Living within the Hermeneutic Circle: Interpreting the Curricular Inquiry of Canadian Secondary Ismaili Religious Education Teachers

by

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Abstract

Educational endeavours within traditional faith communities, and more specifically, religious education programs for youth, present opportunities to inquire into the ways these historically-grounded traditions can be understood as dynamic, diverse, and enriching of present-day life. In this research study, I examine the curricular inquiry of seven Ismaili Muslim secondary religious education teachers for the purpose of drawing attention to the perceptual, interpretive and practical life-worlds of their teaching practices. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological framework, the study articulates how teachers interpret and enact a global curriculum initiative, namely the Institute of Ismaili Studies Secondary Curriculum, within the context of teaching religious education classes for Ismaili youth in Canada. Particular attention is given to the teachers’ understandings of the curriculum text, their rendition of the curriculum text in light of the lived experience of classroom teaching and, more broadly, how these understandings and interpretations of the curriculum shape and are shaped by faith community sensibilities. In addition to drawing upon a range of thinkers associated with hermeneutics and Islamic and Ismaili studies, Dwayne Huebner’s curricular scholarship provides the theoretical framework through which curriculum inquiry and the relation between immanence and transcendence is explored to enable interpretive curricular spaces in classrooms and teacher learning communities.

The claim I make in this study is that curriculum inquiry is an interpretive quest for both teachers and students which requires relational, temporal and hermeneutic ways of knowing. The interpretive quest involves cultivating relations with text, with disciplines, and with individuals. Relational knowledge brings about the presence of the transcendent in the immanence of daily life, thereby facilitating a unity of being for the individual. The interpretive quest also calls for an understanding of the temporal aspects of existence as they reveal themselves in traditions and disciplines. Through practicing epistemological humility in pursuing a plurality of knowledge sources, new expressions of the tradition and its enduring values can be created that resonate with modern times. Hermeneutic ways of knowing are required to access the transcendent possibilities in our encounters with others to enable a ‘going beyond’ who we currently are. This release of potential allows individuals to envision possibilities for self-transformation and community realization. Central to the interpretive quest is the attunement to beauty brought about by a critical and creative engagement with tradition. This creative engagement opens up an infinitude of possibilities for teachers and students to make and recreate their manifold lifeworlds in the service of humankind. These study findings suggest an educational applicability broader than religious education. Curriculum inquiry, conceptualized as an interpretive quest, provides transformative possibilities for curriculum, classrooms and community in a multiplicity of educational settings.
Keywords: curriculum inquiry; religious education; hermeneutic phenomenology; living tradition; Shia Ismaili Muslim; teacher education
To my three gentlemen, Alkarim, Ahmed and Azad, you reveal life’s beauty and infinitude to me each day
Acknowledgements

This study has been guided and inspired through the many individuals with whom I have the privilege of working and living alongside. My supervisory committee has been a true gift and each member has significantly elevated my ways of thinking and being. I would like to acknowledge my senior supervisor, Dr. Stephen Smith, who has guided the integration of tradition, curriculum, hermeneutics and community seamlessly and with great care. Stephen, your approach to education and to life is manifest in unity of being. Thank you for honoring my work. Dr. Ann Chinnery has been instrumental in supporting the venture into uncovering insights of the moral quest in teacher education. Ann, thank you for your luminosity and the epistemological humility you have nurtured. Dr. Shiraz Thobani has deepened and complicated curricular concepts in ways that have been intellectually robust and evoked sophistication of thought. Shiraz, thank you for the gentle manner in which you have opened up the horizon of living tradition and in which you have brought new meaning to community realization. Stephen, Ann, and Shiraz, I am honored to have you as my mentors and as exemplars of educational leaders who embody integrity. You have enabled a professional and personal flourishing through the grace each of you has brought to this study. I would also like to thank Dr. Heesoon Bai and Dr. Peter Grimmett for encouraging me to author my story within the ‘original story’ of the tradition.

My research partners, the seven teachers who gave so generously and passionately to this process, have been inspirational as co-journeymers. Fayyaz Ali, Fatima Kaba, Shirin Karim, Adil Mamodaly, Farah Manji, Rizwan Muhammedi, and Hafiz Printer¹, you have taken this work through many ‘valleys’ and our journey has been replete with dedication, pedagogical thoughtfulness and vitality. Your love for children, for community, for tradition, and for this discipline illuminates new ways of knowing and calls forth an intellectual spirit that is at once humbling and promising. I have learnt

¹ Listed with permission, alphabetically by last name
much from our interpretive quest in making and recreating our curricular worlds and look forward to the possibilities that await us. Thank you for your critical and creative engagement, for your trust and your honesty, for your belief in the significance of this project, for the beauty you have brought to this work, and for your willingness to co-journey with me in the hermeneutic circle.

This study has been profoundly integrated with my service to the institutions of the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board for Canada and the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. I have had the good fortune of being supported and being enlightened by my interactions with individuals who bring dispositions of optimism, rigor, creativity and vision to our work. In this light, I would like to acknowledge: the Primary Teacher Educators (PTEs) who began and continue this quest of curriculum inquiry with me envisioning what community could be and the place of children in this renewal; the Secondary (STEP) Teachers who are continually searching for ‘moreness’ and a ‘going beyond’ what can be, and whose innovations are carving hopeful and enabling pathways for religious education and for our youth; my academic colleagues at ITREB Canada, the global ITREBs, and the IIS, whose depth of knowledge and sensitivity of practice is only paralleled by their commitment to community well being; and the various leaders at ITREB and the IIS, past and present, who have placed their trust in me to steward the religious education initiative in Canada. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Munir Vellani who has walked alongside me every step of this journey ensuring the horizon was always in sight. Munir, thank you for the generosity of heart and mind you continually offer and the ‘light’ you bring to our conversations. I would also like to thank Karim Jiwani, Nurdin Dhanani and Dr. Farouk Mitha for being my dialogue partners on the interpretive history of the tradition. And to Zahida Samji, thank you for being present for all the significant moments of my journey. To all my leaders and dear colleagues above, thank you for revealing the transcendent in the immanence of the everyday and opening up possibilities for us to venture forth together in unified service.

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My eternal gratitude and submission to the grace and the light of the Divine . . .
# Table of Contents

Approval .......................................................................................................................... ii  
Partial Copyright Licence .............................................................................................. iii  
Ethics Statement ........................................................................................................... iv  
Abstract ........................................................................................................................ v  
Dedication ....................................................................................................................... vii  
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... viii  
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................... xi  
List of Tables .................................................................................................................. xiv  
List of Acronyms ........................................................................................................... xv  
Prologue ......................................................................................................................... xvi  

## Chapter 1: A Hermeneutical Act of Beginning .......................................................... 1  
Challenges of Religious Education in the Western Context ........................................... 4  
  Challenge of Secularization ....................................................................................... 5  
  Challenge of Tradition and Modernity ..................................................................... 10  
  Challenge of Perceptions of Islam in the West ......................................................... 16  
Religious Education: Why It Matters ........................................................................... 22  
From Challenges and Opportunities to the Consideration of Responses ................. 27  
  Study Description ..................................................................................................... 29  
Organization of Thesis ................................................................................................. 34  

## Chapter 2: The Hermeneutics of a Living Tradition ................................................. 39  
Understanding the Idea of a Living Tradition .............................................................. 41  
  Cumulative Interaction within Shia and Ismaili Perspectives: The  
    Interpretive Quest .................................................................................................... 45  
    The Qur’an as an Inexhaustible Wellspring of Inspiration: A Shi’i  
      Interpretation ....................................................................................................... 46  
    The Alid Tradition ................................................................................................... 52  
    The Early Ismaili Imams and their Teachings ....................................................... 54  
    Interpreting Revelation and Reason; Interpreting Knowledge and  
      Action .................................................................................................................... 57  
    The Transformative Quest of Ismailis in Modern Times ................................. 62  
Principles of Interpretation within the Living Tradition ............................................. 67  
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 71  

## Chapter 3: Curriculum as Hermeneutical Inquiry ..................................................... 74  
Understanding Curriculum as Inquiry: The Reconceptualist Movement .................. 78  
Phenomenological and Hermeneutical Curriculum Inquiry ....................................... 81  
Reconceptualizing Curriculum as Transcendent Possibilities: Dwayne E. Huebner .......................................................................................................................... 93  
  Education and the Human Spirit ............................................................................. 94  
  Curriculum and Temporality ................................................................................... 97  
  Designing Educative Environments ........................................................................ 98  
  Towards a Just Educational Environment ............................................................. 101  
Reflections on Huebner’s Principles of Curricular Interpretation ............................... 104
The IIS Secondary Curriculum: An Inheritance of the Living Tradition .................. 106
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 115

Chapter 4: A Hermeneutical Research of Community Transformation ........... 120
Research Context: A Community in Transformation ........................................... 125
Hermeneutic Phenomenology: An Interpretive Framework ............................... 129
Understanding and Interpreting Lived Experience ............................................ 132
Reaching towards New Horizons: Gadamer’s Hermeneutics ............................. 135
Revitalizing the Voice of Tradition .................................................................... 138
Inquiry and Interpretation, Application and Self-Understanding ....................... 142
Inquiry and Interpretation in the Shia Ismaili Muslim Tradition ......................... 146
Research Methodology ......................................................................................... 154
Sampling Method ................................................................................................. 158
Participant Preparation for Research ................................................................. 159
Research Process .................................................................................................. 159
Hermeneutical Phenomenological Themes for Curricular Inquiry .................... 165

Chapter 5: Curriculum as Consciousness: The Quest towards a Unity of
Being ...................................................................................................................... 170
Interpreting the Lived Meanings of the Teachers .................................................. 172
Curricular Consciousness: Interpreting the Intentionality of the IIS Secondary
Curriculum ........................................................................................................... 174
What is the IIS Secondary Curriculum responding to? ....................................... 175
On Secular Forces and Faith ................................................................................. 175
On Identity(ies) ....................................................................................................... 177
On Living Tradition ............................................................................................... 179
How is the IIS Secondary Curriculum conveying the living tradition to Ismaili
students? ............................................................................................................... 182
On Curriculum ...................................................................................................... 183
On the Larger Consciousness of the IIS Curriculum ............................................ 184
How are the teachers taking forth the curricular intentionality in their
interpretive work with the curriculum? ............................................................... 191
On the Teachers’ Curricular Consciousness ....................................................... 191
On Relationality with the Curricular Text ............................................................ 194
Living within the Hermeneutic Circle: Towards a Unity of Being ...................... 200

Chapter 6: The Pedagogical Encounter: A Search for Epistemological
Humility ................................................................................................................. 204
The Lived Experience of the Teacher Role in the Pedagogical Encounter .......... 206
On Teacher Aspirations ....................................................................................... 207
On the Weightiness of the Role ......................................................................... 209
On the Ambiguity of the Teacher Role ............................................................... 212
Curricular Intentionality and Student Lifeworlds ................................................... 217
What are the struggles of the pedagogical encounter? ....................................... 218
Curricular Inquiry and the Pedagogical Encounter ............................................. 223
Yasmine: Spaces of In-Betweenness ................................................................. 224
Aidan: Spaces of Self-Reflexivity ....................................................................... 227
Shakeel: Spaces of the Questions behind the Questions .................................... 230
Aryana: Spaces of Knowledge Relationships ........................................... 234
Raziq: Spaces of Contemplation and Sacredness ..................................... 238
Zakir: Spaces of Divinity within Humanity .............................................. 242
Khaliya: Spaces of Co-Journeying ............................................................... 245
Living Within the Hermeneutic Circle: Spaces of Epistemological Humility ..... 251

