christianity into the subject matter.” Hilda, when discussing teachers she respected, made a passing reference to how one of them was “a strong Christian influence”.

Katie, however, expressed a more extensive understanding than the other participants of the relationship between the curriculum and the educational philosophy of Mountainview. She indicated that she would have liked to have more Christian perspective and content incorporated in the curriculum.

Katie: ... it is just like, I felt I was lacking in a lot of the knowledge... like Christian philosophers, and stuff like that, where it is incorporated right into the social studies, and even geography, and stuff like that, where it is, like, these huge Christian figures that even the secular world should know about.... And I feel like sometimes I'm missing something.

Her comments allude to a disappointment she felt regarding her schooling. Her expectation of a Christian curriculum, especially the knowledge aspect, was not met at Mountainview. This comment is interesting in view of the fact that she attended Mountainview Christian School for several years and yet she still felt, after all those years, that she did not enough Christian curriculum at the school.

**Christian perspective in student behaviours.** An important aspect of the school's philosophy of education, also outlined earlier, is that a Christian school should be leading students to incorporate their Christian worldview in all areas of their life so that their behaviours align with their beliefs. As Campolongo (2009) points out, “the

intended outcome, therefore, of Christian schools is to produce students who are transformed in their minds and hearts so that they think and act like Christ in the world” (p 73). The extent to which Mountainview Christian School achieved that outcome with this particular group of students became a focus of discussion in the interviews.

At the heart of this discussion is the foundational relationship between attitude and behaviour. The research appears mixed on whether or not attendance at a Christian school does, in fact, impact behaviour. On the one hand, there is evidence that students who attend Christian day schools are more likely to have a positive view of life and carry that into their actions (ap Siôn, Francis & Baker, 2007; Jeynes, 2001, 2009; Jones & Rossiter, 2009; Regnerus & Elder 2003; Wighting & Liu, 2009). On the other hand, there is also evidence that Christian education makes little impact on the behaviours of students (Collier & Dowson, 2008). Within the interviews, both sides were expressed.

Three of the participants felt that Christian education made little impact on the group of students they were a part of. This was a source of frustration for them because they felt that a sizeable number of students behaved in ways inconsistent with a Christian worldview.

Katie: It did not seem that [the Christian worldview] was much of a focus. I mean, it should have been... Sometimes I think that maybe if, within the school, it was more encouraged. You know, this is what God expects of you and this is your duty as a Christian... There were students who were definitely not acting as a Christian would act... I feel that people who are not Christians should feel out of place. If you are not a Christian, if you don't want to be in this environment, then why are you here? It is a Christian campus. It is a Christian staff, it is a Christian principal,

it is Christian parents who are putting their, you know. So, if they are not Christian, they should feel out of place. And I feel like they didn't.

Naomi: Everyone thought they were a really strong Christian, even though they did not really act on it... Everyone talked like they were big Christians. They knew the Bible so well, and like we would have great discussions on Christianity that were all very positive, but, then they would go out in the parking lot and drink, or have teenage pregnancies, or horrible bullying. They'd talk big, but there was nothing that showed in their actions.

Hilda: Even if you are having trouble with your faith, and you're still going to a Christian school and you are not really sure on where you stand – at least have the decency to abide by that school's rules.

These three participants felt there was a disconnect between behaviours and beliefs and as a result, felt that the school was not having the positive effect on behaviours it should have. Furthermore, there was also an underlying feeling that the school community should have or could have done more to ensure that student behaviours lined up with their religious beliefs.

Two of the other participants felt that their attendance at a Christian school had a positive effect on their lives by protecting them from negative influences. This perceived protective effect of Christian schools has been noted in the research as well. There is a more or less common belief that there exists a "... strong protective effect from the religions and social environment provided to students in Christian schools" (Jones &

Rossiter, 2009, p. 90 – see also Regnerus & Elder, 2003). Jon articulated that perspective quite clearly:

Jon: The public school is literally sex, drugs, and rock and roll... I think that if I would have gone through public school, with my best friend, I think things would have been a lot different.

Luke, as well, referred to the protective function of the Christian school when discussing why he liked being at Mountainview, “Just the fact that everyone is Christian there, so like, they all, like in a public school, it would be harder. You don’t kind of be shy from other people.” It is not clear from Jon’s and Luke’s interviews, though, whether or not they would agree with Naomi, Katie, and Hilda that students were not acting in accordance with their religious beliefs.

**Christian perspective in dealing with resistant behaviours.** As noted earlier, implicit in Naomi, Kate, and Hilda’s discussion on the disconnect between religious beliefs and behaviours, was a feeling that the school community should have or could have done more to ensure that behaviours lined up with beliefs. There were differences in opinion, however, on what that would have looked like.

Katie felt that the school should have been more intentional about fostering a Christian environment:

Sometimes I think that maybe if, within the school, it [Christian perspective] was more encouraged. You know, this is what God expects of you and this is your duty as a Christian.

According to her, a Christian perspective was not always clearly evident in the school’s learning environment until it came to discipline:

It's like as soon as you start pushing the rules, then all of a sudden the teacher is like, as Christians this is what we have to do – but it is like I haven't had that impression the whole time.

Thus, for Katie, there may have been a closer alignment of beliefs with behaviours had the school community been more intentional about fostering a Christian environment.

Naomi, however, felt that the problem was not in the school's environment:

We were expected to live a positive lifestyle which I think is really good in high school because a lot of times you are trying to find yourself in high school and, or be rebellious. I think the rules stop that for the most part because some things were not allowed.

According to her, the school rules weren't enforced as strictly as it should have in order to closer align beliefs with behaviours.

Hilda was somewhat more ambivalent about the relationship between beliefs and behaviours.

Mountainview Christian School does have a good set of morals – the teachers have a good set of morals as well, but enforcing them is a different matter.

Everyone has a different set of what is right and what is wrong.

Her point is that since the school was interdenominational, it should be expected that parents, teachers and students have differences in beliefs of what constitutes appropriate, Christian behaviours. The corollary of these differences is the existence of a variety of opinions on what an alignment of beliefs and behaviours would look like. During the course of her interview, she brought in several examples of where she had engaged conversations with either her teachers or her peers on what would be considered

acceptable, Christian behaviours. According to her, the school simply should have taken a more middle of the road approach to discipline.

