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# Agency in everyday life: An ethnography of the moral experiences of children and youth

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**Abstract**

Drawing on a hermeneutic ethnographic methodology, we studied the everyday moral experiences of young people aged 11 to 16 and how these related to expressions of agency. Our results revealed that young people's agency was manifested through three interrelated dimensions: their aspirations, concerns, and capacities. Agential expression was context dependent, either bolstered or thwarted by certain people or social institutions. Our study empirically supports our ontological advancement of Childhood Ethics as a subspecialization of Childhood Studies, offering novel evidence on children's agency. This work further promotes the importance of meaningfully including young people in discussions, decisions, and actions that affect them.

**KEYWORDS**

agency, ethnography, moral experience, school, youth

## INTRODUCTION

The new sociology of childhood was foundational in re-conceptualizing childhood as a social construction, in which children are viewed as active agents and social actors in their everyday lives (Prout & James, 1997). Despite these significant advances, the use of dated, sexist, ethnocentric and stage-ist views on maturity within some child development theories has persisted

and slowed the recognition of children's agency, including their right to participate in matters that concern them (Stoecklin & Bonvin, 2014). A recent scoping review of moral agency across child-related disciplines revealed that developmental perspectives, in which children are often perceived as incapable of meaningful participation due to their age, prevail in this literature (Montreuil et al., 2018). Moreover, it is well-known that children can be distressed when excluded from decisions that affect them (Bluebond-Langner et al., 2010).

Although agency has become a central theme within Childhood Studies, it is inadequately theorized and defined, leading to challenges in its operationalization in research and professional practice (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014; Esser et al., 2016; Valentine, 2011). According to Esser et al.'s relational conception of agency, children enact their agency by actively contributing to the shaping of their social worlds and to society (Esser et al., 2016). Furthermore, a concept analysis of children's agency within the health literature advanced a definition of agency as their 'capacity to act deliberately, speak for oneself, and actively reflect on their social worlds, shaping their lives and the lives of others' (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2016, p.510). Whether or not young people require any specific capacities (e.g. physical, relational, cognitive) to be considered as agents, however, remains unclear (Carnevale et al., 2015). Moreover, agency is increasingly described as contextual (Abebe, 2019). The use of narratives to examine young people's collaborative agency and the exploration of children's moral evaluations through accounts of conflict further demonstrate agency through a relational lens (Thomas et al., 2021; Walton & Brewer, 2001).

To further advance knowledge, theory and practice regarding child agency, the VOICE childhood ethics research program was created in 2010 (Carnevale et al., 2020). This research challenges conceptions of children as 'morally immature' and aims to advance knowledge and elaborate strategies for addressing significant ethical concerns among young people relating to health, education, child welfare—among other domains—as well as less dramatic but equally distressing concerns that are often overlooked (Miller, 2009). Exploring young people's agency in relation to how they navigate daily moral concerns in diverse social contexts is important because agency is relationally embedded (Spyrou, 2016).

This particular study aims to advance our understanding of the dimensions of agency among young people through an exploration of their everyday moral experiences. The empirical research concept *moral experience*, defined by VOICE researchers as 'encompassing a person's sense that values that [they] deem important are being realized or thwarted in everyday life' (Hunt & Carnevale, 2011, p.2), includes a 'person's interpretations of a lived encounter, or a set of lived encounters, that fall on spectrums of right-wrong, good-bad or just-unjust'. This concept draws on Taylor's conception of human agency (Taylor, 1991), which embeds moral matters within a person's surrounding moral ontological terrain. This ontology refers to a system of outlooks within which a person is situated. As a moral agent, a person stands against a background horizon of significance and social imaginaries shaped by the social context that the agent inhabits (Taylor, 1989). According to Taylor, human agents make choices and act in light of the meaningful context within which they reside, and cannot stand outside their respective horizon of significance, social imaginaries and their corresponding moral framework (Taylor, 2004). Understanding moral experiences can illuminate an understanding of these horizons and imaginaries that shape human agency (Hunt & Carnevale, 2011). Moral experience is therefore a useful framework for investigating child agency and the moral dimensions of children's lives.