Chapter 7: Individual Insights into Mysteries of Community Realization .... 257
Community Realization: The Student Community ...................................... 259
  On the Teacher-Student Relationality .................................................... 259
  On the Classroom Space as Community .................................................. 263
  On Creating Spaces for the Transcendent ............................................... 266
Community Realization: The Teacher Community .................................... 273
  On the Complexity of the Teacher Learning Community ......................... 274
  On Diversity in the Teacher Learning Community .................................... 277
  On the Vulnerabilities and Tensions of the Learning Community Space ....... 279
  On the Potentiality of the Teacher Learning Community ........................... 282
Living within the Hermeneutical Circle: Towards Community Realization .... 289

Chapter 8: Living Within the Hermeneutic Circle: An Interpretive Quest
towards Beauty and Infinitude ................................................................. 294
My Interpretive Quest ................................................................................. 295
The Interpretive Quest of This Study ......................................................... 300
  Interpreting Temporal Knowledge .......................................................... 302
  Interpreting Relational Knowledge .......................................................... 303
  Interpreting Hermeneutical Knowledge ................................................... 305
The Interpretive Quest of the Teachers' Curriculum Inquiry ....................... 307
  Curriculum as Consciousness: The Quest towards a Unity of Being ........... 309
  The Pedagogical Encounter: A Quest for Epistemological Humility .......... 317
  Insights into Mysteries towards Community Realization ......................... 325
  Make Me Complete .................................................................................... 332
An Interpretive Quest towards Beauty and Infinitude .................................. 332

References ................................................................................................. 338
List of Tables

Table 1: IIS Secondary Curriculum - Educational Aims, Values and Outlooks .......... 110
Table 2: IIS Secondary Curriculum Modules......................................................... 111
Table 3: Themes for Curricular Inquiry................................................................. 169
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HC</td>
<td>Hermeneutic Conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td>IIS</td>
<td>Institute of Ismaili Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>IOE</td>
<td>Institute of Education, University of London</td>
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<td>ITREB</td>
<td>Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board</td>
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<td>Religious Education</td>
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<td>RI</td>
<td>Researcher Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEP</td>
<td>Secondary Teacher Education Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP</td>
<td>Written Protocol</td>
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Prologue

God is the Light of the heavens and earth.
His light is like this:
here is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass,
A glass like a glittering star, fuelled from a blessed olive tree
From neither east nor west,
Whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it—
Light upon light—God guides whoever He will to His light;
God draws such comparisons for people;
God has full knowledge of everything—

(Qur’an, 24:35-35)
Chapter 1:

A Hermeneutical Act of Beginning

“. . . I gave a good deal of thought and analysis to the methodological importance for work in the human sciences of finding and formulating a first step, a point of departure, a beginning principle. A major lesson I learned and tried to present was that there is no such thing as a merely given, or simply available, starting point: beginnings have to be made for each project in such a way as to enable what follows from them. . . The idea of beginning, indeed the act of beginning, necessarily involves an act of delimitation by which something is cut out of a great mass of material, separated from this mass, and made to stand for, as well as be, a starting point, a beginning;” (Edward Said, Orientalism, 1978, pp. 15-16).

Five years ago, there was a new “beginning.” It was the beginning of a milestone change in the Shia Ismaili Muslim community where after decades of having religious education classes for youth being taught by volunteer teachers, there was a move towards professionalizing the secondary teachers so the work of religious education would become their vocation. No longer would teachers throw together their materials for their Saturday morning class on Friday night, looking over their lesson plan in their rushed efforts to internalize the lesson content for their secondary religious education class the next morning. Instead, teachers with masters’ level qualifications would be working on interpreting curriculum, developing and teaching appropriate unit and lesson plans for adolescent students, engaging in parental communication and parental education, collaborating with their teacher learning communities, and working alongside community stakeholders as their professional responsibilities.

1 In time, it is envisioned these professional teachers will also teach in secular educational settings.
All of us entered what we thought was a new beginning with our diverse understandings of what this new beginning was “made to stand for.” Each of us had our own aspirations, interpretations and trepidations about what was to follow. Twelve teachers in the first year, followed by cohorts of approximately eight teachers each subsequent year, were hired by the Ismaili Tariqah\textsuperscript{2} and Religious Education Board\textsuperscript{3} (ITREB). The teachers are employed after completing a two year full-time double Masters’ program, in Education and Humanities (specifically Muslim Societies and Civilizations), at the Institute of Ismaili Studies\textsuperscript{4} (IIS) and the Institute of Education (IOE) in London, UK.

What sets this beginning apart as a starting point? The delimitations are bold and striking for a minority Muslim community. First, the professionalization strategy is international starting with a few pilot sites of which Canada was one\textsuperscript{5}; second, the teachers recruited globally for this profession of teaching religious education and the humanities are required to undertake a centralized two year double Masters’ program in London as their preservice training in preparation to teach in their country of residence; third, each country-specific ITREB was asked to set up a new educational and human resource infrastructure for the delivery of religious education to Ismaili adolescents; fourth, the teachers would be implementing a global curriculum developed by the IIS;

\textsuperscript{2} Tariqah can be understood as a way or path; the path followed by esoteric schools of interpretation in Islam.

\textsuperscript{3} The Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB) is an appointed governance board whose mandate is the religious education of the Canadian Shia Ismaili Muslim community. This education is undertaken with a view to situating the essential principles of the Shia Ismaili Muslim faith within the broader framework of Islam, with sensitivity towards diversity in the Islamic and Ismaili community, and with mindfulness to tradition and resonance with the contemporary world.

\textsuperscript{4} The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) is an academic institution established in 1977 whose focus is to promote historical and contemporary scholarship and learning on Muslim societies and cultures and their relationship with other societies and faiths (www.iis.ac.uk).

\textsuperscript{5} The secondary professionalization began in 2009 with five international pilot sites: Canada – Toronto and Vancouver; Tajikistan – Khorog; India – Mumbai; Pakistan – Karachi; and USA – Houston.
and finally, each pilot site was required to hire an educational leader as the Academic Director\textsuperscript{6} to “enable” what was to follow.

This study is written from my perspective as the Canadian Academic Director responsible for the Ismaili Religious Education system Kindergarten to Grade 12, and in particular, the development of a secondary professional religious education system for the Ismaili community in Canada. What makes this a noteworthy endeavour to research and document? Why am I choosing to interrogate this particular beginning from the mass material of education, religious education and teacher education? The response to the above questions is the awakening of a self-realization that my faith tradition is an inescapable and integral part of my being and it is that entry point in which I wish to ground my investigation. I began my role with ITREB in a professional capacity about twelve years ago\textsuperscript{7}. Prior to this role, I had the privilege of holding a number of prominent positions with the Burnaby School Board, the Ministry of Education and the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. I had always conceived of my identity as an educator to be distinct from my identity as an Ismaili Muslim. My role as an Academic Director, however, challenges those distinctions and provokes questions that are sometimes inspirational and sometimes disconcerting. At one time in my professional life, I was concerned with innovative secular education practices such as cooperative learning, transformative curriculum, inquiry based professional development and teacher learning communities. Now, although I still hold to these practices, I am asking deeper questions about the values and practices that guide the formation of an Ismaili Muslim educational system. I am asking what are the dispositions of educators within faith communities? I am asking about the extent to which faith based teaching is individually focused and to what extent it is communal or community oriented? I am asking how we

\textsuperscript{6} The role of the Academic Director is described as an educational leader to steward the direction and implementation of the secondary professionalization for their respective ITREB. The Academic Director is expected to work in partnership with key departments of the IIS to ensure alignment with the program and curricular mandate.

\textsuperscript{7} The Academic Director (AD) role commenced in 2009 with the start of the professionalization initiative. Prior to the AD role, my professional role with ITREB Canada was as the educational leader of the elementary (volunteer) educational system.
as educators develop curricular practices and ways of knowing and being that are
grounded in the Muslim tradition. And I am asking how responses to the questions
above can contribute to larger educational discourses of curriculum theory and practice.

The first decade of the Ismaili secondary religious education professionalization
can be considered as a beginning. And how we understand and act on this beginning
will, as Said (1978) points out, enable what is to follow. As both the researcher and the
Academic Director, it is my hope that this study will illuminate spaces of thinking and
dialogue about community, religious education, and curriculum inquiry and practice
within the context of a living tradition and also, within broader contexts in education.
*Living within the Hermeneutic Circle: Interpreting the Curricular Inquiry of Canadian
Secondary Ismaili Religious Education Teachers* is a study of educators who have
entered the journey of the professionalization of secondary religious education in the
Ismaili Muslim community and who are in the interpretive quest of what this beginning “is
made to stand for.” We have all entered this new beginning seeking a freshness to the
meaning of education, of religious education, of working within community, of our
identities as Shia Ismaili Muslims.

**Challenges of Religious Education in the Western Context**

What is the problem this study is inquiring into? I come back to Said’s thought
that how we understand and act on a beginning enables what is to follow. What then is
it that I wish to understand? If we are charged with the creation of a professional
religious education system for our community, two pertinent questions continually play
on my mind. The first one is, “What is it to teach religious education in the world of
today, particularly in the Western context, to Ismaili Muslim youth?” The second
question is, “What is it to teach and to engage in curriculum as a Muslim educator?”
How we understand the responses to these questions will inevitably shape how we
choose to act in our response to this charge. It would not be a difficult task to set up a
system of class offerings in various educational facilities, assign classes to teachers, and
provide a syllabus to impart to the students. In the Ismaili religious education system,
the weekly classes take place for two hours on weeknights and weekends. Additionally,
for the last thirty years, Ismaili religious education was taught by volunteer teachers. It
could easily be assumed, therefore, that we could continue this history of practice and simply substitute the volunteer teachers with professional, paid teachers. But this is not the nature of the endeavour being envisioned. In this respect, professionalization does not refer to the provision of remunerated teachers. Rather, it is a professionalization of a rigorous curricular and pedagogical approach to the education of a faith community, which is to say, a community of living tradition. This is not a simplistic model of educational delivery. Instead, it is a complex phenomenon of understanding the nature of faith in the lives of individuals, of a living tradition in the life of a community, and how education and specifically a civilizational and humanistic approach to Muslim education can sustain and give new and enduring expressions to a living tradition.

What is complex about this phenomenon is that once a question is raised such as, “What is it to teach religious education in the world of today?”, it gives rise to a plethora of subsequent questions such as: What should we teach in religious education and why? How do we teach about faith? What is the world of today? What is faith in the world of today? Questions such as these make this focus worthy of inquiry for a doctorate study. And although the study cannot possibly respond to such questions in full, it can look at and better understand how curricular and pedagogical efforts within a religious education setting can situate the place of faith as integral to the life of an individual and of a community, and how human beings can draw on their faith for strength, for insight, and for inspiration to respond to the challenges and the opportunities of the modern and post-modern world. The challenge facing us is how such a perspective can give life and vitality to a religious education experience for communities when the experience of living in a modern society can sometimes condition us to see faith as predominantly optional or outdated, sometimes an impediment to progress, and peripheral to our lives. An educational endeavour for Ismaili Muslim youth would need to respond to such challenges: of secularization and its forces in shaping worldviews; of conceptions of tradition and modernity as being incompatible and conflictual; and of how Islam is perceived or misperceived in the West.