This relationship of religion to discipline was a topic that I intentionally explored further. I wanted to determine the extent to which the participants felt that the school community enforced compliance by using religious symbols or dogma to support a particular view of what constituted appropriate behaviours. I based this on McLaren's (1986) research in a Catholic school in Toronto where he noted that religious symbols and dogmas were used as powerful messages to enforce a particular ideology of what made a good Catholic. These messages, then, were used to bring "powerful, binding sanctions to bear on the enforcement of school values (p. 185). Similarly, since Mountainview is also a faith-based school, it clearly does communicate ideological messages of normative significance to students. After all, the educational goal of the Christian school is to reproduce citizens who accept Christian teachings and seek to live their lives accordingly. It would make sense that student resistance is about the ways in which students struggle against and rebel against that ideology and refuse to accept its implications. In order to explore that, I asked the participants if they ever felt that religion was used as a discipline tool to enforce these ideological messages of how a good Christian ought to behave?

The participants answered this question somewhat hesitantly and uncertainly, likely because they did not completely grasp the question. To participants who are steeped in a Christian worldview – a worldview that certainly does cultivate a particular view of how a good Christian ought to behave – this question essentially asks them to step outside of themselves and consider objectively the relationship of their beliefs to

their behaviours. The extent to which they were able to be objective about this question is not entirely known. However, it is clear that the participants themselves never felt like religion was used as a tool of coercion, and certainly had no strong feelings about it.

Katie: Um – I think some people would have gotten that idea. Yeah, I don't know. If I think about Mountainview, that's not what comes to mind. But, if you really think about it, I think it could have come across.

Jon: I don't think so. No, not that I can remember. I'm happy because I probably would have let them have it too.

Hilda: Um – I wasn't really, like I said before, I really wasn't the recipient of much discipline because, you know, I wasn't really rambunctious.

Naomi: No, that didn't happen. At all. No one ever – everyone was pretty respectful for that. Ummm, no one made fun of the Bible, the teachers never used it against us. So, in that way, it was good.

Luke: Well, I definitely think, like, it's not as a punishment, really, more just like, "You're in a Christian school, how should you act like you're kind of." You get told that, and it's like, "Yeah, you're right... Christians shouldn't act like that."

**Christian perspective in peer group relations.** The role of the peer group in influencing student behaviour, both negatively and positively, is well documented (Coyl,

Jones & Dick, 2004; Kiesner, Cadinu, Poulin, & Bucci, 2002; Newman, Lohman & Newman, 2007; Steward, 2003; Urberg, 1992). It is a reasonable assumption that peer groups in Christian schools would exert a positive influence in encouraging students to align their behaviours with their religious beliefs. This is based on evidence that suggests students who attend Christian schools are more likely to have a positive outlook on life and less likely to engage in high risk behaviours (ap Siôn, Francis & Baker, 2007; Jeynes, 2001, 2009; Jones & Rossiter, 2009; Regnerus & Elder 2003; Wighting & Liu, 2009), as well as the commonly held belief that there exists a "... strong protective effect from the religions and social environment provided to students in Christian schools" (Jones & Rossiter, 2009, p. 90). I was, therefore, surprised by two the of participants who indicated that, given a choice, they would rather have attended a public school rather than a Christian school because they felt that they could stand firmer in their religious convictions in a public school than at Mountainview.

Katie: So, in some ways, I wish, you know, I went to a public school because, like, I think it is easier because you don't have to defend your faith... I really struggled with that in high school, just like having a good solid group of friends that would like really, really build me up.

Will: I think so. Because at {Mountainview}, there's one type of people – that's church-going people. The majority of it, anyway. And everyone is kind of like – everyone is trying to be – I want to say – like, I'm a lot better than that kind of guy, kind of thing. Whereas, when you go to a public school, there's so many

different people, it's kind of like, you find a group of guys you get along with, you just click.

For these two participants, the school's environment in general and their peer groups in particular, did not have the expected or intended effect of encouraging them to incorporate their Christian worldview into their daily lives. Paradoxically, both of them felt that a public school would be more conducive to that than Mountainview Christian School.

**Summary of Philosophical Context.** Peters (1967, 1972) argues that education is not a process but rather it is an ideal for which to be striven. For Mountainview, Christian education as an ideal strives to “to produce students who are transformed in their minds and hearts so that they think and act like Christ in the world” (Campolongo, 2009, p 73). The experiences of the six participants suggest that this ideal had not been successful for the class of which they were members. While there were divergent opinions on how successful the ideals of Christian education were present in both the school's curriculum and in the social relationships, there was a consensus that there was a gap in the general religious commitment and the behaviours of students. In other words, there was the perception that students did not live out their faith life in ways that demonstrated their professed religious commitment.

### **Summary: Research Findings and Analysis**

The experiences and perceptions of the six participants provided a window into the resistant behaviours of a class of students. Their interviews, after careful analysis, revealed tensions and contradictions within the structural, the relational, and the

philosophical context of Mountainview Christian School that gave meaning to resistant behaviours.

The structural context revealed that the participants were generally pleased with the quality of the education, especially how it prepared them for life beyond grade twelve. One area of tension had to do with the school rules and their enforcement. On the one hand, they had no issues or concerns about the rules and expectations of the school. However, on the other hand, the participants did express a belief that stronger enforcement of the rules and expectations by teachers and administrators would have been an effective way to deal with the resistant behaviours.

The relational context revealed two aspects. The first aspect is that the high school peer groups were influential in stimulating and supporting resistant behaviours. The influence of the peer groups stems not only from the relative size and social position of certain groups, it also stems from its deep historical roots. The fact is, many of the friendships had been formed early on in the elementary grades and carried on through to graduation. The second aspect is that the teachers' personality rather than instructional styles was more significant in affecting student behaviours. The participants felt that resistant behaviours escalated with those teachers with whom students did not make a connection.

The philosophical context revealed tensions in how the school's ideal of Christian education was not successful in minimising or diminishing resistant behaviours. In fact, there were contradictions in the ways in which Christian education could actually exacerbate resistant behaviours because of its perceived insulating and protective effect.