The existing body of empirical literature on children's agency, including agency in navigating experiences relating to moral matters, has largely focused on children's agency within particularly marginalized circumstances (Montreuil, Noronha, et al., 2018). To our knowledge, no ethnographic studies have examined young people's everyday moral experiences. This study explores

how children navigate these everyday experiences, in light of their understandings of good or bad, right or wrong, and fair or unfair, and how these relate to expressions of their agency. 'Social institutions' was used as a frame for meaningful contexts within which young people's agency can be examined through moral experiences. Within these contexts, (e.g. school, family, community) expressions of agency can be bolstered and/or thwarted.

In this paper, 'children' and 'young people' are used interchangeably to refer to persons below the age of majority. We acknowledge 'children' may not adequately include older youths but we opted to use this terminology for congruence with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child terminology (UNICEF, 1989) and with the term 'childhood' within Childhood Studies.

## METHODOLOGY

Given the aim of exploring young people's experiences within the contexts in which these experiences happen, hermeneutic ethnography was used as the research methodology for this study (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). Rooted in Taylor's hermeneutic philosophy, this methodology helps illuminate children's moral lives in light of their surrounding social imaginaries and horizons of significance (Taylor, 2004). Anchored in notions of child agency and moral experiences, this methodological framework was well-suited for this school ethnography, which seeks to understand how young people navigate everyday moral matters. It offers analytical methods for examining ethical concerns among young people within their day-to-day experiences and the contexts in which they occur, using an interpretive and iterative qualitative approach.

Our ethnography examined young people's moral experiences and their expressions of agency in selected social institutional settings. Social institutions refer to the organized sets of ideas and expectations that shape societal efforts to address childhood needs (Kendall et al., 2000). Institutional settings correspond to the concrete spaces in which these ideas and expectations are materialized in everyday discourse and practice (Kendall et al., 2000). In conceptualizing agency as relationally embedded, social institutional settings allow for an examination of the ways in which certain contexts may bolster and/or thwart young people's expressions of agency.

## METHODS

### Recruitment plan and rationale

Following Research Ethics Board approval for this study, the research team contacted a school board for permission to conduct the study in that school board and ask for recommended elementary and high schools for the study. The research team then sought agreement to participate from the principals of one elementary school and one high school that were recommended. Having two age groups in two different settings allowed for a richer exploration of agency across young people. The objective was to describe and understand as fully as possible these two distinct contexts, not to compare them.

## Data collection

This hermeneutic ethnography drew on common ethnographic data collection methods: participant observations, interviews and document analyses (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). These methods were chosen to provide rich data to advance our understanding of participants' moral experiences, as well as related institutional norms, structures and practices within specific settings. A 'bottom-up' approach to data collection was chosen to iteratively revise processes. At both schools, consultations with key informants (teachers, educational staff) informed us about the settings and helped us plan and tailor data collection. Through a constant reflexive awareness, the research team examined the meanings of data interpreted within the setting. According to participants' discussion style preferences and to the results of continuous data analysis, further changes were made to the interview guide based on which questions worked best. This concurrent data collection and analysis allowed for modifications in the interview guide or in participant recruitment (Morse et al., 2002). The research assistant who conducted the interviews wrote reflective memos following interviews, to identify potential data gaps requiring exploration in subsequent data collection (Birks et al., 2008). This research assistant spent between 10 and 20 hours weekly at both schools. Students aged 11 to 16 were recruited at these two schools in September, and data collection ended in June of that academic year.

The research assistant attended a diverse range of school activities relevant to this study, such as debates, workshops on managing emotions, and assemblies to promote kindness. Field notes were taken during and after participant observations, and discussions with the research team followed these sessions. A variety of data sources were sought to complement interview and participant observation data to enhance understanding of young people's moral experiences and agency. Student assignments with a moral scope, school policies, and letters to parents were collected throughout the year for analysis. The research assistant also had high school participants choose a journal that best represented them from a selection of options. The students were told that they could use them to explore their thoughts and emotions throughout the study. Some students chose to discuss their journal entries during interviews.