Challenge of Secularization

The agent seeking significance in life, trying to define himself or herself meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions. . . Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of
my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. (Charles Taylor, 1991, p. 40-41)

Charles Taylor (2007) describes conditions of secularity in the following ways. First of all, public spaces are emptied of God or any other ultimate reality in the attempt to avoid one dominant religion in the public space. This emptying of religion from public spaces means various religions can co-exist and it also means the practice of religion is shifted to private spaces. Second, people are increasingly turning away from religious beliefs and practices that are seen to be determined through external authority. Furthermore, for some in a secularized environment, religiosity may be seen as irrelevant and unfounded. Third, belief is one option among many and God is no longer axiomatic. Taylor defines secularism as when all goals of human flourishing become conceivable without reference or connection to something higher. Whereas in the past, religion used to be embedded within society, in modern times and with the shift of religion from public to private spaces, Taylor claims we are developing a new sense of our social existence which is “disembedded” from society. The primacy given to individual autonomy has resulted in what Taylor refers to as a “buffered identity” which distances itself from external sources of authority and creates a deep sense of interiority where all powers rest within the individual. In an earlier work, The Malaise of Modernity (1991), Taylor outlines pressures emerging from conditions of secularity. These include the loss of meaning or a higher moral horizon, the domination of instrumental reason in shaping our lives, and the loss of freedom as citizens distanced from political vigour. He presents some thinking on dis-embeddedness and interiority which may result in a distancing from community and increasing dependence on the self.

Taylor acknowledges many people in the developed world would consider individualism and the ability to be able to choose for ourselves one of the most

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8 Also referred to as exclusive humanism or self-sufficing humanism
9 Taylor defines the term malaise as a “feature of our contemporary culture or society that people experience as a loss or decline” (p. 1) despite our progression and advancement as a civilization.
significant achievements of modern life. Individualism has freed human beings from higher orders that had previously restricted personal agency. The shift in moving away from the larger hierarchical order where each being had a place and a symbolic role has, however, resulted in a move towards instrumentalism where beings are viewed for their instrumental value rather than for their symbolic meaning. Thus, breaking free of these higher orders has also come with detachment from a larger moral horizon. This focus on the individual self has narrowed the connection to a broader vision or a higher purpose. There is that which Taylor refers to as the “disenchantment” of the world, that is, indeed, a loss of meaning or sacredness.

Taylor also observes the domination of instrumental reason has come to be a primary influence of how we act in this world. Efficiency, cost/output ratios, using resources for own individual benefit are actions associated with an instrumentalist perspective. When society lacks a sacred structure, and the order of things are no longer grounded in a larger moral horizon, society can be deconstructed and redesigned to serve the well being of individuals as driven by their needs. The danger of having instrumental reason as the pervasive influence in our lives is that we lose touch with the ephemeral, more permanent aspects of humanity and instead allow technology with its instant gratification to become our guiding force. In doing so, our choices are increasingly less grounded in moral deliberation and more grounded in industrial progress. Taylor cautions that this is not just a matter of changing individual perspective, but equally importantly, of also changing the perspective of the institutions we all inhabit. A related caution articulated by Mohammed Arkoun (2000) is the climate of ‘disposable thought’ generated by rapid progress where the study of man and society stand in sharp contrast to economic, technological and monetary concerns.

The third malaise is a loss of freedom or what Taylor refers to as “soft despotism” where participation in government, voluntary organizations and civil society institutions is on the decline. He proposes that alienation from public life can leave citizens to feel powerless and subject to the decisions or power of impersonal bureaucratic structures. Taylor points out that this does not necessitate choosing between modernity and morality. The nature of modernity and modern culture is far more complex than this. It is not a call to return to ‘they way things used to be’ or to deny the progress of
civilization. Rather it is to ask the question of “how to steer these developments towards their greatest promise and avoid the slide into the debased forms” (1991, p.12).

Taylor suggests we need to think more deeply about the promise of modernity and the opportunities which progress and development offer in rendering significance and meaning to human life. The immanent frame Taylor refers to and the transcendent order, which he defines as the belief that there is some higher good beyond human flourishing which offers possibilities for human transformation to take us beyond our current being (2007), do not necessarily exist as polarities. In fact, Taylor points out that the dyad of the immanent and transcendent is in itself a modern construction brought about by the conditions of secularity. He proposes that we can indeed seek, recognize and develop the interpenetration of the immanent and the transcendent, and while these in their relationships, efforts and practices remain complex and multi-layered, they are also co-constitutive of human flourishing. Taylor maintains that the search for fullness is characteristic of humans whether they are believers or non-believers and this search is taking form within secularized conditions in reconstitutions of spiritual life and new ways of existing in and out of relation with God. “In particular, I hold that religious longing, the longing for and response to a more-than-immanent transformation perspective . . . remains a strong independent source of motivation in modernity” (Taylor, 2007, p. 530). He expands on his belief in the transcendent interpellating spark in humans by calling attention to our indeterminate nature, that is, “we are active, building, creating, shaping agents” (p. 596); we have higher spiritual and ethical aspirations; and we seek a deeper sense of meaning and significance in aesthetic forms such as art and nature.

What Taylor is suggesting is of prime relevance to this study. Although secularization and its forces complicate the search for meaning, the experience of the sacred or the transcendent and the experience of the immanence of modernity are not necessarily opposing forces. Taylor is asking whether we need to think about new placements of the sacred and spiritual in relation to individual life. Here he is referring to the “buffered identity” and the move of spirituality from society to self. He presents the concept of authenticity which he describes as an individual’s inner voice providing the aspiration to find one’s true potential and realize one’s own way of humanity (1991, 2007, 2011). Within the authenticity perspective, individuals seek ways of believing that are chosen by them rather than imposed from the outside and that make sense to them.
in terms of their spiritual development. Primacy is no longer given to belief situated within a broad framework of church or religion but may be given to spiritual insight and feelings of value to the individual. We are, Taylor says, in a “pluralist world in which many different forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence fragilize one another” (2007, p. 531).

The challenge Taylor’s work presents for religious educators is not to move students fully from an immanent frame to a transcendent frame. He claims most of us are somewhere in between these two frames. Yet we need also be aware that the sense of religiosity may be less present in society than previous times where our sense of the sacred was more embodied—touched, felt, spoken, heard—through ritual and community. In modern times, the sacred passes through interpretations of the mind; modern enlightenment has brought about a disciplined sense of thinking that is theory oriented and has given agency to humans for their progress. As educators, then, we must be able to understand the complexity and pressures of the immanent and transcendent frames and interpret our experiences within this complexity and within the context and evolution of our times. What is less apparent in Taylor’s work is how to honor the spirit of authenticity in the search for the sacred and simultaneously honor or conceive of the sacred within community. That is a gap we as educators of a living tradition need to think about further.

The present study does not situate the study of faith as distinct from the study of life. I seek rather to understand how curricular and pedagogical lived experiences and the meanings attributed by Ismaili Muslim teachers can facilitate the integration of the immanent and the transcendent within the modern, secular realities of Western life. I want, as an educator, to understand how such integration can be given meaning within a horizon of important questions for the child so the child is in a position to cultivate an integrated world view, and such a view as that which enables joyful, meaningful, responsible participation in our world. Curricularist Dwayne Huebner (1961) asks a profound and relevant question. His query is whether we as educators and the children we work with, “love the world, the people and the beauty in it, enough to assume responsibility for it and to maintain it in some form of wholeness and to increase its wonder, productivity and incomprehensible beauty” (p. 11). Our responsibility emerges as a result of becoming curious about our world, being excited about our participation in
the world, feeling connected to those who share our time and space, in a way that we wish to continue our existence, the existence of others who share the world with us, and the existence of the world itself. Responsibility, Huebner offers, derives from meaningful, joyful participation in our world. In addition to understanding the complexity of the immanent and transcendent frames, our role as educators is also to inquire into how we present curriculum to our students such that it offers an inter-penetration of both frames and such that the students are able to enrich their worlds responsibly and joyfully and participate in the promise of their tradition within modern times, as individuals and community members.

**Challenge of Tradition and Modernity**

In the section above, we considered the challenge of the secularized, modern environment that may characterize the lives of Western Ismaili Muslim adolescents through looking at Charles Taylor’s work (1991, 2007, 2011) on secularization and the possibility of integrating a sense of sacredness and meaning within our daily experiences. With the progress of secular societies and the shift of religion from public to private spaces, there is an increasing focus on, and value of, the individual, reliance on instrumental reason and measurable gains to guide actions, and seeking out ways of religious life that are individual rather than community centred. These orientations, especially the first two, are also influencing educational policies and trends and accordingly, result in norms for adolescents in their educational experiences.

Furthermore, the social, economic, and technological transformations brought about by modernity have resulted in related shifts in thinking about authority, knowledge claims, and the societal influence of religious traditions (Arkoun, 2000; Kenney & Moosa, 2014). As a response, Taylor (1991, 2007, 2011) is offering a conception that does not polarize the immanent and transcendent realms and suggests instead that the aspiration for fulfillment is an integral part of the human experience and we can be open to both immanent and transcendent frames and to their inter-relationship. Taylor’s work invites us to rethink our conceptions of tradition within the modern environment and how we, as educators, may interpret this relationship.

In this section, I will look at a second challenge relevant to the study of religious education in the Ismaili Muslim context, namely, the conception of tradition and its
relationship to modernity, using the work of Aziz Esmail\textsuperscript{10}. Esmail (1995, 2000a, 2000b, 2001), supported by other thinkers\textsuperscript{11}, frames tradition as a dynamic force which requires social and intellectual engagement to re-interpret expressions of tradition in modern times whilst remaining committed to its distinct identity. The perspective being presented is one of tradition and modernity as being given expression through the enduring values of traditions and the potential of modernities.

The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) was established in 1977 with the key objective of promoting learning and scholarship in Muslim societies and cultures from both an historical and contemporary perspective. The academic pursuits of the IIS seek understanding of the relationship of Muslim societies to other societies and faiths\textsuperscript{12}. Programs at the IIS encourage an interdisciplinary study of Islamic history and thought in order to broaden and situate Islam as a faith and civilization amongst the study of societies and culture at large. In doing so, religious ideas are seen in relation to societal contexts and are not exclusively confined to theology. Speaking about the work of the IIS and its research and educational efforts, Esmail (2000b) poses the following questions about how Islamic thought can be understood today. First, he asks about resources Islamic thought can offer for surmounting the challenges of contemporary society. Second, he asks with what voice Islam can speak today to the hearts and minds of Muslims. And third and most importantly, he asks what Islamic thought has to say that is “distinctive to its historical experience, and yet deserving of the interest and attention of a technically advanced but humanely uncertain world of today” (p. 2).

\textsuperscript{10} Dr. Aziz Esmail is a scholar of Islamic and Ismaili Studies and previous Dean of the Institute of Ismaili Studies.

\textsuperscript{11} Scholars of Shia and Ismaili studies such as Aziz Esmail, Azim Nanji, Farhad Daftary and Shiraz Thobani will be drawn upon and referenced frequently through the course of this text. These scholars are pivotal thinkers in developing responses to the challenges of education in Muslim societies through their work with the Institute of Ismaili Studies.

\textsuperscript{12} Its stated mission is to promote the investigation of Muslim cultures and societies, both of the past and of the present, to explore the interaction of religious ideas within the broader aspects of modern life, but to do so with special attention to often neglected fields that contain the intellectual and literary expressions of esoteric Islam, including Shi‘ism in general and Ismailism in particular, in the full richness of their diversity (Walker, 2004, p. 164).
What is notable about the questions raised by Esmail is the active role he places on Islam as a tradition and heritage in pondering and responding to issues of modernity when so often, tradition and modernity are conceived as antithetical constructs with the former being considered static and fixed in time and the latter being dynamic and progressive. Esmail (2001) asks us to consider what is meant by the concept of tradition and proposes that tradition is not only a focus of study but a way or ways of looking at the world, of how we interact with one another, and of how we understand morality. It is a way of life or a culture. “And if we add to these elements, a faculty for distinguishing between the sacred and the profane (between ultimate and subordinate concerns) we obtain the concept of a religious culture” (p. 2). Like Taylor, Esmail challenges the polarization of religious and secular cultures and contends instead that all cultures, religious or “irreligious,” have some presence of the sacred and spiritual. In other words, sacredness or spirituality is not exclusive to the religious individual but is existentially present for all humanity. And if traditions are culturally rooted, then like cultures, traditions are also “dynamic, diversified and manifold” (p. 3). Furthermore, traditions are not merely replicated statically. Implicit within the practice of tradition is creation and change as tradition is applied to new ways of thinking and evolving cultural contexts.