Within this insulating and protective environment, some of the participants felt that many students disconnected their behaviours and actions from their religious beliefs

In the next chapter, I do three things. First, I outline how those tensions and contradictions, especially in the structural and philosophical contexts, are part and parcel of the communicative potential of resistance at Mountainview. Second, I outline three limitations to this study. Third, I conclude with recommendations for further reflections.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Reflection

This thesis, in its broadest sense, is a study of student resistance as seen through the experiences of six graduates of Mountainview Christian School. More narrowly, though, this study seeks to contribute to an understanding of student resistance through an exploration of the relationship between communication, community, and resistance. This thesis takes a transactional perspective of resistance to explore this relationship – a perspective that recognises students as having multiple and shifting identities, and schools as being complex, social settings which contextualises student resistant behaviours. Integral to this perspective is a communicative potential of resistance that can be used as a means of “signalling, generating, and building dialogue” among the various groups of people who make up the school community (Abowitz, 2000).

In this concluding chapter, I suggest that schools, especially faith-based schools, go beyond seeing resistance as purely an expression of political statements or an engagement in power struggles and consider how resistance can be a potential communicative act. Specifically, I outline how resistance at Mountainview signals a need for reflection and dialogue on the ways in which the ideals of that community are experienced. Community seeks to be a unifying force, both in values and beliefs as well as in actions and behaviours. However, tension and contradictions between the two – intended and experience – can exist and create a dilemma of community so that the values of cooperation and collaboration, the accompanying sentiments of belonging and the shared values are being resisted and undermined by those people it was intended to bring together.

It is true, as Raby (2005a) reminds us, that young people respond to authority in diverse ways and that researchers and educators cannot always assume certain behaviours are resistant or specific situations or circumstances lead to resistant behaviours.

Resistance is not a value-free, objective term – in many ways, resistance is about how schools and those in authority interpret and label student behaviours (Grahame & Jardine, 1999; Sekayi, 2001; Stevens, 2000). At the same time, however, in order for resistance to be useful as an analytical tool, there needs to be a way to conceptually distinguish it from oppositional behaviours – behaviours that are “rooted in the social psychological complexities of adolescent life” (Kingston, 1986). I used McLaren’s (1985) concept of resistance to make that distinction. Essentially, resistance is to be understood as “Oppositional student behaviour that has symbolic, historical, and ‘lived’ meaning and which contests the legitimacy, power, and significance of school culture in general and instruction in particular” (p. 85). In short, oppositional behaviours are, as Alpert (1991) suggests, part and parcel of normal adolescent life and are common modes of expression and interaction in the classroom. Resistance, on the other hand has symbolic, historical, and lived meaning. For the purposes of this thesis, that meaning is carried in its potential as a communicative act.

There is a need, though, to understand the ways in which resistance as a communicative act is interpreted by educators and researchers, as well as the participants, and accordingly assigned meaning within the setting of the school (Abowitz, 2000). As I outlined in Chapter 2, Abowitz distinguishes between three modes of communication – self-action, interaction, and transaction. Furthermore, rather than seeing these as three distinct categories, she conceives them as locations on a continuum and suggests that

conceptual understanding of resistance has historically tended to be placed somewhere along the continuum between self-action and interaction.

When resistance is seen as interactional communication, meaning is located within a causal relationship between two parties. In this perspective, for example, resistance is about students communicating messages of marginalisation, alienation, or dissonance to schooling through their words, gestures, and actions. Teachers and school authorities can interpret these messages as defiance or opposition and thereby frame their responses accordingly. In this situation, the two parties tend to remain further entrenched in their individual perspectives and their relationship to each other remains fundamentally unchanged.

This is often the case when locating the meaning of resistance within a framework of power, domination, and control. As I noted in the first chapter, there is a tendency for educators, in dealing with student resistance, to understand power as a commodity that can be appropriated and used to dominate and control those who are subordinate. In line with that, Goodman's (2010) view that a decline in teachers' authority is associated with rising students deviance, suggests that teachers need to be empowered with more authority in order to deal with student behaviours.

The participants of this study certainly expressed this view. There was a general feeling among them that the school should have been more intentional in clamping down on resistant behaviours. Both Luke and Katie explicitly stated that. Naomi and Hilda, in expressing the same belief, also voiced their opinion that by the time their class had reached grade 12, teachers had lost control and were essentially powerless in the face of student resistance. Both of them also believed that it was ultimately the power of the

students that forced the school to release a particular teacher some years ago. There was some evidence, as well, that teachers at Mountainview shared this view that they had lost some power and needed to regain control. Some of the participants mentioned a new discipline program in grade 9 with a ‘three strikes and you’re out’ policy. Ostensibly designed to give power back the teachers, two of the participants noted that this program was not very successful in reaching that goal.

This attitude towards power – a belief that it is concerned about controlling others, even against their will – exemplifies a Weberian understanding of power relations (Weber, 1978). This perspective, however, tends to be a simplistic understanding of the effects of power relations at Mountainview. It is not able to capture or understand the nuances and complexities that not only inform resistant behaviours but also contextualise them within the learning environment of the school. A more post-modern perspective of power understands it, as To (2006) points out, “... as something that is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation in which individuals can be subjected to the effects of power and power relations that appear in diverse forms and run through the whole social body” (p. 781). For example, varying power relations were evident within the different peer groups and the effect this power had on both students and teachers were noted by many of the participants. The exercise of power was also evident in the social relations between parents, teachers and students. This came out in the remarks three of the participants made regarding the role of parents in subverting the school’s discipline activities.

As such, an interactional perspective is tempting as a conceptual tool for locating the meaning and significance of student resistance. It logically and neatly organises

conceptual understandings of resistance by first determining the roots of resistance and then suggesting the application of various solutions to deal with the problem. A micro-level perspective of resistance exemplifies this approach in its search for implied or explicit roots of resistance. Some of these are classroom based and include: attempting to transform the learning environment (Davidson, 1999; McFarland, 2001; Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007). Others see resistance as rooted in a more global attempt to redress power imbalances that cause marginalisation (Grant, 1997; Langhout, 2005; Miron & Lauria, 1995). Still other approaches root resistance in deliberate choices made by students as a way to assert their independence and mitigate their perceived helplessness against the school's power structures (Leung & Lee, 2005; Stevens, 2000). In all these perspectives, though, the unit of analysis is localised to an interactional relationship between students and school.

Clearly there was evidence from the participants' interviews that an interactional perspective could effectively locate some of the meaning and significance of resistance at Mountainview. For example, Hilda, Luke, and Katie all made mention at one time or another of classrooms that could be interpreted as disorganised or unsafe learning environments (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007). This came up in their discussion on the difference between the ways students tended to treat those teachers who they respected from those they didn't. As well, Will, Naomi, and Hilda talked about the role sports played in defining certain types of students and the relationship they had within the school environment. Thus, some resistance could be understood as part of the process by which students work through their identities (Miron & Lauria, 1995).