The research assistant presented the study to different classes and consent forms were provided to students interested in participating in interviews. Two to three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. These varied in length depending on the day's events. Interviews were largely guided by participants' interests, experiences, and decisions they were navigating at the time of the interview. Participants were asked what seemed good, bad, right, wrong, fair and unfair within various situations, and whose counsel they sought during difficult experiences. Participant perspectives on broader issues such as youth participation in society were also sought. Interview guides are found in Table S3 of our Supporting Information.

## Data analysis

We used a hermeneutic methodology—rooted in Taylor's hermeneutic philosophy—which consists of a circular navigation of part-whole relations (Taylor, 1973). Within this study, the 'part' refers to the individual participants and the 'whole' refers to the social institutional settings (school, family) in which participants navigated moral experiences.

All collected data were analysed in a comprehensive manner. Field notes from participant observations were regularly reviewed to contextualize the data collected during the interviews. All data were analysed for content relating to moral experiences and agency. In school

document analyses, special consideration was given to school as a social institution wherein expressions of agency can be bolstered and/or thwarted. The research assistant who primarily conducted data analysis regularly consulted with the research team, ensuring trustworthiness of analyses.

Participants who were interviewed were divided into two groups: primary participants and secondary participants. Primary participants were those who had completed three interviews that were transcribed. Secondary participants were those who had completed two interviews, as well as those who did not want their interviews transcribed.

A thematic analysis of the data was conducted through a series of procedures, including coding, identification of micro-themes and meso-themes, generation of narrative syntheses, and cross-participant analyses (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). Each relevant text segment was highlighted and summarized with a 'synthesis code' (S) and interpreted provisionally with an 'analysis code' (A). Through an inductive process, S/A codes from all interviews with one participant were then grouped according to common content into micro-themes. Micro-themes were then grouped based on commonality into meso-themes. Lastly, a comprehensive narrative synthesis for each participant was written, which provided a rich account of each participant's moral experiences based on all data sources. Narrative syntheses ensured that data were 'examined simultaneously with the emerging interpretation, never losing sight of the informant's particular story and context' (Crist & Tanner, 2003, p.203). All participant narrative syntheses were reviewed by two team members.

Data from secondary participants were examined to help corroborate—or not—primary participant data and identify potential new themes that had not been identified within the primary participant data. These data primarily included transcripts, audio recordings, and field notes that were reviewed and analysed by a research assistant who regularly consulted with other team members.

All sets of meso-themes and narrative syntheses were comparatively analysed to identify common themes across participants. Although data for all participants were integrated for the final phase of analysis, a conscious effort was made to recognize and reveal participants' uniqueness in their expressions of agency.

## RESULTS

The circular hermeneutic analysis used in this study allowed us to delve both into individual participants' moral experiences, the 'parts', resulting in several in-depth exemplars that demonstrate the interrelations between various dimensions of agency, as well as a transversal examination of the 'whole', that is, how agency was expressed within social institutional settings across all participants. In what follows, both of these perspectives, transversal (which integrate themes across participants) and individual exemplars (which integrate themes within one participant), are outlined.

Following an integrative and inductive analysis of all data, articulations of participants' moral experiences were generated that revealed diverse expressions of agency in young people.

Overall, young people's agency was manifested through three key interrelated dimensions: young people's *aspirations*, *concerns*, and *capacities*. These three dimensions will also be referred to as our study's main themes.

This ethnography further showed that young people's agency was relationally embedded in social institutions, which can either thwart or bolster expressions of agency.

We acknowledge the importance of 'thick descriptions' of results in ethnographic studies (Geertz, 1973). Given space limitations, two detailed exemplars of interrelations among aspirations, concerns, and capacities within individual participants are presented below. Two additional individual exemplars, as well as detailed examples of aspirations, concerns, and capacities across all participants and illustrative verbatim data are presented in our Supporting Information Tables S1 and S2. Table 1 presents key participant characteristics. Table 2 presents detailed descriptions of the participating high school and elementary school.