Other Muslim writers have also theorized the construct of tradition or traditions interplaying with and also in part giving expression to our modern experiences. An illustration is Armando Salvatore (2009) who views traditions as “bundled templates of social practice transmitted, transformed and reflected upon by arguments and discourses” (p. 6) which depend upon the active role played by practitioners. He challenges the view of civilization and modernity as a single, monolithic conception and puts forth a counterview of civilization and modernity as not only plural, but also open to contact, interaction and exchange. Adopting such a view entails a reformulation of the notion of tradition.

Tradition thus conceived is essential to social action, communication and even cultural and institutional innovation. It would be difficult to conceive of the social bond without referring to the working of tradition demarcating a field of practice whose maintenance depends on adequate mechanisms of transmission and renewal of knowledge through generations. (Calhoun & Salvatore in Salvatore, 2009, p. 7)
Salvatore conceives of the Islamic tradition as a discursive tradition with a central concern for the common good and for axial transformations. In this view, the idea of transcendence is salient, both sociologically and theologically, as it speaks to the capacity of human beings to transcend the daily necessities of their world and project the potential of a different world from the here and now through the construction of values. The discursive and plural nature of traditions and modernities (Al-Azmeh, 2009; Arnason in Salvatore, 2009; Sajoo, 2008) invites an engagement of self-reflexivity and broader intelligibility which moves away from the divides and fractures caused by essentialism (Al-Azmeh, 2009). Furthermore, Salvatore (2009) advises that an adequate conceptualization of traditions, which includes their pluralities and also their internal contestabilities, is essential to opening up horizons for the theorizing of multiple modernities. The discursive quality of traditions and modernities in this approach is given life through traditions being drawn upon as resources to interpret social situations and to develop orientations to the world. Amyn Sajoo (2008) also contests the idea of a singular modernity arguing instead that the plurality of modernities calls forth considerations of “multiple sites where modernity is produced, the diversity of those who produce it and the variant processes that are involved” (p. 9). For Sajoo, the idea of plural modernities is promising because it comes to terms with the present whilst being aware of ethical and practical limitations of any hegemonic narratives.

Esmail (2000a) observes that the world today has a pluralism of traditions, which due to technological progress, are instantaneously available throughout the globe. The youth have immediate access to numerous traditions which may raise tensions and cause fragmentation in their identities. How does one maintain or choose anchorage in particular historical traditions? Are there specific threads amongst traditions to which one can adhere and in which one can find comfort and a sense of belonging? Can historical traditions sustain themselves or survive in such global conditions and, if not, from where would one draw one’s identity? The Report of the Task Force on General Education (2007) from Harvard points out,

The world today is interconnected to a degree almost inconceivable thirty or forty years ago. It is, at the same time, and in ways that are often obscured from the press and the culture of public life, a deeply divided, unstable, and uncertain world. (p. 3)
Referring to the impact of globalization on tradition and modernity, Patricia Crone (2003) believes progress, although inevitable, has led to a world that is fragmented, unstable and immersed in contemporary experience rather than a world that is coherent, enduring and rich in historical experience. This fragmentation can cause conflicts between parts of our identities as we may choose to adhere to one set of values in our professions, another set in our personal lives and yet another set in our special interests. Crone describes the modern individual as drifting rather than anchored in tradition thereby resulting in a struggle to form an identity. Fragmentation can also cause us to seek identity in one dimension of the divide in particular instances i.e. in secular, modern, cognitive renditions of the self, and in the other dimension in other instances i.e. in religious, historical, spiritual, and community affiliations. As a person of faith striving to be in the horizon of crucial matters, the struggle is to find or create a convergence between these divides and harness the potential of one and the inspiration of the other. Suha Taji-Farouki (2004) articulates that the heart of the struggle Muslims are experiencing in responding to the challenges of modernity lies in the definition of the place of the sacred as well as human reason and in maintaining a commitment to the role and implications of the transcendent. She supports and advances efforts made by Muslim thinkers who strive to “avoid the pitfalls and excesses of modernity, and to preserve the moral and cultural integrity of the Islamic worldview” or Islamic worldviews (Al-Azmeh, 2009) whilst upholding a “non-negotiable commitment to applying an ethical dimension to the exercise of reason and power” (p. 27). The response she suggests is to build a bridge between a demanding, continually changing present and the enduring values of the Muslim tradition. Further thought is required on how to navigate effectively a course of life which remains open to external influences yet also honors enduring internal faithfulness in our world today. This navigation necessitates an active role in interpreting traditions and modernities and engaging with dynamics of resonance as well as dissonance.

In alignment with the above, Esmail (2000b) suggests one of the issues of modernity requiring further contemplation is the meaning and place of the sacred in human society. He claims that a sense of the sacred has been the foundation of all great civilizations in history and it is this perception of the sacred in conjunction with social order and legislation that has provided the individual with a sense of meaning to
their lives. This meaning is now spoken of in theological language as spirituality. Esmail distinguishes spirituality from formal religion and specific practices of faith. He describes spirituality as that dimension of life that is related to “universal enigmas and foundations of human existence, and the aspirations and ideals to which these give rise” (p. 2). Spirituality is therefore related to meaning; the meaning of nature, of culture, of life, and this meaning is not an objective absolute entity that descends upon us from outside. “It is something that is developed as an aspiration, a continual search and realisation, in the very process of living” (p. 3). In this light then, Esmail posits that the role of the human mind or intellect is central to the ongoing realisation and expression of a faith tradition in time. Attention to the sacred or to the spirit, the role of the intellect, and the need for ongoing interpretation to give expression to tradition is specifically integral to the Ismaili Muslim tradition.

Esmail’s stance is foundational to this research study which will look at how the teachers’ curricular engagement and inquiry can redefine and help students realise their own agency in evolving and giving expression to their faith tradition, and such expression as is consonant with their times. He is suggesting that the search for the sacred in the everyday and using one’s intellect to understand tradition and redefine tradition within the modern experience, individually and with community, can possibly counter the challenge of viewing tradition and modernity as incompatible concepts. Esmail has observed that the relationship of youth to tradition is either one of dependence where they want to be told what to do or one of defiance where they wish to resist or want the power to choose what they will accept and follow (2000a). How will communities of living tradition ever sustain themselves if youth feel they have to choose between tradition and modernity? Esmail (1995) is proposing an alternative where tradition is continually given new forms and expressions as guided by the endeavour of interpretation and reinterpretation. In this sense, then, tradition is seen as a changing, evolving, developing phenomenon which can serve as the horizon or framework within which one can shape one’s thoughts, habits of feeling and conduct, and self-interpretation all within the modern experience.
Challenge of Perceptions of Islam in the West

I have looked at two of the three challenges facing the development of enabling responses to Ismaili Muslim education thus far. Conditions of secularity have shifted the presence and practice of religion from public spaces to private spaces. Although this shift enables the co-existence of multiple religions, it also raises questions of how people derive their understanding about various faiths and of how individuals and communities perceive the relationship between immanent and transcendent aspects of their lives. A second related issue is that of conceptions of tradition and modernity in their plural, discursive forms. The approach being argued is centred on the complexities of multiple modernities arising out of a plurality of traditions and shaped by multifarious experiences of modern environments. Consequently, how faith is perceived and understood, and for this study, how the faith of Islam is perceived and understood in its own pluralities, is of prime importance. This section will address perceptions of Islam in the West. It will also present efforts in education and Muslim education towards shifting perceptions from monolithic stereotypes perpetuated by mass media to more nuanced understandings of contextualization and the need for new approaches to Muslim education. Like the first two challenges, the topic of misperceptions of Islam is vast and has been the subject of multiple books and research studies. An acknowledgement of this issue, however, cursory as it is, is important because it has profound implications for how an education program is conceived and implemented for Ismaili Muslim adolescents living in the Western context.

Shiraz Thobani (2010) attributes Islam’s centrality and significance in modern times to the . . . long, historical engagement of Muslims, spanning some 14 centuries, with civilizations, cultures and societies across the globe. Islam is presented as the second largest religion after Christianity and is claimed to be the world’s fastest spreading faith. It is upheld by almost a quarter of the world’s population, defining the religious identities of over 1.5 billion people who reflect collectively a wide diversity of nationalities, ethnicities, linguistic groups and cultures. (p. 6)

And yet, for some who may be less familiar with Islam’s rich history and diversity of interpretations, perceptions of Islam are shaped through stereotypes, generalizations
and extreme behaviours perpetuated by the mass media. Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith (2009) share their concern that “growing numbers of Americans are expressing a sense of unease about Islam and that such apprehensions generally are founded not on their personal interactions with Muslims but on what they read in the press” (p. 17). In reality, Haddad and Smith feel this perception exists amongst individuals who have limited knowledge of Islam and limited contact with Muslims. They report on findings of a study which confirm that authentic face-to-face interactions between Muslim students and other students bring about increased knowledge and personal understanding. Furthermore, such interactions help to “dismantle stereotypes, emphasize commonalities, and make differences seem less threatening” (Sahi, Tobias-Nahi, & Abo-Zena in Haddad & Smith, 2009, p. 18). Haddad and Smith identify pertinent challenges facing the education of Muslim youth today. These include continuing to improve the quality of education on Islam, increasing efforts to educate the public on principles of Islam consistent with the message of the Qur’an (aligned to other Abrahamic faiths), and educating the youth to distinguish between principles of faith and cultural phenomena which have taken shape within family or particular geographical environments.

Susan Douglass (2009) adds to this concern in remarking how textbooks in the school system from the 1970s and 1980s are rife with errors and have contributed to the essentializing, othering, or exocitizing of Islam. Examples of erroneous representations include: misleading statements about the Qur’an and the authenticity and legitimacy of the revelation and the Prophet’s teachings; omissions about the similarities and continuities amongst Islam, Christianity and Judaism; the geography of Muslim regions being limited to a Middle Eastern or desert context; incomplete periods of Muslim civilizations in history; reinforcement of conventional stereotypes of the role of women or the spread of Islam by sword; and references to terms such as “extremist” or “fundamentalist.” Contributions of Islamic and Muslim civilizations to world history have been seldom recognized and are, for the most part, absent or ignored in the story of human history. Where world affairs are presented, these are limited to the Middle East and Islam is portrayed as “a struggle between religious traditionalism and secular modernism” (p. 90).

Douglass herself is active in the work to reform educational material and works in schools to develop and implement appropriate curricula for the teaching of religions. A
significant area of effort for her is to include the study of religions to enrich the teaching of history. “Uncovering the rich historical experience across cultures and the role of religion not just as a perennial source of conflict but a source of preserving and a vehicle for the transfer of scientific, artistic and technological advancements has opened up exciting ways for teachers and students in actively learning history” (p. 94). Douglass’ approach to Islamic education is not boundaried or distinct from mainstream education. “Both should strive to educate students who would pursue knowledge willingly and with an open spirit of inquiry, engage and serve society as responsible and well informed citizens and make sound individual life choices” (pp. 106-107).