At the same time, however, these disparate explanations, taken together, produce a piecemeal understanding of resistance at Mountainview and limit a broader and more comprehensive understanding of its communicative potential. This perspective attempts to locate the meaning of resistance within the individual students themselves and in the division between students and school (Heron, 2008). In so doing, it cannot account for the tensions and contradictions that were revealed through a more holistic overview of the social contexts at Mountainview.

Rather, taking a transactional perspective and exploring resistance as revealed through the three social contexts (structural, relational, and philosophical), underscores what Abowitz (2000) pointed out:

... acts of resistance are not self-revealing political statements that take place in social vacuums. They occur in the social sphere – in educational communities, for example – and as such, resistant acts take on complex and often contradictory meanings for those who experience them, including those authorities who react in official and unofficial ways to these acts. (2000, p. 902)

As such, resistance at Mountainview invites exploration and, ultimately reflection and dialogue, on how the notion of community as a unifying force might be understood and experienced by students and teachers. The tensions and contradictions, as revealed by resistance, points to a dilemma of community – between how community is intended and how it is expressed. This dilemma of community becomes problematic for Mountainview because the shared values of cooperation and collaboration and the accompanying sentiments of belonging are being resisted and undermined by those people it was intended to bring together. This was especially evident in both the structural and the

philosophical contexts. For the remainder of this section, I outline how both the structural context and the philosophical context are undermined by this dilemma of community.

There is a caveat that needs to be acknowledged first, though. The invitation for reflection and dialogue is based on the experiences of six participants. I acknowledge and understand that it is impossible to form generalisations about the tensions between intended and experienced community among the entire Mountainview school community based on six participants. At the same time, these experiences can form a springboard that invites further discussion and responses to resistant behaviours and that reflects on what Mountainview is as a school community, what members value educationally, and how those values are actually experienced by all parties.

The dilemma of community can be found within the structural context of Mountainview. According to Sergiovanni, a school as community has a social structure that binds people together (1994a, 1994b). This binding together finds its expression in the *habitas* of the school. *Habitas*, as Mills (2008) points out, “disposes actors to do certain things, orienting their actions and inclinations without strictly determining them” (p. 80). For Bourdieu, a religious *habitas* orients people to think and act in conformity to particular set of systematic principles (as cited in Green, 2009). Thus, in faith-based schools, the *habitas* has an added dimension in that a contributing factor to orienting actions and inclinations is a conformation to a religious perspective. Therefore, the structural context, as I noted earlier, can be understood not only in how learning is structured and organised within the school, but, more importantly, in how both teachers and students perceive and experience that structure and organisation. It is here where the dilemma becomes manifest.

It became clear from the interviews that the *habitas* of Mountainview contained contradictions and inconsistencies that made it difficult to bind the various groups of people together in community. There was a significant amount of discussion by all of the participants on how there was an obvious disconnect between how students acted and how they were supposed to act. Naomi and Katie expressed this when they suggested that some students were very good at articulating a Christian worldview and perspective but did not follow through in their actions – “Everyone talked like they were big Christians... They’d talk big, but there was nothing that showed in their actions” (Naomi). It was not clear if the participants felt students consciously chose to act in this manner or if they felt students really did not believe there was a discrepancy between their actions and their worldview. In any case, the participants experience with *habitas* reveals the contradictions and inconsistencies within community, which lead to a dilemma.

This dilemma of community exists within the social structure of Mountainview. On the one side, the social structure of the school is being undermined when people’s actions are not clearly being oriented by their religious principles. On the other side, as a result of this undermining, there are those who experience a sense of dissonance because the very values that are designed to foster unity are creating tensions and contradictions. For example, all three of the participants who had either experienced a public school or had siblings in a public school, compared their experiences to Mountainview. They all felt that within the Christian school community there existed barriers to varying degrees that prevent them from experiencing relationships, sentiments, and bonds that are consistent with their religious beliefs. This paradox invites further dialogue and reflection among the community on ways to resolve this dilemma and seek ways to remove these

barriers. That dialogue and reflection needs to occur at all levels within the school community – students, teachers, parents. In that vein, participants expressed the following sentiments at one time or another during the interviews: students had no desire to learn and had no respect for teachers; teachers did not or could not control their class; parents did not support the school when it came to discipline issues.

While there is a fair amount of research on the relationship between resistance and students or teachers, there is less on the relationship between resistance and parents. Alpert (1991) as well as Aggleton and Whitty (1985) make important points when each notes that in some cases resistant behaviours at school are extensions of similar patterns of behaviour at home. Both Luke and Jon made a similar point when they suggested that some of their friends treated their parents the same way they treated the teachers. As well, Garber (2002) noted in her research that family conflicts and non-academic priorities at home interfere with learning at school and do exacerbate resistance to schooling. More research on this topic could provide additional information to encourage school communities to also incorporate reflection from and dialogue with parents and caregivers on this dilemma of community.

Dilemma of community can also exist within the philosophical context of Mountainview. As noted in Chapter 2, the philosophical context has to do with the educational goals of the school that, with respect to Mountainview, have to do with preparing students to live as Christians in all aspects of their lives. The philosophical context accords well with Sergiovanni's concept of community when he suggests that community needs to have a centre of values and beliefs (1994a, 1994b). A dilemma of

community can occur when there is a discrepancy between the participants' understanding of these values and beliefs and the school's understanding.

To understand that discrepancy, we need to account for the consensus perspective among the participants that the quality of education at Mountainview was good. Most of the participants expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of education they received. At the face of it, it is an aberration to have a great deal of resistance in a school community that is perceived by students as providing a quality education. As noted in the literature review, it is not uncommon for resistance to be associated with either low academic achievement by students or a learning environment that is based on poor teaching techniques.

In the case of Mountainview, this perception of the school's high quality of education is, in fact, also matched by its high ranking by a well-known independent research organisation. Furthermore, the publically available results of the provincial diploma exams for this particular class also demonstrate that this class of students graduated with relatively high marks in the core subjects. Since all Alberta schools are required to make public the average final marks of the core courses, it was relatively simple to ascertain from the school's website that the final marks from students in this particular class were not anomalous when compared to the school's five-year average. In fact, this particular class's marks in the core courses were not lower than any of the previous four graduating classes. A few of the participants made this point. Both Katie and Naomi noted that their class, despite the resistant behaviours in the classroom, still learned the material and generally received good marks. Luke also noted that their class did quite well in the provincial final exams.