Overall, this ethnographic study revealed rich accounts of high school and elementary school students' aspirations, concerns, and capacities through an immersive exploration of their moral experiences. These morally oriented aspirations and concerns seemed to guide the ways young people navigated relationships and difficult situations in their lives, which in turn called on young people's capacities to reflect, reason, discern and act. In what follows, we present a synthesis of these three themes (aspirations, concerns, and capacities), describing the diverse forms of aspirations, concerns, and capacities that were manifested across all participants.

## Aspirations

Students at both schools expressed aspirations regarding multiple spheres of their lives. Aspirations can be understood as the wishes that they expressed for themselves and for others, and desires for change within their school and societal structure (Table S1). These included aspirations related to their own flourishing, aspirations regarding fairness, respect, and social justice, aspirations for the school system, and aspirations for society and young people.

To illustrate this last sub-theme of aspirations, one participant expressed that young people must deal with the same problems as those faced by adults, and their perspectives therefore ought to be considered in decision-making that affects them. She aspired for a society with less ageism towards young people:

> 'I find it really frustrating. I don't know, it's not the same ageism as you would hear on regular, I don't know, usually you hear ageism and it's like oh, it's towards old people but it's very much towards young people, people just kind of brush them off and it's like oh you're going to wait until you're 18 to start participating in society. Like, no, I'm in society, this is my life, I'm here so I feel like I should have a say in things.'

**TABLE 1** Participant characteristics

| | Elementary school | High school |
|---|---|---|
| Primary participants ($N = 21$) | 7 | 14 |
| Age | 11–12 | 15–16 |
| Girls[a] ($n = 12$) | 5 | 7 |
| Boys[a] ($n = 9$) | 2 | 7 |
| Secondary participants ($N = 8$) | 3 | 5 |

[a] All self-identified as girl or boy without being given that binary choice by researchers.

## Concerns

High school and elementary school participants articulated various concerns, which were linked to their aspirations. Concerns can be understood as preoccupations stemming from thwarted aspirations or worries about their aspirations not being fulfilled. Participants expressed concerns regarding their well-being and that of others. Concerns about the school system were also put forward by participants (see exemplar 4 in Table S2), as were broader concerns related to young people's participation in society (Table S1). These included concerns related to self-flourishing, and concerns related to the flourishing of others. As an example of a concern for another person's well-being, one elementary school student was particularly preoccupied and saddened by her father's violence towards her mother:

> 'Like, I told my mom, 'I'm tired of my dad, like, not abusing you, but, like, saying hard things to you.' and I still remember that day my dad (...) wanted to hit my mom (...) I was on roller blades; he kinda pushed me to the – like, the bureau (...) 'cause he wanted to hit my mom, and then I told him, 'No', then he kind of pushed me into the – like, the kitchen, and slammed the door, and I kinda got, like, a butter knife and opened the door, and I stopped my dad from hitting my mom, so yeah (...) I should have called the cops on my dad, and instead I kinda pushed my dad off of her (...) I didn't want my mom to get hurt. I didn't want my dad to hurt my mom, and I didn't want my dad to hurt me, but he hurt me.'

## Capacities

Navigating aspirations and concerns called on a diverse spectrum of capacities among participants, which varied with the context (Table S1). These included the capacity to discern and decide and the capacity to act based on moral judgments along spectrums of right or wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair. Participants also manifested the capacity to confront challenging moral issues to make sense of difficult situations. One such difficult situation involved a high school student who recounted that her good friend was not treating her well. She felt distressed and knew she needed to speak to her friend, but felt conflicted because this friend was navigating challenges of her own:

> 'I want to tell her how I feel but like I don't cause I don't want her to get upset cause now she's having more family issues, but like I'm planning on telling her like please, it's not nice, stop. But like I don't want to cause I don't want to make her more upset but I need to do it for me.'