In her study on Canadian Islamic schools, Jasmine Zine (2008) remarks that religious schools are often associated with intolerance and anachronism, and religious world views are often held in "contempt, as illegitimate, because of false dichotomies that privilege the ‘rationality’ of secular knowledge over the ‘irrational’ and ‘mystic’ knowledge that flows from religious or spiritual sources” (p. 7). She validates religious knowledge as one of multiple lenses or frames human beings employ to make sense of and create meaning about our world. Zine refers to Bleher (1996) who critiques secular models of education as being fragmented, not attentive to the inter-relationships of human nature, and in denial about transcendent or divine elements. She describes the fragile state of our global and postmodern world as replete with “ethnic and political divisions, sectarianism, and fragmented and impermanent notions of identity” where “the spectre of fundamentalism and extremism is the primary lens through which the Muslim community is viewed” (p. 16). In fact, Zine asserts fundamentalist and extremist groups are the exception rather than the norm, with their extreme views lacking religious legitimacy and resting entirely outside valid Islamic knowledge and praxis.

To counter such misperceptions and the hegemonic tendencies of the West, Zine calls for an Islamic education that will revitalize intellectual thought, elevate it to the level of global cultural critique and turn it towards “the task of providing concrete alternatives to Western discourses based on Islam’s spiritual principles of democracy and social justice” (p. 20). The kinds of intellectual engagement being sought that are rigorous and inspiring are represented by scholars such as Wadud (1992) and El Fadl (2001, 2002), who are known for advancing hermeneutical, pluralistic and spiritually inspiring discourses. Zine acknowledges that such intellectual revitalization must unfold within
the larger historical, cultural and social environment and must promote civic engagement. She draws on the work of Safi (1999) who proposes that one of the aims of the Islamic educational endeavor, which secularism has compromised, is to reposition divine revelation at the core of human consciousness. “Islamic education must encompass responsibility for family, community, and humanity as well as a vision for social and environmental change based on empirical and spiritual knowledge” (p. 28). Zine terms this movement from knowledge to action as Islam’s ‘living curriculum’ which seeks a unity of being between epistemological and ontological realms. In a similar vein, Nadeem Memon (2013) draws on the work of Al-Attas to describe the purpose of Muslim education as cultivating human beings both in relation to spiritual and societal responsibilities. He conceptualizes knowledge in education by highlighting two substantive aspects. The first is action, meaning it is insufficient to know something if one does not act ethically on what has been learned; knowledge must lead to action. The second aspect is the recognition of one’s place in the world in relation to others, community and society. This acknowledgement manifests itself in respect towards others, acting in a praiseworthy manner, and recognition of servitude to God.

Robert Hefner (2007) offers a broad and pluralistic conception of Muslim education. He states that “Islamic education is a total social phenomenon, in which knowledge, politics, and social networks interact in a complex and generative manner” (p. 2). He characterizes it, furthermore, by a plurality of actors, institutions and ideas. The last two centuries have witnessed a heightened pluralism within the Muslim community and beyond. This plurality is further complicated by the plurality of our world. Hefner reflects that today’s world is characterized by a “pervasive mingling” of people, ideas and objects. The boundaries of nations and communities are increasingly permeable. “The flow of people and ideas across social borders has fragmented identities, destabilized social hierarchies, and challenged all traditions of knowledge and faith” (p. 3). Within this global and pluralist view, he suggests that forms of Islamic education are not “merely institutions for teaching and training young believers. They are the forges from which will flow the ideas and actors for the Muslim world’s future” (p. 4). Hefner poses critical questions and dilemmas requiring due consideration: What is required to live as an observant Muslim in the modern world? Who is qualified to provide instruction in this matter? What is the purpose of Islamic education – Is it to
teach fidelity to a fixed and finished canon? “Or should religious education offer a high-minded but general religious ethics that looks outward on creation and encourages a plurality of methods for fathoming and engaging its wonder” (p. 35)? Rather than thinking of such debates as a regression into the past, he argues for a “civilizationally specific response to the challenges of pluralism, knowledge, and ethics faced by all citizens in the late-modern world” (p. 35).

Ali Asani’s effort to combat religious illiteracy is an example of one such response. Asani (2011) defines religious illiteracy as “the inability to conceive of religion as a cultural phenomenon intricately embedded in complex cultural matrices” (p. 1). Religious illiteracy results in defining a religion exclusively through its rites, rituals and festivals. Another tendency is attributing actions of individuals, communities and nations solely to religion rather than engaging in a thoughtful, analytical consideration of other contextual factors governing human behaviour. Where Islam is concerned, the widely held perception is that behaviours of any Muslim can be attributed to their religion instead of seeking more complex nuanced rationales within social, political and economic conditions.

Citing the work of the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Asani claims that we commonly conceive of religions as “homogenous, well-defined, and systemized ideologies, each with a distinctive set of beliefs and practices” (p. 12). Limiting the study of religion to textual and devotional approaches exclusively can be wholly constraining. Asani proposes instead a contextual approach to foster literacy about Islam where the Islamic tradition can be understood through its multiplicity of diverse interpretations reflective of the geographical, historical, cultural, political and social aspects of the respective region. Asani posits that religious interpretations are human constructions and although believers may understand certain truths to be divinely revealed, the meanings constructed from these truths are expressions related to a complex web of non-theological factors. According to Asani, one of the principal functions of curricula is to equip students to think critically about religion as a cultural phenomenon that is dynamic and prone to change. As discussed, contexts and traditions are continually changing and evolving over time. Paying close attention to the contexts of interpretation is an important intellectual strategy to better understand religion within the context of the society in which it exists as a human experience.
Misperceptions about Islam and Muslims are rampant in the West and may very well be an entrenched part of the realities of young Ismaili Muslim adolescents. If Islam is commonly associated with descriptors such as archaic, outdated, irrelevant, fundamentalist, narrow-minded, incompatible with modernity and progress, how can any individual take pride in their heritage and draw comfort and inspiration from their faith? Asani’s conceptualization of religious literacy is not only applicable to people who do not practice a faith tradition; it is equally applicable to people of a faith tradition who can then understand and broaden both their notion and articulation of religion and culture. Ismaili Muslim children, too, need to understand the rich diversity that exists amongst the Muslim ummah (community). They need to understand religion against the wider backdrop of culture and society. They need to develop awareness of the similarities and distinctions amidst the various communities of interpretations within Muslim traditions and within the Abrahamic traditions. And most importantly, they need to internalize, as Asani reminds us, that religions do not have agency, people do. Like other societies, Muslims are also in the process of seeking out a “satisfying and legitimate interpretation of religion in relation to a host of issues: nationalism, modernity, globalization, industrialization, and inter- and intrareligious and cultural phenomena” (p. 27). Through this search, a myriad of interpretations are emerging which range from progressive to reactionary; there is no single monolithic definition of Islam we can generalize and use as a sole reference point. Such is the complexity of the study of any faith tradition, and, in this case, the Ismaili Muslim tradition. Religion is a dynamic force central to the human experience and its interpretations are shaped by contexts and human subjectivity.

As a central question to educators, Thobani (2010) brings us back to how such emerging conditions as described above can give rise to a creative reconstruction of curriculum such that it does justice to a global and interdependent community in preparing the young for a sophisticated and thoughtful reading of the world. He reminds us that the pedagogic space is the most critical sphere of influence in the educational endeavor. It is at the classroom level that teachers consolidate and present their understanding of policy, their interpretation of the curriculum content, and their pedagogical aspirations as they stand before their students each day. Thobani describes this process as recontextualization. Through multiple refractions and
mediations, the “policy interpretations, curricular renderings and pedagogic translations combine dialectically to constitute a pedagogic discourse through which symbolic content comes to be formulated in the educational context” (p. 240).

In this section, I have presented some challenges facing Muslim education along with responses from scholars who seek to alter monolithic and generalized perceptions of Islam in favor of understandings of Islam representative of its plurality of approaches and interpretations. What is being suggested are approaches to Muslim education that nurture critical thinking, the cultivation of an inquiring mind and a revitalization of intellectual thought and engagement. These approaches are underpinned by a civic disposition recognizing the role of religion in preparing individuals for making positive contributions within society. Muslim education must do more than teach about traditions; it must nurture capacities to act ethically according to the values of the tradition within society. Muslim education efforts should also acknowledge and develop epistemologies that are representative of transcendence and immanence. Finally, Muslim education can develop ways of interpreting religion contextually where religion is not viewed as an isolated phenomenon but intricately woven into the fabric of our cultural and social experience. Such approaches to Muslim education will require creative conceptions of curriculum and sophisticated interpretations of curriculum within pedagogical spaces amongst teachers and students. The following section presents some thinking as to how religious education is being conceptualized for the pedagogical space and the possibilities religious education can hold for students in how they understand and interpret their worlds.

**Religious Education: Why It Matters**

Although the various discourses regarding Muslim education hold potent challenges and tensions, there are also hopeful, constructive discourses (some of which were introduced in preceding sections) regarding conceptualizing approaches to religious education. In this section, I will look at conceptions of how teachers and curricularists can inquire into approaches that influence the recontextualization of content in the classroom. Some of these perspectives include: religious education as opening up transcendent epistemologies for students; religious education as opening up
opportunities to challenge prevailing Western assumptions concerning religion and its practice; religious education as demonstrating a generous minded but critical openness to diversity in our pluralistic society; religious education as helping to render the world a safer place through the search for truth and goodness; and religious education as promoting personal and spiritual development to enable capacities of making judgements on matters of significance and meaning in life (Watson, 2012). It should be noted that the scholar perspectives presented below are drawn from the UK context where religious education is taught in the state schools as part of the formal curriculum using a non-confessional approach. This thinking is equally applicable, however, to the religious education context of this study where religious education within the living tradition of the Ismaili Muslim community is situated as a study of both faith and civilization by the IIS curriculum. Moreover, the preceding sections have argued for responses to challenges of religious education that are holistic, integrative and representative of a paradigm which embraces both the immanent and transcendent possibilities of human experience and recognizes a social and moral vision. The implications for curriculum inquiry are provocative and promising.

Brenda Watson (2012) distinguishes between religious education and religious indoctrination, asserting that, for the former, the educator must uphold a commitment not only to the subject matter, but also to the integrity of each student. For Watson, religious educators should promote open, critical, investigative learning for their students. She emphasizes that this openness needs to transcend the divide of cognitive/affective learning since true understanding involves the heart and the mind. When educational concern for the integrity of the student is in place, the teacher can then safely open up questions concerning truth(s) without indoctrinating. Watson encourages us to think about religious education as opening up a perspective on knowledge that is concerned with a belief in transcendence. The aim goes beyond merely imparting information; it

13 Unlike the UK, religious education is not taught within the Canadian secular setting. This means that some of the benefits, dispositions and capacities being presented in this section are important for Ismaili Muslim teachers to engage with for suitability and applicability to Ismaili Muslim education in the North American context.
engages students in meaning making on matters of significance to humanity. This engagement is critical in enabling society to accommodate diversity. Sometimes, religious teaching is also associated with dogmatism. Watson offers a term from Cush and Francis (2001), epistemological humility, which acknowledges the provisionality and partiality of all our presumed knowledge whilst not betraying reasonable trust in one’s own commitment. The perspective Watson is offering is that religious education, when rooted in the integrity of the students, has the potential to develop an epistemological outlook which moves away from the extremes of purely positivistic science and religious fundamentalism to an outlook which is centred on developing a spiritual and religious literacy; a literacy that enables a generous-minded, intelligent, sensitive consideration of the differences of others and to be able to situate one’s religious convictions comfortably amidst that plurality.