This suggests there is a discrepancy between how the participants experienced the centre values and beliefs of the school community (i.e. the philosophy of education) and how the school articulated those value and beliefs. It appears that some of them experienced the values and beliefs of Mountainview in strictly academic terms – the goal of the school is to provide a quality academic education. For almost all of the participants, this goal was met. However, the articulated values and beliefs about education at Mountainview are not about academics, it is about Christian living. Therein lies a dilemma of community. On the one hand, there were those students who believed the school was nothing more than another educational organisation and they approached their learning at Mountainview in that particular way. On the other hand, there were those students who felt that the school community was not actively demonstrating its own philosophy of education and helping students to align their actions with their beliefs.

Strike's (1999) analogy to a bank is instructive to understand how some participants understood Mountainview Christian School as simply another educational organisation. Banks are not communities in the same sense as schools are. While those who use them might share common values of desiring good service and good financial advice, there is no sense at all in which bank clients consider themselves as part of a community. Banks are used to serve the unique and individual needs of its clients. In some ways, as Strike (1999) notes, some people tend to see schools that way. They see schools as organisations designed to meet individual needs and aspirations, which might be to provide students with what they need to get a good job or entrance to a post-secondary institution.

There is a sense in which some of the participants saw Mountainview in that way. They did not see it as a community with constitutive and shared values. They saw Mountainview as just another organisation. Will particularly articulated this thinking throughout the entire interview. It began with his response to what he thought of his schooling at Mountainview: “Just another school”. Towards the end of the interview, when we were talking about whether or not he would send his children to Mountainview, his response was no. His perspective was it is just another school that happens to have a tuition fee attached. He wonders why he would pay tuition when he can get the same service free from a public school?

On the other hand, there were those students who felt that the school community was not actively demonstrating its own philosophy of education and helping students to align their actions with their beliefs. Essentially, this was expressed as a disappointment with the school. Katie articulated that view when she suggested that students who are not Christian should feel out of place at Mountainview. If school is a Christian school because that’s its mission statement then its environment (ethos) should indicate this. Naomi also expressed a frustration with the fact that a Christian school does not seem to be any different in how students relate to each other, how discipline is handled, or how students are prepared for their careers. It became clear, though, from the participants that their experiences at Mountainview suggests an absence of community. It is not clear whether this absence is due ontologically because the school is perceived more as an organisation rather than a community or became perceived as an organisation simply because it lacked community.

This dilemma of community should give schools, especially faith-based schools, pause to consider how resistance can be a form of communication about the extent to which their centre values and beliefs – their philosophical context – accord with the actual experiences of students. If students are thinking that there is no difference between a public school and a faith-based school, then the community of Mountainview Christian School needs to open up dialogue on ways to enhance the articulation of their values and beliefs. As well, if students believe that a public school has a community environment that is more conducive to preserving and living according to one's religious principles, then this should be taken as a signal for discussion by the various members of the community on why there is such a discrepancy between the values of the school and the experiences of its students.

Ironically, this dilemma of community seems opposite to what both Mateu-Gelabert and Lune (2007) and McMillian (2004) suggest as one cause of resistance. They suggest that students may be committed to a particular philosophy of education, but resist the ways in which schools live out that philosophy in their day-to-day schooling activities. At Mountainview, many students were successful in schooling and were able to achieve relatively high marks within a high quality educational setting. However, their resistance was exacerbated by a philosophy of education to which they were not necessarily committed – at least, when their level of commitment is being judged by the extent to which their behaviours were aligned with their beliefs.

Faith-based schools are not the only ones to benefit from dialogue and discussion around how resistance can be seen as a way to communicate tensions and contradictions between the values and beliefs of the school and the experiences of its students. For

example, most schools have clearly articulated goals of education in terms of democratic citizenship. The extent to which these ideals of democratic citizenship are aligned with the actual experiences of students has been significantly researched (Efrat & Schimmel, 2003; Raby, 2008; Schimmel, 2003; Thornberg, 2008). Where tensions and contradictions arise should be seen as a form of communication that provide a means of not only measuring the success of citizenship education but also open up opportunities to reflect and discuss students' actual experiences with it.

Mills (2003) notes that:

The key ingredients of school culture are the shared values and beliefs of its members. The culture subconsciously defines the hidden ideology, epistemic assumptions, motives, values, and perceptions of participants in the organisation, powerfully and silently creating meaning and fostering unity within the community. (p. 130)

Framing resistance as a communicative act can play a role in exposing some of the hidden ideologies, assumptions, values and motives that can serve to create tensions and contradictions with the community. In that way, resistance can be considered a communicative act if it is understood as a means to signal, generate, and build dialogue (Abowitz, 2000). That does not mean, however, that either or both parties will feel compelled to develop a common response or seeks ways to work together in response to these behaviours. Rather, as Abowitz argues, herein lies its communicative potential – by framing opposition in communicative terms, it allows educators “to respond to resistance in ways that enhance its coordinating, communicative potential” (2000, p. 883). In other words, once it is recognised that there is a potential for communication, such recognition

provides a 'springboard' (Abowitz, 2000, p. 884) that invites further responses and reflections.

### **Limitations of This Study**

I acknowledge that this study does have some limitations that impact its significance in developing an understanding of the participants' experiences with resistance at Mountainview. In this section, I reflect on three factors: (1) the breadth and depth of the participants; (2) the time frame of the study; and (3) the relationship of participants and researcher.

**The breadth and depth of the participants.** The first limitation is methodological and has to do with attempting to achieve two somewhat mutually exclusive goals within a phenomenological framework. One of the goals of this research was to study the experiences of resistant students and to understand resistance from their perspective. This was important to me because, as Garber (2005) noted, most research on student resistance is "from the outside looking in at the student" (p. 7). I wanted the perspectives of the students and, as such, a phenomenological approach was an appropriate choice to achieve that goal. At the same time, the other goal was to examine the communicative potential of resistance within a transactional perspective. A transactional perspective of communication needs to consider multiple perspectives and shifting identities within the school community. These two goals are somewhat mutually exclusive because of the obvious difficulty in obtaining multiple perspectives from only one part of the school community.