## Interrelation between aspirations, concerns, and capacities

In each participant's account of their moral experiences and manifestations of agency, it was evident that interrelations existed among the participant's aspirations, concerns, and capacities. Two exemplars of these interrelations are presented below in Table 3. In these detailed exemplars as well as those in our Supporting Information (Table S2), we highlight how social institutions (school and family) bolstered or thwarted participants' agential expression.

**TABLE 2** Descriptions of school contexts

| |
|---|
| **High school:** It was situated in downtown Montreal, Quebec, Canada. In Quebec, students begin high school at age 12. Students aged 15 and 16 years old at this school were recruited for the study. These students were in their penultimate or final year of high school. This school was known for its specialized focus on the arts and therefore attracted students with a strong interest in music and fine arts. At this school, students were enrolled in either the English or French program. Participants demonstrated a clear sense of comfort and belonging within their school environment, likely due to a high retention rate in students from elementary school to high school within this same school. High school students often referred to their circle of peers as their family. The student population at this school was culturally diverse. The uniqueness of its arts-focused curriculum and its central geographical location may explain why this school drew a wide variety of students from diverse social, religious and linguistic backgrounds. During the time of data collection, the research assistant conducted participant observations in several classes, observing several activities pertaining to agency, such as debates, contemporary world issue presentations, and sexual health education classes. In English class, although the teacher planned most activities within the curriculum, the topics for these activities were often selected by the students themselves, according to their own interests. For example, in the grade 11 debate class, students chose to discuss global issues including: world overpopulation, the LGBTQ2SIA+ community, Islamophobia, poverty, juvenile crime justice, women's rights, human trafficking, crime and punishment, energy and terrorism. One high school English teacher seemed to be regarded as an informal mentor to students. He was highly appreciated by students for the way he encouraged them to express their viewpoints. High school students also particularly valued one of the art teachers. This teacher seemed to play the unofficial role of a counsellor as students often turned to her to share their problems. High school participants' agential expression seemed to be bolstered by these two teachers within the social institution of school. |
| **Elementary school:** It was situated in the West end of Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Students aged 11 and 12 years old were recruited for the study. Most were in grade 6, the last year of elementary school in Quebec. The student population at this school was also culturally diverse. According to its website, the school included students born in 25 different countries, suggesting the school's interest in building diversity into its mandate. This school organized several activities and events. The research assistant either attended these activities through participant observation or heard student accounts of them. For instance, during 'We Day', an event across North America aimed at promoting positive social, environmental and economical change, some students chose to partake in group projects. These aimed to foster community engagement and raise awareness about global issues such as poverty, capital punishment and the rights of people within the LGBTQ2SIA+ community. This school also hosted regular assemblies to encourage school solidarity, and collaboration among students of different classes and grades through engaging multi-media activities. Two examples of these assemblies included the 'Kindness Assembly' and the 'Growth Mindset' assembly. For this latter event, a post-it board on the 'Growth Mindset' in a classroom compiled students' visions of themselves in the coming year. These assemblies would pair students from different grades to work on a shared project related to a theme. The resulting artwork would then be displayed in school hallways. In this way, students would be reminded and encouraged to continually reflect on these issues as they physically moved through the school. The research assistant also observed participants during 'Chill Zone', an external program run by the Trevor Williams Kids Foundation. Chill Zone aimed to equip students with the knowledge, skills and strategies to learn from and manage their emotions, and make better decisions. One document retrieved at this school was a hand-out for students to recognize 'distorted feelings' and how to manage anger in a healthy way. Through participant observations and document analysis, it was evident that considerations to moral values were threaded inside and outside the classroom. The curriculum also adapted to contemporary events. For example, following the Quebec City Mosque Attack in January 2017, students opted to write letters to the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City. These letters offered words of support, empathy and solidarity towards the Muslim community. They attested to students' concern for others and their desire for respect and unity. |

**TABLE 3** Interrelations of aspirations, concerns, and capacities: two selected exemplars

**Exemplar 1**

One high school participant recounted that she grew up in a household marked by strong intimidation and emotional violence from her father. Her father also made it clear to her that, because she had not turned 18 yet, her voice did not matter. She disagreed.