Trevor Cooling (2012) advocates for a constructivist approach in teaching religious education that acknowledges the role of belief and interpretation in human knowing. This hermeneutical pedagogy puts interpretation at the heart of learning and engages students with the process of constructing meaning from the knowledge acquired. Religious education, as a hermeneutical undertaking, integrates the processes of learning about and learning from religion to promote student development. Cooling suggest that priorities for religious education teachers should be to enable students to articulate their own worldview and draw on its resources to interpret knowledge they encounter in school curriculum as well as in other areas of their lives. Hermeneutical pedagogies should also enable students to understand alternate worldviews to their own and hear voices that may challenge or enrich their views. Such is the hermeneutical character of religious education—to encourage students to make meaning from their world views and those of others, and learn something about themselves so as to promote their development as individuals within community.

In his essay, “Citizenship and Human Rights,” Mark Pike (2012) claims that in order for students to understand the complexity of religious issues in the present, they need to understand the influence of religions in the past in shaping social and moral responsibilities, community involvement and liberal democracies. Religious education should not just help young people to consider how religious practices are viewed but should encourage them to look at different religious responses to secular and liberal
values and whether these values can be mediated and enacted through exclusively rational means. Pike challenges the view that reason and revelation are incompatible and does not see the two as distinct world views. He explains that any reason given to a situation is grounded in beliefs and presuppositions. “The Western, secular, liberal tradition of education is prone to overemphasize the rational and often forgets that commitments are held by individuals who are not entirely rational and emotionless any more than they are completely solitary and autonomous” (p. 116). Pike encourages a more holistic educational approach that acknowledges the intimate interweaving of our emotional, moral and spiritual selves with our rational nature.

Tony Eaude (2012) observes social and cultural changes are resulting in greater forms of diversity in terms of culture, religion, and family structures. Information technology increases diversity through making accessible information and exchanges globally. In Western society, there is a growing emphasis on individual choice, including questions of personal morality. He quotes White (1997) in saying “the problem is not moral decline, but a certain lack of confidence about how we should behave and what we should believe” (p. 122, emphasis in original). In suggesting a response to this lack of confidence, Eaude makes reference to a study by Hay and Nye (1998) who examined spirituality as a search for meaning and connectedness. This search happens through making sense and making meaning of experience where spirituality is seen as ‘relational consciousness,’ awareness of self, awareness of others, awareness of the environment, and awareness of a Transcendent Other. Such a quest is an engagement with the world, not a distancing from it, since it requires the capacity to engage critically with questions related to identity, meaning, purpose and what it means to be human and lead a good life, both in theory and practice. It requires deliberation with controversial and difficult issues, personally, socially or globally. It requires a recognition that all human beings will be faced with issues that are hard to comprehend whether they pertain to not getting one’s own way or making judgements on the ethics of science or business. Asking questions, understanding that there are not always simple answers to dilemmas, and developing a willingness to dialogue and open our learning to diverse views, are all associated with spiritual development. Eaude’s perspectives clearly show spirituality as relationship to the world rather than a detachment from it.
Rosemary Woodward (2012) advances a perspective about relating to the world through community cohesion as integral to religious education. Community cohesion, defined as the community working towards a positive and common vision for society, does not begin with the development of interpersonal skills, but rather the development of each individual’s confidence in their own position within society. A central concern for religious education should therefore be to equip the individual with strong roots, that is, a sense of self-worth, understanding and pride in their own cultural heritage and to value their position within this heritage so they can begin to appreciate the positions of others. Developing confidence in one’s beliefs of their faith tradition and the ability to share these beliefs in ways that are respectful and non-threatening with others enables children to begin to examine the opinions and beliefs of others in positive ways. Woodward highlights the importance of feeling “rooted” in one’s own tradition and feeling confident in one’s ability to make a positive contribution within society before one can establish a similar sense of relational consciousness with others.

Religion, as a particular system of thought and practice separate from the secular sphere is a fairly recent phenomenon in the Western context remarks Marius Felderhof (2012). He asks: What does it mean to have faith? Is it adherence to certain social institutions or engaging in certain traditional practices that are called ‘religious’? To which he responds, “In its widest meaning to have faith is to live relatively purposefully, confident that the world has some kind of meaning and sense. So to live without faith is effectively to be in despair i.e. to have no overarching sense of purpose” (p. 147). Felderhof’s point is that it is not adequate to simply make sweeping generalizations of whether one has faith or not. Rather, it is important to probe into the overarching sense that people refer to in their thought and practice and consider the extent to which this narrative articulated. For some, there is a deliberate rootedness in tradition. For others, this rootedness comes from shared communal life, which in itself is rooted in a tradition (for Western contexts, the Christian tradition). Without a conscious participation in traditions, the implicit faith that informs life may be dynamic and emotionally mature but may not necessarily be cohesive and coherent. This can sometimes lead to a sense of life which is more fragmented and can be described as contradictory, eclectic and lacking in an overarching narrative. A fractured overarching narrative can lead to existential dis-ease or malaise as Taylor (1991) has articulated. The impulse to form an
integrated construction arises from a basic human desire to lead a happy, ordered life. Felderhof is calling for self-consciousness about what it means to live and to act faithfully within the world and for the world. “Religious education is designed to represent religious interests and religious forms of understanding that are marked by a decentering from the self, and focus on a form of human flourishing uniquely occasioned by existing ‘before God’ or before the transcendent.” Felderhof conceives of religious life not as a theory but as a way of being in the world which demands from the individual certain dispositions, virtues or strengths of character. “Religious education is about the endeavour to learn what religious life has to contribute by seeing oneself as a responsible self rather than a spectator devising theories about human nature and the world” (p. 155).

The perspectives presented in this section are important to ponder as they speak to what the study of religion can offer to children in preparing them to live confidently, holistically, and pluralistically in the world. Because these perspectives come from scholars who are working in non-confessional religious education programs, the emphasis is not on learning specific doctrines of a tradition. What is being offered is how learning about diverse religious ways of thinking and living enables students to understand and respond to complex issues of our world; issues that may not necessarily be responded to by empirical knowledge alone. Furthermore, these perspectives indicate that religion can facilitate a productive and positive engagement with the world rather than an abstract distancing from the world. Civic responsibility, and contribution to and confidence in community are also featured as perspectives that may be vital to religious education pedagogical spaces. Through these perspectives, religious education is seen as furthering knowledge of one’s self and one’s world and increasing awareness of the transcendent elements of our existence.

From Challenges and Opportunities to the Consideration of Responses

“Beginnings have to be made for each project in such a way as to enable what follows from them” (Said, 1978, p. 16). How will this beginning of the secondary religious education professionalization in the Ismaili Muslim community enable what is to
follow? How will the implementation of the IIS Secondary Curriculum by its teachers create new and inspiring expressions of this living tradition for the students using the potential of the human intellect? How can curriculum inquiry represent enduring values of the tradition within our modern context in a manner that incites the students’ joyful, meaningful, responsible participation in the world? How can a curricular endeavour of religious education enable our students to draw upon their living tradition to enrich both immanent and transcendent elements of their life experiences? These are questions providing the impetus for this study.

To craft an inquiry of curriculum and its interpretation into lived experiences of teachers and students, we can start by observing environmental forces within which the curriculum is taking life and consider that to which the curriculum may be responding. In this chapter, I have presented three issues influencing religious education in the Ismaili Muslim context. Conditions of secularity and modern progress have resulted in religion being less present in public spaces. Religion is distanced from public life and this unfamiliarity and lack of contact with practice of the faith may be interpreted by our youth as religion not being valued as part of human flourishing and societal progress. This detachment of the sense of sacred from human flourishing may also lead to conceptions of the individual being associated with self-advancement rather than community contribution. Additionally, pluralistic conceptions of traditions and modernities are complex and require sustained intellectual and interdisciplinary engagement. These are not the kinds of conceptions of religion and particularly of Islam being generated in public spaces by the media. Alternate voices are needed to reveal and nurture broader understanding of the diverse interpretations of Islam.

Studies within broader discourses of non-confessional religious education presented earlier are exploring how the study of religion can open up transcendent ways of knowing for students, enable students to engage with critical questions of human existence, and develop an awareness of themselves in relation to community and society. Studies within Muslim education are seeking to legitimate epistemologies of religious thought, redefine perceptions of Islam which are more representative of its diverse interpretations rather than narrow extremes, and maintain the centrality of the tradition for the young members of the community. In the present study, I seek an understanding of how a living tradition can be taught so as to provide students with a
rootedness in the enduring values of tradition and how it can be taught as a civilization such that students can gain an awareness of the transcendent within the immanent experiences of their lives. I want to understand how curriculum inquiry can provide insights for students to develop commitment to a specific faith tradition and draw on the values of their tradition as resources to engage, interpret and give ethical expression to the multiple modernities of their worlds.

**Study Description**

*Living within the Hermeneutic Circle: Interpreting the Curricular Inquiry of Canadian Secondary Ismaili Religious Education Teachers* is a study that strives to understand how educators of a living tradition interpret and enact their curricular, pedagogical and community responsibilities of religious education for Ismaili Muslim adolescents. Our students are living in a society that demands achievement, access to global knowledge, and a continuous definition and redefinition of the self. Although our students attend the weekly religious education classes in modest numbers and participate in congregational services, some regularly, others less so, it is unclear if and to what extent they feel enabled, knowledgeable and confident to draw on their Ismaili Muslim tradition to respond to both the pressures and the opportunities of their contemporary world. The challenges outlined earlier of secular forces, tradition and modernity, and misperceptions of Islam are challenges faced not only by the students, but also by the educators and the larger Ismaili community. The community has institutionalized its secondary religious education programming as an evening or weekend program taught by professional teachers. It is now in deliberation about how policy, organizational, curricular and pedagogical directions can materialize the ideals being sought amidst the complex issues these very directions create.

From the discussion above, there is a sense that our globalized world is creating polarizations and fragmentations in our understanding, our experiences and our identities. This dispersed experience can result in perceiving the world in binaries: individual/community, religious/secular, tradition/modernity, Western/Islamic, us/them. This chapter has explored voices of scholars who are constructing alternatives to polarized thinking and instead, are proposing alternative paradigms based on ‘wholeness’ instead of ‘totalism’ and ways of thinking that are resonant with the curricular
aspiration of the study. Drawing on Eric H. Erickson’s work, Esmail (2000b) explains totalism as a unifying system of thought which dictates and takes an absolutist view as its reference point. A totalising ideology draws firm, impenetrable boundaries between its own world and other worlds, thereby creating opposing dichotomies between worlds and views. An ideology based on wholeness, in contrast, denotes a sense of interconnectedness between the universe, fellow human beings, and the self. There is a unity to the individual rather than a fragmented existence. In today’s world, a fundamental challenge for educators to consider is how to counter disconcerting divides and instead, engage paradigms and practices that unify and result in coherent, meaningful, rich perspectives of our world for our youth.

Appropriate responses to the challenges discussed in this chapter are responses that will give life to faith traditions in ways characteristic of the ‘wholeness’ ideology, thus creating a sense of interconnectedness, a relational consciousness, between the students’ sense of self, their society, and the universe including a sense of the Divine. It is important to note, however, the complexity of proposed responses. Responses to religious education must enable youth to not only find meaning and purpose in their world through their tradition but also to develop the tools to seek meaning and create new expressions that continue to sustain their living tradition. To actually enact such responses is not easy to do. One can say we need to integrate the transcendent and immanent, that tradition is continually evolving and requires a genuine intellectual engagement to give it new expressions, and that religion needs to be understood in a multifaceted, contextual way. These ideas are far reaching aspirations and well worth further study. But they are also significant shifts in ways of knowing and ways of being and therefore are complex processes requiring rigorous efforts to continually understand and interpret experience within such paradigms. This research study is an inquiry into how teachers are creating conditions and spaces for curricular, pedagogical and communal practices that are integrative, enduring and interpretive for themselves and their students. I will endeavour to gain insight as to the understandings and interpretations informing the teachers’ experiences and encounters with curriculum, their students, and each other. I will also seek to gain insight as to the tensions and ambiguities of implementing responses to challenges and what new challenges arise from that effort. Through the inquiry, the aspiration is to gain deeper awareness and
knowledge as to the questions posed earlier: What is it to teach religious education in the world of today, particularly in the Western context, to Ismaili Muslim youth? And, what is it to teach and to engage in curriculum as a Muslim educator?”