I realise now that there exists some gaps in the study, particularly in the multiple perspectives within the school community. As a result, there is a certain myopia in the

larger discussion about the relationship between resistance and community. For example, a teacher perspective would have filled in some of the gaps in understanding the nature of the contradictions and conflicts that make up the social environment of the school. The sense that the participants had that the rules and expectations were not enforced was key in their belief that more could have been done or should have been done in providing an effective learning environment. It would have been beneficial to explore that perspective from a teacher's point of view. As well, a parent perspective would have provided a broader and deeper understanding of philosophical context by incorporating their expectations of Christian education.

**Time frame of the study.** A second limitation has to do with the time frame of the study. The original intent was to interview students at Mountainview who had just graduated, thus minimising the time between their actual school experiences and the interviews. However, various factors worked against that time frame and there ended up almost a two-year gap between the actual experiences of the participants and the interviews. This, of course, raises concerns about the validity of this study. In order to mitigate these concerns, the following caveat needs to be considered. Clearly this study cannot claim in any way to express the lived experiences of either former students or current students at Mountainview. This study offers a reflective assessment by six former students who have experienced resistance during their school days. The participants' views of their resistances are removed from the lived-experiences of the here and now and therefore are subject to selective memories and filtered emotions.

That said, over the course of this study, my focus shifted to take this into account. As I progressed through the study, I began to realise the deeper value of the

communicative potential of resistance, especially with respect to the potential for generating reflective dialogue. It became apparent in the interviews that the participants themselves were struggling to understand the resistance behaviours that their class exhibited through their school years. These participants have been out of school for almost two years and are currently engaged in either post-secondary studies or in the work force. Some of them are in a serious relationship and are thinking about starting a family. Some of them are still searching for the right career. Almost every one of the participants, through the course of the conversations, reflected on the impact their class had on them personally and on the school community.

It also became evident that we – researcher and participants – were constructing knowledge together. This process is expressed by Koro-Ljungberg (2008): “all knowers (researcher and study participants) are constructing reality by living it, and they are equally engaged in the construction of this knowledge” (p. 986). As I was interviewing the participants to explore their resistance to schooling, they, too, were exploring their resistance at the same time. The fact that they had been out of school for a couple of years gave them a perspective that was removed from the immediate day-to-day learning activities. They were able to reflect on their experiences and also compare their Mountainview school experiences with the experiences they are currently engaged in. For example, Katie, on numerous occasions, made comparisons between her secondary schooling and her post-secondary schooling experiences as a way to deepen her own understandings of her resistance at Mountainview. For example, she made a point that students at Mountainview Christian School did not always behave in ways that were consistent with the Christian worldview which the school espoused:

Katie: I feel that people who are not Christians should feel out of place [at Mountainview]... If you are not a Christian, if you don't want to be in this environment, they why are you here. It is a Christian campus. It is a Christian staff, it is a Christian principal, it is Christian parents who are putting their, you know. So, if they are not Christian, they should feel out of place. And I feel they didn't.

When I responded with, "That's really interesting. I've never thought of that", she replied, "Me neither – until now". Clearly, we were constructing knowledge together in this interview and this interview gave her a chance to reflect on her experiences in a way that she had never thought of before. This process actually came up several times during the course of our interview. Not only with Katie, but with all of them. This process of constructing knowledge together is an important component in communication that leads to reflection and dialogue.

**The relationship of participant and researcher.** The third limiting factor has to do with my dual roles of former administrator and researcher. To what extent were the participants open and honest about their feelings and to what extent did what they say really reflect what they believed? It was simply impossible for me to fully remove myself from the lives and experiences of the participants. At the same time, the challenge becomes, as Thomas (2009) expressed it, "is to insert the author back into the text in a way that makes clear his/ her bias, still honours the stories of the participants" (p. 37). It is difficult to gauge, but one way to explore this is to engage in reflexive discussions. Using the model of Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins (2008), I explore the following questions:

*What did you think of the whole interview process?* I found the most difficult aspect to the interview process was finalising the logistical details of the interviews. While finding six subjects willing to be participants went fairly well, it took much longer than I anticipated to arrange the details of time and location for the interviews. In a couple of cases, I became worried that I was pushing too hard or that the participants were feeling pressure to participate. In two cases, I was almost ready to give up because I was ready to assume that the participant had changed their mind. At the same time, I was also very much aware of the impending deadline of my study. I knew that I could not afford to 'lose' two interviews. Ceglowski (2000) talks about this in terms of managing relationships. Researchers not only have a relationship with the participants, they also have a relationship with their research committee (in my case, my thesis committee). It can be a challenge for researchers to manage all those relationships, especially if there are competing or contradictory objectives. In the end, however, those two were some of the best interviews because both participants opened up and were very incisive about their experiences.

Aside from that, I really enjoyed the interviews and connecting with the participants in a way that allowed both them and me to reflect on their experiences with resistant behaviours. If I think about why those particular six participants agreed to be interviewed, I'm inclined to believe that some of them used this interview as an opportunity to bring out some concerns they had, not only about their own schooling, but also about Mountainview Christian School in general. After the official interview was completed, as we were debriefing, I had the sense that for some of them, this was a

catharsis of sorts. I believe there were issues that really bothered the participants about their school years and this gave them an opportunity to express those concerns.

*How comfortable were you in reacting with all of the participants?* I was very nervous immediately prior to the interview. In all situations, I had arranged to meet the participants at a neutral location. As the time approached, I kept worrying about how the participants were going to react to me during the interview, and whether or not this interview would yield relevant and useful data. It did not take long into the interview, however, before I felt at ease. We always started the interview with small talk and then as we progressed, the participants opened up and it became relatively easy to keep the conversation flowing. There were no awkward pauses in the conversation and questions flowed very naturally.

*How comfortable do you think the participants were in reacting to you?* I believe that most of the participants were comfortable with me. After all, if they weren't comfortable with the thought of sitting down with me for an hour, they likely would not have agreed in the first place to be interviewed. That said, I could tell that some of them were also nervous or hesitant. Some of the participants didn't make a lot of eye contact at the beginning; others struggled to find the right words to say; and some displayed body gestures that indicated nervousness. I was expecting some nervousness and therefore attempted to find ways to make the participants feel more at ease. My main focus was to keep the participants talking. There were times when they discussed sensitive things – such as the rules or expectations they had flaunted. I think some of them were wondering how I would react to that information. I also noticed with a couple of participants that they wanted to say more, but they held back. I wasn't always sure why and I didn't want

to probe too much. My goal was to stay neutral and objective – to not make any comments that could be construed as judgemental.