When asked about this perspective held by her father and other adults, that young people's voices are not meaningful, she said: "*We do have heads of our own and we can think and we are smart and you guys might have more wisdom cause you've lived longer but we are going to be just as smart as you, like we are gonna get there. And like just because like age is just a number, it doesn't define who you are in your head. I never thought I was 16, or 12 or 9. I always thought ahead. And when people would talk they'd be like 'she talks like she's 35'. Like there you go.*"

She expressed an aspiration to change her life for the better, by distancing herself from her father due to the negative impact of his manipulative and harmful nature. Following this realization, this participant chose to discuss her concerns with a trusted school social worker and family members. She eventually made a difficult decision to meet with a lawyer to start the process of terminating her father's parental authority over her.

This participant's aspiration to lead a healthier life according to her in a more positive environment, driven by her concern for her own well-being and flourishing, resulted in her mobilizing her capacity to advocate for herself by speaking up, seeking support from school staff, and acting to enforce the changes she wanted in her family situation. Likewise, her capacity to morally reflect on her reality helped her recognize the concerns she felt about her father. Her relationship with her father (within the social institution of her family) seemed to thwart her agential expression, leading her to make decisions that could help her fulfil her aspirations in other ways. In contrast, her expression of agency seemed to be bolstered by relationships in other social institutions (school and other familial structures).

**Exemplar 2**

One elementary school student recounted that she found out she had dyslexia in grade 3. The teacher who supported her through this news became her favourite teacher and a mentor who continued to help her in grade 4.

She explained that her learning disability did not make her feel limited in any way. She felt comfortable at school and her friends never made her feel different, suggesting that she has never felt stigmatized because of her dyslexia. Given that she received support at school for her dyslexia and did not get penalized for this help, she found that her school had been supportive overall with her learning challenges, allowing her to succeed academically. She said that although most people with dyslexia do not do well in math, she does. She also felt proud that she overcame some learning challenges due to dyslexia.

In her high school application, she wrote about the challenges she has had in school with dyslexia. She explained why she thought this school would be a good fit for her to support her with her learning needs and interests:

*"They have (...) AP classes for math 'cause I'm really good at it, so that might – I might try to take that, and also (a teacher) said that (...) I can cancel out one of the (...) subjects every day to go into the basement and, like, with a resource person, so they can help – so they can help me do my homework".*

This account showed that this participant held an aspiration to thrive while living with dyslexia, because she was concerned about her future, and her ability to succeed academically. These academic concerns and aspirations seemed to have mobilized her capacity to seek additional scholarly support when needed and to help her recognize that she was valued and could reach her goals, even if her school experience may be different than that of her peers.

This participant also expressed the capacity to trust in herself that discussing her learning disability in her high school application was the right decision for her. Lastly, the relationships with her grade 4 teacher in this particular social institution (school) seemed to bolster her agential expression.

## DISCUSSION

Conceptualizing agency within young people continues to challenge Childhood Studies due to ambiguous definitions and debates regarding the interrelation of agency and autonomy (Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019). In contrast to something fixed or possessed, the relational dimensions of agency have been increasingly explored within the literature (Esser et al., 2016; Gallagher, 2019). In a critique of certain conceptions of child agency, Coffey and Farrugia denounce the narrow views of agency as an inner capacity that withstands existing power structures and rather conceptualize agency as a 'generative process' (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014). In her work on child precarity, rights and resistance, Leonard similarly introduced the notion of 'generagency', situating childhood within generational power structures (Leonard, 2020). In the last decade, researchers have identified a need for empirical studies examining children's rights and agency in their everyday lives from the perspectives of children themselves (Bjerke, 2011; Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013).