This study inquires into how religious education teachers from the Secondary Teacher Education Program (STEP) in the Canadian Ismaili Muslim community engage with the Institute of Ismaili Studies’ (IIS) Secondary Curriculum to shape their curricular, pedagogical and community interpretive practices. The study specifically seeks to understand the perceptual, interpretive and practical life-worlds of curriculum inquiry and practice of the teachers as these lifeworlds may be:

• represented by, and with the text of the IIS curriculum;
• experienced and expressed as processes, constructions and reconstructions of thinking, interpreting and acting by the secondary teachers;
• create and foster conversations of curriculum understanding and action in the teacher community; and
• develop a practice of curricular inquiry which may influence the teachers’ classroom and pedagogical practices.

This study is conducted at an important historical time for the Ismaili community with the shift from a volunteer to a professional teacher model for secondary religious education. The STEP teachers have had only one to five years of in-service experience at the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB) for Canada. They are, as mentioned previously, graduates of a newly developed Masters level pre-service program at the IIS and Institute of Education (IOE). They are now teaching in six regions across Canada with educational support from their curriculum mentors and are grappling with the understanding and interpretation of a curriculum designed centrally for global implementation. It is the responsibility of the teachers to adapt this global curriculum to their regional contexts with the support of a new in-service program of evolving curricular standards and practices provided by their curriculum mentors. The challenge lies in four areas. The IIS curriculum content is diverse, high-level and complex, touching culture, ethics, art and aesthetics, literature, intellectual traditions, philosophy and other disciplines of the humanities. The teachers are required to contextualize this global curriculum to their regional contexts. Teacher curriculum mentors, while experienced and proficient in teaching and education, are also
contending with a new curriculum and curriculum structure. And the teachers are implementing the IIS curriculum with Canadian adolescents who are deeply steeped in the secularized, non-religious cultural norms of the Western context and are faced with the challenge of teaching a faith tradition in a way where children perceive living their tradition as integral and enhancing to their lives.

The main research question the study will address is, “How is curricular inquiry lived in the Canadian secondary religious education Ismaili teacher learning communities?” The study will investigate several themes and sub-questions associated with the main research question which include the following:

a) Understanding the curricular intentionality as embedded in the IIS Secondary Curriculum and its interpretive influences and epistemologies: How do the teachers interpret the intent of the IIS Secondary Curriculum for the education of Ismaili Muslim adolescents?

b) Understanding modes of curricular intentionality and interpretive lifeworlds of secondary teachers: How are the secondary teachers interpreting and creating meaning about living within a faith tradition from the IIS curriculum materials?

c) Understanding how teachers develop classroom pedagogies and interactions reflective of their interpretive modes and curricular understanding: In what ways are the teachers’ curricular interpretations influencing their classroom experiences? In what ways are the teachers’ classroom experiences and the students’ lifeworlds influencing the teachers’ curricular interpretations?

d) Understanding how teachers are constructing communities of curricular inquiry within their classroom and within themselves: How are secondary teachers interpreting and creating conditions for curriculum inquiry within their learning communities?

e) Understanding how teachers are living within the hermeneutic circle as it pertains to their experiences: How are the teachers creating a unity of meaning (the horizon of the living tradition) from their lived experiences (the parts) of curriculum inquiry with text, contexts, students, and colleagues?

The study will situate itself within a qualitative interpretive research paradigm, and will use hermeneutical phenomenology as applied in the field of curriculum inquiry and curriculum theory as its core methodological and theoretical framework. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach will be employed to study the teachers’
experiences as to how they are making meaning of the IIS curriculum and how these interpretations translate into their lived practices. It is my intention in this study to make an original contribution to research on how faith traditions can influence curriculum theory and curriculum inquiry. This contribution can be of benefit to both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs in cultivating inquiry and interpretive oriented approaches to curriculum. Why such approaches are critical to education in our current times is because curriculum is no longer solely about knowledge acquisition but also about knowledge management and knowledge integration. With the over-abundance of knowledge in today’s globalized world, education is increasingly focused on the value of knowledge for the individual and for society at large. Curriculum inquiry raises our consciousness as educators to the two enduring questions of curriculum; what am I teaching and why is this important for my students?

Although many forms of curricula have been theorized and articulated in the extant field of curriculum studies, teaching practices in schools and other educational settings seem to adhere to the model of teacher as curriculum deliverer or implementer. This study situates itself within the context of a particular faith tradition and argues that if education is to be transformative (rather than transmissive or transactional), then curriculum understanding and content will require a particular type of engagement and inquiry from teachers (and by extension, from students). This engagement or inquiry views curriculum content as a temporal event, “lived” and “argued” in time, within diverse contexts of the community. I ask the question, “Why this content for the youth of the community and why now?”

One significant benefit to the secondary teachers, students and other professional staff and stakeholders is the opportunity to explore and redefine the role of educators, of Ismaili Muslim educators, as not simply teachers implementing a curriculum, but as educators who participate as actors and agents of a living tradition, by actively questioning, probing, interpreting, and researching the various linguistic, historical, cultural, traditional and social texts and activities borne to them in time. As such, this study proposes an act of hermeneutic responsibility. Curriculum is not limited to the textual materials of time; it finds extensions of understanding in their students, their community, their colleagues, their classrooms. The benefit of the study is less about how to teach a curriculum and more about conceptualizing understanding and the
process of interpretation to which a faith community participates, belongs and in which it is situated. The idea of knowledge and learning being provisional, partial, contextual and most importantly, requiring an active and ongoing engagement from the individual is relevant to all educational stakeholders and is an underpinning value of the Ismaili Muslim tradition. Furthermore, the notion of the pursuit of knowledge being an integral aspect of the practice of faith is also rooted deeply in the Muslim tradition.

The assumptions and propositions being brought to this study are as follows: First, a curricular paradigm for Ismaili Muslim education must pose religious education not as a distinct entity, but one that enables participation in the modern world; second, as tradition and modernity are both dynamic, evolving concepts, the ongoing pursuit of knowledge and the engagement of the human intellect is central to the curricular enactment; third, the quest for the transcendent or a larger good can inspire human beings to continually develop their potential beyond who they are; and fourth, a paramount aim of a curricular effort in religious education is to facilitate an ethical, enriched engagement with the world. A living tradition is not an entity imposed externally which shapes thinking and behaviour; it is a conscious way of knowing the world and a relational way of being in the world. This way of knowing and being is grounded in the living tradition and is given expression through hermeneutical processes of experience, understanding, inquiry and application.

**Organization of Thesis**

The present research is an interdisciplinary study and as such, is located in a cross section of discipline areas, namely in education and curriculum theory, hermeneutics, Islam and Muslim education. Curriculum inquiry will provide the central intersection point for the discussions which will be interwoven as relevant to the inquiry. Chapter One, *A Hermeneutical Act of Beginning*, sets the stage for the study in raising challenges present in the Western context when considering a program of religious education for communities of living tradition. These challenges include the forces of secularization and its impacts, conceptions of tradition and modernity, and perceptions of Islam in the West. In addition to presenting challenges, the chapter also discusses principles and approaches to religious education that are integrative of the immanent
and transcendent, that continually seek expressions consonant with modern times through ongoing interpretation, and that foster a moral engagement with the world through human potential and through enduring values of the tradition.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four will continue to provide the interdisciplinary backdrop to the study. Chapter Two, *The Hermeneutics of a Living Tradition*, will look at the Ismaili community as a community of living tradition and will present a historical overview of the centrality of interpretation as an essential principle of the Shia Ismaili faith. This historical overview will illustrate how interpretive efforts over time have remained a central tenet in giving the living tradition vitality and in how the Qur’anic revelation has been interpreted and expressed. The interpretive quest highlights the esoteric nature of the living tradition, the need for an authoritative guide to interpret the revelation for the community according to the time, and the importance of engaging the dialectic of revelation and reason as a responsibility of the believer. Arising from these ideals, four interpretive principles are being presented as ways of articulating our interpretive efforts within contemporary times: unity of being; epistemological humility; community realization; and attunement to beauty and infinitude. It is suggested that these interpretive principles have significant implications for the ongoing, lived curricular inquiry being undertaken.

Chapter Three, *Curriculum as Hermeneutical Inquiry*, will present a conception of curriculum inquiry drawn from phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions in curriculum theory. The emphasis on understanding curriculum as has been developed through the reconceptualist movement in curriculum studies is discussed. Essential themes of hermeneutical phenomenological inquiry are elaborated upon using the work of scholars who have contributed to the curriculum field in these areas. Dwayne E. Huebner, a founding scholar of the reconceptualist movement which is aimed at ‘humanizing’ curriculum work, is looked at for his conception of transcendent possibilities of curriculum. The goals and approaches of the IIS Secondary Curriculum are also discussed. The chapter is intended to show a relationship between Huebner’s curricular conceptions, the goals of the IIS Secondary Curriculum and hermeneutical phenomenological curriculum inquiry. Of particular import are the common themes of the presence of the transcendent in daily experience, seeking knowledge and meaning through interpretation from a plurality of epistemological sources, awareness of the
temporal nature of understanding, and developing the capacity to envision and act upon possibilities for the betterment of the world.

Chapter Four, *A Hermeneutical Research of Community Transformation*, presents the methodological framework for the study. The hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm is discussed, placing emphasis on research for community transformation and well being and the art of understanding and interpretation as the hermeneutic act. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical principles of pre-understanding and historicity, reason and authority in tradition, and the integration of various knowledge forms for self-understanding and application are discussed for their relevance to the study. The Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition and its emphasis on inquiry and interpretation is also drawn upon using the work of Aziz Esmail. With this backdrop, the research design, methods and research processes are explained. Attention is given to how these elements were designed and experienced hermeneutically throughout the research process. The chapter shows the hermeneutical circle being enacted through consideration of parts of theory, research design, and context and relating these parts to the whole which is the curricular inquiry being undertaken by teachers of a living tradition.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven are a presentation and analysis of selected data excerpts which illustrate and reveal the lived meanings teachers are attributing to their curriculum inquiry. Chapter Five, *Curriculum as Consciousness: A Quest towards a Unity of Being*, begins with an exploration of how teachers are perceiving the context of their students and the relationship between the secular environment and faith. Some of the struggles perceived by the teachers include students dichotomizing their experiences between daily life and their conception of faith, and the integration and articulation of identities. The teachers speak about how they are conceiving of the idea of a living tradition, of curriculum, and specifically, of the intentionality of the IIS Secondary Curriculum. The chapter concludes with insights as to how teachers are developing their own relationality with the text and with the living tradition as a part of their interpretive process. The framing idea used for this chapter is cultivating a curricular consciousness (or faith awareness) in everyday lived moments to enhance an individual’s unity of being.
Chapter Six, *The Pedagogical Encounter: A Search for Epistemological Humility*, focuses on the curricular inquiry within the pedagogical encounter. Here, teachers recount the aspirations of their role and the kind of far-reaching change they desire to make for the community through this vocation. The challenges and complexities involved with the education of a living tradition are brought to life through the teacher’s lived experience descriptions of dissonances between the teachers’ understanding of the curricular intentionality and the students’ receptivity to the curriculum. Hermeneutic phenomenological narratives of how each teacher is creating interpretive spaces for meaning making with their students are presented. The chapter suggests how a disposition of epistemological humility, that is, seeking knowledge from a plurality of sources, is central to the interpretive endeavor.