*Which part of the interviews impacted you?* In as much as I tried, it was simply impossible for me to fully remove myself from the experiences of the participants and remain an objective observer. There were certain points in the interviews, especially when some of the participants expressed some strong emotional feelings about their experiences, that I felt keenly aware that, in some ways, Mountainview had let them down. This spoke to me most directly because I am an administrator at the school. For example, one of the consensus perspectives of the participants was that the school had not done enough to enforce the rules and make the learning environment conducive for effective learning. Both Katie and Naomi expressed that several times in the interviews. I believe that these participants were not necessarily upset at me personally, but I do think they felt strongly that the administration could have done more to constrain the behaviours of some students.

**Summary.** In attempting to make transparent the values and beliefs behind this study, I chose to use a degree of reflexivity to not only recognise the limitations of the knowledge produced by this research study, but also to serve other purposes (Etherington, 2007). For example, this reflexivity can be used to ensure rigour and validity by expressing my experiences and biases. Furthermore, this reflexivity can also be part of an ethical practice that exposes the power relations between me, as researcher, and the participants. With that in mind, I remain convinced that despite these limitations, this study can make a valuable contribution to the understanding of the communicative potential of resistance – particularly looking at how it can be used as a means to generate

reflection and dialogue about the relationship between community and resistance. As Thomas (2007) notes, qualitative research can be hypothesis generating rather than hypothesis answering.

### **Recommendations for Further Reflection and Research**

I suggest three areas for further reflection and research. The first area has to do with exploring the factors that make one particular group of students more resistant than another group, given that each group operates under essentially the same learning contexts. The literature on resistance tends to project a homogenous perspective of resistance. Yet, resistance is so complex and diverse that the same set of conditions may enhance or encourage resistant behaviours in one group of students but not necessarily in another. Looking at Mountainview Christian School, why did one particular group of students exhibit extreme resistant behaviours towards their teachers while another group did not? Even some of the participants noted that as well when they made comments about how teachers seemed to be able to handle one group of students but not necessarily another group.

Related to this, is a need for reflection on how resistance affects other students. Again, the research on resistance tends to portray it homogeneously, as if all members of a class are equally engaged in and equally affected by resistance. However, a few of the participants in this study expressed frustration at how the resistance negatively affected not only their academic performance, but also their attitudes and perceptions towards their schooling. In understanding how resistance affects other students, there may be avenues that could be opened up for dialogue between students and teachers that seek to minimise resistant behaviours.

The second area that I believe needs further reflection is on how students themselves understand their own resistance? It became clear from the participants in this study that they did not fully understand their own resistance themselves and were seeking ways to make sense of it. They felt that the school adequately prepared them for post-secondary life. They felt that, for the most part, teachers were caring and willing to give them everything they needed. They also seemed to understand the helplessness of the school in dealing with them as a group. At the same time, they came away with a feeling that their school experiences were somehow deficient – that they were missing an important part of community. This leads to some important questions: How can we teachers and researchers help students to contextualise and to understand their experiences with resisting schooling? How can we help them view themselves as an integral part of a solution rather than the primary cause of the problems of resistance? How can we provide them with the requisite skills to engage in reflection and dialogue regarding their resistance?

The third area has to do with the whole notion of community and the ways in smaller groups can impact, either positively or negatively, the larger school community. Sergiovanni's (1994b) concept of school community is concerned about finding ways for people to become bonded together around shared educational values and goals. However, there is evidence in this study that suggests that despite the explicit intentions of the school to promote community, not all members experienced this sharing of values and goals. As a matter of fact, the interviews suggest there existed smaller, competing groups within the larger school community that had their own goals and values that were often at odds with those of the larger community. For example, most of the participants noted the

influence sports had on the school culture. In fact, four of the six participants suggested the largest peer group was comprised of the athletes. Three of the participants – Hilda, Naomi, and Will, noted that the athletes tended to be treated differently by both teachers and the other students and that the sports program tended to receive a disproportionate amount of funding and support by the school authorities. Therefore, it seemed that the athletic group at Mountainview was a smaller community whose values and goals, while bonding some people together, were counter to those of the larger school community. Further study could deal with some of these questions: To what extent do groups exist within the school that have their own community values and goals? How do these smaller groups impact the larger community and compete with its ideals? To what extent is student resistance bound up in those competing communities?

### **Conclusion**

I began this thesis with a fictitious conversation between three teachers on student resistance. The teachers in this conversation tended to see student resistance as a battle in which they needed to get the upper hand. However, resistance need not necessarily be about expressions of political statements or engagement in power struggles. In fact, schools that wish to reorganise themselves and adopt the model of community as outlined by Sergiovanni (1994a, 1994b) need to recognise that student resistance can have a communicative potential – a potential to build and enhance community. School administrators need to tap into this communicative potential. This can be done, first, by being open to the possibility that resistant students may be facing a dilemma of community – that students are not experiencing the intended values and sentiments of community because of the tensions and barriers created within the school community

itself. Second, administrators need to engage in relationship building with students and engage them in conversations about their attitudes and perceptions about school. It is only through relationships that students can be part of a solution to resistant behaviours rather than primarily viewed as the problem. Third, administrators need to develop benchmarks, in consultation with staff and students, which can measure the extent to which the intended values and sentiments of community align with the actual experiences of the community members. These benchmarks can then serve as a springboard to further reflection, dialogue and discussion among the various community members – parents, students, teachers, and administrators.

Student resistance is considered by educators as one of the most important issues in education today primarily because of the negative impact these behaviours have on the school community (Sun, 1995). However, schools can become stronger communities if they are able to use resistance as a communicative act to understand and thereby deal with the tensions and contradictions that are barriers to creating and maintaining school-as-community.

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## Appendix A



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## APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

March 15, 2010

**TO:** **Rob vanSpronsen** Advisor - N. Piquemal  
Principal Investigator

**FROM:** **Lorna Guse, Chair**  
Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

**Re:** **Protocol #E2009:129**  
**"How do Students in an Independent Christian High School Make  
Meaning of their Resistance to Schooling? "**

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by the **Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board**, which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement. This approval is valid for one year only.

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat in advance of implementation of such changes.

**Please note:**

- if you have funds pending human ethics approval, the auditor requires that you submit a copy of this Approval Certificate to Eveline Saurette in the Office of Research Services, (e-mail [eveline\\_saurette@umanitoba.ca](mailto:eveline_saurette@umanitoba.ca), or fax 261-0325), including the Sponsor name, before your account can be opened.
- if you have received multi-year funding for this research, responsibility lies with you to apply for and obtain Renewal Approval at the expiry of the initial one-year approval; otherwise the account will be locked.