Rooted in the moral experiences of young people (Hunt & Carnevale, 2011), our ethnographic exploration of agency is unique in presenting thick descriptions of young people navigating day-to-day moral matters in diverse social contexts. Our study revealed a threefold framework for agency involving *aspirations*, *concerns*, and *capacities*. It supports our ontological advancement of Childhood Ethics as a sub-specialization of Childhood Studies (Carnevale et al., 2020), offering novel empirical evidence on children's agency. This threefold conception of agency aligns with Abebe's reconceptualization of agency, as 'dynamic, situated, and contextual' (Abebe, 2019, p.11). Expressions of young people's agency in our study were indeed shown to be context dependent, either bolstered by certain people or situations (e.g. feeling supported by a school social worker and lawyer in a difficult decision) or thwarted by them (e.g. feeling unfairly targeted by a school dress code), revealing the importance of social institutions in understanding agency. Similar to Leonard's view that agency is not possessed, but rather practiced in the everyday spaces of childhood and adulthood (Leonard, 2020), agency in our study was enacted in unique ways, depending on the relationships at play. Our results also support the value of understanding youth experiences through different contexts to reveal how the construction of youth agency within various social structures may generate or perpetuate power imbalances (White & Wyn, 1998). The impact on agency of diverse social contexts has been studied in other research (e.g. young people manifesting their agency by engaging in community activities to navigate oppressive experiences Montreuil et al., 2017, 2018), or by engaging in research exploring children's experiences of humiliating or harmful practices in a child mental health program (Montreuil et al., 2020).

Our results align with the conception of young people as agents who can effect change (Prout & James, 1997), and can draw on supportive social institutions to learn how to better express their agency when facing adversity within other social institutions (Carnevale et al., 2020). Our results also corroborate a 'thick' conception of children's voices, which recognizes these voices as 'relationally embedded expressions of their agency' (Carnevale, 2020).

Although our study does not aim to compare young people's agency based on age, we noted similar articulations of agency across high school and elementary school students. At both schools, students articulated aspirations related to their own flourishing and to the well-being of others, illustrating how agency can differ from autonomy or ego-centrism (Esser et al., 2016). Participants articulated wishes related to their own futures, as well as aspirations for fairness, respect, and social justice through their volunteering, and participation in school events aimed at promoting these values. High school students in particular shared aspirations for positive change within their school and societal structures such as modifications to their sexual health curriculum and improvements to the Canadian voting system. Although

our relational conception of agency differs from Kirby's view of agency as something that is achieved, we see a link between the aspirational dimension of agency in our study and Kirby's projective element of agency (Kirby, 2020). One of our high school participants, an aspiring artist who felt constrained by the education system, decided to prioritize his art portfolio, setting aside his other schoolwork. This situation relates to Kirby's 'lines of desire', referring to children's productive pursuit of interests.

High school and elementary school participants articulated various morally oriented concerns, which often related to their aspirations not being fulfilled. Participants shared concerns regarding their well-being, as well as that of others. Both sets of students expressed concerns about bullying and racism towards themselves or their peers. There were numerous examples in our study of participants who referenced the ways their choices affected their family, friends and peers, revealing their concern for others. Participants expressed concerns beyond the school setting including government policies that discriminated against certain religious groups, the pitfalls of political correctness, and various instances of adults discounting young people's voices because of their age. Participants' specific concerns about their voices not being heard by adults also align with common societal discourses about children's 'moral immaturity'. Stage-based child development theories, which have largely dominated the literature on child agency, have contributed to this view of children as individuals who are not yet capable of forming morally meaningful contributions to discussions and decisions that affect them (Hogan, 2005; Montreuil, Noronha, et al., 2018; Van Praagh, 2007). Participants' articulations of their aspirations and recognition of their concerns relied on their capacities to discern moral matters, which then guided their reflections and actions.