**The Research Ethics Board requests a final report for your study** (available at: [http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/ethics/ors\\_ethics\\_human\\_REB\\_forms\\_guidelines.html](http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/ethics/ors_ethics_human_REB_forms_guidelines.html)) **in order to be in compliance with Tri-Council Guidelines.**

*Bringing Research to Life*

## Appendix B – Letter of Consent



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### Letter of Consent for Participating Subjects

Research Project Title: How Do Students In An Independent Christian High School Make Meaning Of Their Resistance to Schooling?

Researcher: Rob vanSpronsen

*This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.*

**Purpose of the Study:** First, you should know that I am enrolled in the Master of Education program at the University of Manitoba. Part of the requirements to obtain this degree is to write a thesis based on a research study. This research study is an integral part of this degree.

That being said, the general focus of the study is exploring how and why high school students might resist schooling. I have chosen to research how students perceive and understand their high school experience at Immanuel Christian High School. My overall goal is to investigate how students make meaning of their resistance to schooling and suggest ways to improve the school's learning environment.

**Procedures:** I have purposely selected you to participate in this study because you were a member of a high school class at Immanuel Christian High School that displayed behaviours that can be classified as resistant to schooling. I am particularly interested in your perspectives of and experiences with rules and authority. If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research study, I would conduct the research in one interview session. During this session – which I anticipate taking about one hour – I will be asking you various questions about your experiences at high school with a special emphasis on your experiences with rules and authority. We will schedule this interview session, as far as it is possible, at a mutually convenient time and at a mutually convenient place.

**Recording and Transcription:** I plan to audio-record each interview session with a digital recorder. I will personally transcribe the interviews for later analysis.

**Confidentiality of Information:** I understand that you may have some concerns about privacy and confidentiality – after all, you will be discussing your personal experiences with rules and authority. Please be assured that I will make every effort to keep your personal information confidential and private. As a student of the University of Manitoba, I am bound to the Ethical Guidelines for Human Research Subjects.

There are specific things that I will do to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of your personal information:

- Other than myself, no other person – including your former teachers – will know that you are participating in this study. I will not use your real names in any aspect of the research process or final products. I will disguise the information in such a way that your identity will not be disclosed.
- When the interviews are transcribed, I will change your names and the names of other persons mentioned in the interviews into pseudonyms.
- If I use direct quotes from the interview in the final thesis or other follow-up materials, I will ensure the quotes do not in any way identify you or any student / staff member.
- The only two people who will hear the interviews or see the transcripts will be me and my Thesis Advisor (see name and contact information below).
- All data pertaining to this research project – including the digital recordings of the interviews and the transcriptions – will be stored in a locked cabinet at my home. No data will be stored on any computer. Digital files (and their back-ups) will be kept on an external storage device and stored in the locked cabinet. All data pertaining to this project will be destroyed after three years from the time the project is complete. Paper copies will be shredded and digital files will be securely erased.

**Potential Risks:** Your participation in this research study does pose some minimal risks. I will be asking you to recall incidents from your high school years that you may find difficult or distressing. Please be assured that your participation is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequence to you or to members of your family who happen to be students at this school. You have the right to refuse to answer any question. You have the right to ask for more information before you answer any question.

**Feedback About The Study:** If you wish, I will provide you with a summary of the results of this research study. I anticipate this will take at most one year from the time of the interviews. If you wish to receive a copy of this summary, please provide your address and / or email address in the space below.

**General Comments:** I will give you a copy of this Consent Letter for your records. It is my intention to provide you with as much information as possible for you to make a decision about participating. However, if you would like more information about any aspect mentioned in this letter or about any aspect of the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me. You should only sign the letter once you are completely satisfied with all the information I have provided.

*Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.*

**Contact Information:***Researcher:*

Rob vanSpronsen  
(403) 320-8772  
umvanspr@cc.umanitoba.ca

*Thesis Advisor:*

Dr. Nathalie Piquemal  
Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba  
(204) 474-7032  
piquemal@cc.umanitoba.ca

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at (204) 474-7122 or email Margaret\_bowman@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your reference and records.

---

Participant's Signature

Date

---

Researcher and / or Delegate's Signature

Date

Mailing address or email address if you wish to receive a copy of the final results.

## Appendix C

### Interview Questionnaire

This research study is about how students experience and understand their high school experience at Immanuel Christian High School with the aim to seek ways to improve the learning environment.

I have selected to talk to students who have graduated from this school because this would minimize any conflict we would have if I was still your teacher.

I would like you to think back on your high school experiences and recall incidents or examples of how you personally reacted to school rules and authority. I will record this session and will transcribe it. That way I can search through for ideas and patterns emerging from this.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer any question. You have the right to ask for more information before you answer any question.

I will keep your identity and comments completely confidential through out the entire project. I will give you a 'false name' and will endeavour to disguise any identifying information about you and the school.

In order to respect each other's privacy, I ask that you keep confidential your comments that you make during the session. In the discussion, where ever possible, you should refrain from mentioning the specific names of students and teachers. I am not concerned at all about specific teachers or students but rather your thoughts, perceptions, and feelings.

1. I want you to think back on your years in the high school – grades 7 to 12. Tell me about your general impressions about those years.
2. Now that you have been out of the school for a year, let's take a look at your feelings about the schooling you received. What are your expectations of a good school? How well did this school measure up to those expectations? Elaborate.
3. Consider the range of teachers you had in your years here at school. What are some of the qualities in a teacher that you respected? What are some of the qualities you did not respect?
4. Think back to those teachers you did respect and those teachers you did not respect. Was there a difference in the way students in general tended to treat these teachers? Elaborate.
5. Let's talk about the rules and the expectations the school placed on you. What were some of the positive aspects of those rules and expectations? What were some of the negative aspects of those rules and expectations?

6. Tell me about how teachers and principals tried to enforce the rules and expectations? What are some specific ways they tried? In your opinion, how successful were they? What could they have done differently?
7. Can you recall any examples of incidents that either you or your classmates were involved in which clearly went against the rules or expectations of the school? Can you remember why you might have become involved?
8. Tell me more about those incidents. How did teachers react to those incidents? How did other students react to those incidents?

These are all of my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add, or anything you think I have forgotten that would help me to understand more about your experiences at high school.