In response to complex situations, participants expressed various capacities in navigating their moral experiences. Participants in elementary school and high school both shared difficult situations they had faced, including: emotional manipulation from a parent, substance abuse experienced by a sibling, violence at home, parents' relationship challenges and financial difficulties, and illness in the family. As participants contended with these situations and made decisions according to what was right for them, they referred to trusted individuals for support. This aligns with the idea that relational experiences such as those described in our study can help young people understand how to navigate trust in relationships with others (Noiseux et al., 2019). Gallagher's suggestion of the close relationship between young people's vulnerable circumstances and their capacity to thrive within these circumstances, not despite them, corresponds to our conceptualization of capacities (Gallagher, 2019). For instance, one participant's capacity to express sadness about the loss of a relative to a teacher and seek support was considered a manifestation of their agency within a trusting relationship. Our results support a rich and relational understanding of young people's capacities, far beyond actions that resist power relationships (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014; Moran-Ellis, 2013).

Our qualitative study of capacities complements other quantitative research on children's moral reasoning processes (Nucci et al., 2017). Using in-depth data from each participant, our qualitative design allowed us to further understand the ways young people interpreted their own experiences within their everyday contexts, revealing the moral dimensions of their agency. Our results also corroborate criticisms of binary views of capacity, which situate children's and adults' capacities in opposition to one another, failing to consider the relational ethical complexity of children's voices *vis-à-vis* those of their parents and other adults in their lives (Bjerke, 2011; Carnevale et al., 2017).

Overall, our ethnography revealed that young people's agency was manifested through their aspirations for themselves and for their communities, their concerns for themselves and for others, and their capacities to reflect, discern, make sense of morally complex issues, and act.

## LIMITATIONS

We wish to acknowledge one significant limitation of this study. Participants in our study were observed directly within only one social institution, their schools. Although participants expressed rich accounts from their lives outside of school, those experiences could not be contextualized in the same way that the ones regarding school topics were, given the researchers' presence at the two schools throughout data collection.

## IMPLICATIONS

This research can inform changes within schools promoting the participation of young people in the design of programs mindful of their values, interests and needs. Although our study was set at school, it also reveals the importance of young people's participation in society more broadly. At the time this manuscript was submitted for review, Covid-19 pandemic policies had been implemented with major repercussions on young people, who had not been included in this policy-making (Campbell & Carnevale, 2020).

This ethnography revealed young people's interest in and capacity for participating in such decisions. Our results emphasize the need to recognize young people as interested stakeholders regarding not only their schooling, but also other institutions such as child welfare and healthcare. Participants in our study referenced their involvement in community work and the justice system. They provided input on how certain systems either positively or negatively affected their experiences, and as a consequence, their agency and that of others. This study shows that direct engagement with youth may be leveraged to develop societal structures mindful of youth experiences (Orenstein, 2016, 2020).

Furthermore, this study has implications for the education of professionals working with young people. Participants in our study referred to the administrative staff and teachers at their school as individuals that either bolstered or thwarted expression of their agency. Programs that prepare professionals to work with young people may draw on these results to help ensure professionals have rich understandings of the aspirations, concerns, and capacities of young people (Bardaxoglou et al., 2020; Van Praagh, 2005).

Lastly, this ethnography created several avenues for Childhood Ethics research. Future research should explore young people's agency in other settings, such as community organizations. We see value in studying connections between the agency framework from our study and the concept of 'best interests'. In ethical and legal understandings, 'best interests' should be based on a child's unique interests, even in situations where the child's active participation is not envisaged. Our study has shown that young people have capacities to be meaningfully involved in decisions made by others that concern them. When others make a determination of a young person's best interests, it should be maximally informed by that young person's aspirations, their concerns, and their capacity to meaningfully participate in these decisions.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, young people expressed their agency through articulations of their aspirations, concerns, and capacities. Participants referred to diverse situations in their day-to-day lives within social institutions (e.g. school, family, community), and how they navigated such situations. They

expressed moral reasoning through their reflections, discernment and decision-making. Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of what shapes young people's agency, and how this agency ought to be recognized and leveraged when it comes to political and institutional discussions, decisions, and actions concerning young people.

## ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

The McGill University Research Ethics Board approved this study.

## PARTICIPANT CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in this study.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this manuscript have no conflict of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of the article at the publisher's website.

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