Chapter Seven, *Individual Insights into Mysteries of Community Realization*, presents the complexity of living in community with students and amongst teachers in the teacher learning communities. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss how the teachers are interpreting what it means to be in community within a classroom space and what the concept of relationality means between teacher and student in this context. The second part of the chapter reveals some of the vulnerabilities and tensions brought about by diversity within the teacher learning communities. The discussion progresses to the potential held by the learning community and how we can awaken this latent potential in our curricular inquiries. The chapter concludes with consideration of the contemplative dimension to inquiry which may offer access to creativity and beauty necessary for uncovering insights into mysteries of community realization.

Chapter Eight, *Living within the Hermeneutic Circle: An Interpretive Quest towards Beauty and Infinitude*, is the concluding chapter to the study. In this chapter, I present my own interpretive quest as the researcher, the author of the study, and as an actor in the curricular pursuit. Next, the teachers’ interpretive quest is presented organized by curricular inquiries of the IIS curriculum text, the pedagogical encounter and the learning communities in classrooms and amongst colleagues. For each of these sections, our interpretations are summarized and considerations for further areas of inquiry and action are proposed both for the specific context of the study as well as for broader educational purposes. The study is concludes with revealing insights as to how
attunement to beauty and infinitude can sustain and give vitality and possibility to living traditions.
Chapter 2:

The Hermeneutics of a Living Tradition

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the research study, *Living within the Hermeneutic Circle: Interpreting the Curricular Inquiry of Canadian Secondary Ismaili Religious Education Teachers*. In considering how to approach an initiative of religious education for a community of living tradition, in this case the Ismaili Muslim community, three environmental or societal challenges were articulated. First, Ismaili Muslim adolescents are living in an environment with pervasive secular forces where the practice of faith takes place in private spaces and whilst this situation allows for several faiths to co-exist, it can also create a perception of religion as not being an integral part of secular life. Second, tradition may be perceived as a fixed, static entity in time and therefore may be seen as an impediment to modernity. Conceptions of traditions and modernities as being diverse and dynamic are complex constructs which require new paradigms reflecting the interdependency of these phenomena rather than their division. Third, Western perceptions of Islam can be disabling towards Muslims when associated with stereotypes and generalizations perpetuated by the media. There is a need to replace this lack of understanding with well informed, historically grounded views that reflect the immense diversity of beliefs, practices and behaviours within and amongst Muslim communities.

The chapter was not limited to presenting these challenges but also introduced thinkers who are responding to such challenges through creating perspectives and paradigms that acknowledge the complexity of faith, and of the sacred and religious experience in the lives of individuals and community within Western society. The objective of introducing these thinkers was not to suggest solutions to these challenges but rather to acknowledge that responses are being constructed, with an intention of this study being, to better understand how educators craft, implement and negotiate such responses in their curricular practices, and also gain a nuanced understanding as to the
difficulties associated with such complex responses. Two questions were raised in the first chapter. “What is it to teach religious education in the world of today, particularly in the Western context to Ismaili Muslim youth?” And also, “What is it to teach and to engage in curriculum as a Muslim educator?” In Chapter One, I discussed the first question and provided some frames for thinking about environmental challenges facing the Ismaili Muslim community which bear consideration for educational and curricular processes. The second question, “What is it to teach and to engage in curriculum as a Western Muslim educator?” will be the problematic raised for this second chapter. The aim of Chapter One was to situate the research within the current environmental context of the study and articulate relevant challenges and responses being explored. Chapter Two will situate the research study within the Ismaili Muslim tradition and here, I will introduce salient educational implications arising from Shia and Ismaili thought on interpretation and how these perspectives continue to evolve over time through a historical overview of the community’s living tradition.

The question of what does it mean to engage in curriculum as a Western Muslim educator arises from deeper questions of how a living tradition shapes, influences and is integrated into my quest for a unified life narrative. For most of my educational life, I saw myself as an educator living and practicing in the Western context. I had always conceived of my Ismaili Muslim identity as being something separate from my profession. I was the teacher, teacher educator, educational leader and then at other personal times, I was Ismaili. It was only over the last decade when I came to learn more about Islam and Ismaili tradition that I began to question this bifurcation for myself of the educational work we are doing and my personal commitments. Similarly, are we teaching our youth about our living tradition or are we teaching our youth about living our tradition? And if are doing both and we assume the latter requires the former, shouldn’t our educational and curricular processes and practices be reflective of our living

14 It should be noted that the historical overview presented is not from a specialist perspective and is not intended to be a work of historical scholarship. Drawing on secondary sources, the aim of the historical overview is to provide a broad historical context to the interpretive inquiry being pursued in this study.
tradition, of Ismaili Muslim values? I am not in the least suggesting we disregard educational research and knowledge from secular disciplines. Instead, I am asking about alternate ways to understand and interpret education that may influence our approaches to curriculum whether we teach in the secular education context or the religious education context. I am also inquiring into ways we understand and draw upon knowledge from our tradition as an act of reinterpreting tradition for the benefit of educating our youth. In the previous chapter, I looked at the complexities of social challenges and responses impacting the religious education of a community which will inevitably influence curricular development and engagement. I will now add a further layer of complexity by looking at how interpretations of living traditions, and specifically, the notion of interpretation in the Ismaili Muslim tradition, are central to the curricular endeavour.

Understanding the Idea of a Living Tradition

Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) defines a living tradition as an “historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition” (p. 222). MacIntyre also laments the segmentation of human life caused by modernity and points out how the partitions between the various parts of our lives, namely, work, leisure, private and public life, even childhood and old age, impede the experience of a unified life. There is a tendency to see life as series of individual actions and episodes rather than a larger unifying horizon. He writes about a concept of self whose unity resides in the narrative of one’s life and calls attention to the interrelationships between our intentional thoughts and actions, our social settings and our historicity as humans. According to MacIntyre, we are always in the context of narrative histories that have a past, middle and end. And hence, how we choose to live our lives, what he calls intelligible or unintelligible actions, is largely dependent on how we understand the histories into which we find ourselves placed, as well as the social contexts of the present. What brings unity to the narrative of our life then is the quest for good, the quest for what is good for me and what is good for mankind. The nature of this quest is that it is only in looking for the conception of the good that we come to understand the goodness that we are seeking. In addition, the goal of the quest is not predetermined and it is through engaging in the quest that we understand the goal. “A
quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge” (p. 219).

Why the above is important to the discussion of a living tradition is that, according to MacIntyre, it is the pursuit of the good or goods which give a tradition its particular point and purpose. This pursuit takes place within a tradition through generations, and hence, an individual’s pursuit for good is embedded within the larger historical narrative of the tradition and influenced by the social context and roles the tradition and society defines for the individual. Concerned with the essential need and purpose of virtues in creating the unified life narrative for individuals, MacIntyre points out the importance of having an adequate sense of the tradition to which one belongs or which one confronts. Having an adequate sense of tradition “manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present.” Because living traditions continue narratives yet to be completed, they “confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possesses any, derives from the past” (p. 223).

In understanding the living tradition of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, it is helpful then to ask the question of the quest for good and how this quest has taken place historically and continues to take place within current social contexts. As Sajoo (2010) reminds us, faith traditions are seeking philosophies that enable adherents to face and respond to daily life rather than mythical ethics or virtues beyond the reach of the human being. Given the hermeneutic emphasis of this study, I will examine in this chapter how inquiry and interpretation have been integral principles of the Shia Ismaili Muslim community historically in shaping philosophies and religious thought. Through looking at specific historical instances and personalities, readers will be provided with an understanding of interpretive practices that have guided the quest for good of adherents of the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition. The argument being presented is the centrality of interpretation within this living tradition which will be further developed in subsequent chapters to suggest an interpretive approach to curriculum inquiry for the teachers and for their students as a contemporary manifestation of this tradition.

The Ismailis constitute one of the communities of interpretation that make up the Shi’i Muslim community whose long and eventful history dates back to the formative
period of Islam when various communities of interpretation were formulating their doctrinal positions (Daftary, 2007). The formative period of Islam has been described as an intellectually dynamic and fluid milieu and was characterised by a multiplicity of communities of interpretations, schools of thought and a diversity of views on religious and political issues (Daftary, 1998). It was this diversity that led to formulations of distinct identities and doctrines. Over the course of time, the Muslim community has developed into many different communities of interpretation, each with their own view of how the perspectives emerging from the Qur’an are best fulfilled and realised within individual and community life. The Ismailis were one of these groups who developed their own distinct interpretation over 1400 years of history and interpretive endeavours (Esmail & Nanji, 2007). As such, the interpretation of Islam within the framework of the Ismaili tradition should be understood as one response among others to the divine revelation which Muslims believe was conveyed to the Prophet Muhammad. However, the response is not a singular response which is carried forth through time. Rather, the response is a continual interpretation and re-interpretation of the creative vision which gives impetus to the tradition, the community’s or group’s commitment to that vision, and the cumulative interaction amongst the community which shapes expressions of the tradition as elucidated in Hodgson’s (1974) conception of living tradition.

Marshall Hodgson addresses the complex, diverse and dynamic nature of the Islamic vision in religion and civilization and how living traditions are always in the course of development. He claims that the Qur’anic vision, and how this vision is understood, has generated a complex web of life patterns and cultures. Whilst the Qur’anic message can be interpreted to speak to the unity of vision of Islam and the spirit of venture, Islam cannot be defined or spoken about monolithically. "For historically, Islam and its associated lifeways form a cultural tradition, or a complex of cultural traditions; and a cultural tradition by its nature grows and changes; the more so, the broader its scope" (p. 79). According to Hodgson, a culture grows and changes when it is vital, that is, when it meets a real need. Traditions cease to be living traditions when they degenerate into mere transmission. If that is the case, any change of circumstance can lead to its erosion or abandonment. If, however, a tradition is engaged with, it can be readjusted or grow to serve the circumstances or context within which it takes on altered expressions. A tradition is a living tradition when it continues to
have meaning or use within new or changing conditions as was discussed in Chapter One.

Hodgson describes the process of cultural tradition as a movement comprised of three dimensions or moments: a creative action; group commitment to this action; and cumulative interaction within the group. “A tradition originates in a creative action, an occasion of inventive or revelatory, even charismatic, encounter” (p. 80). Hodgson uses the example of the Qur’anic revelation as an illustration of a spiritual vision, a creative action, which opened up new possibilities for life. These acts of acceptance are highly creative because the events hold something which “genuinely answers to universally latent human potentialities” (p. 80). The potentialities are awakened when people choose to take up the invitation of the creative event to find meaning in and draw from the creative event inspiration that responds to dilemmas at a social and personal level.

Arising out of the assigned value to the creative event is the second moment of a cultural tradition, the group commitment. This is when the creative action becomes a “point of departure for a continuing body of people who share a common awareness of its importance and must take it into account in whatever they do next, whether in pursuance of its implications or in rebellion against them” (p. 81). When such a commitment is effective, it becomes an allegiance. The concept of community is central to the sustenance of a living tradition as it is within communal spaces and through the cumulative interaction taking place in these spaces that the group commitment retains its vitality. Hodgson elaborates on the cumulative interaction and explains that through this shared commitment and through debate and dialogue, people come together to further understand the potential that lies latent within the creative act and what the implications of this potential may be. It is essentially the continuing cumulative dialogue and the response and counter-response such dialogue provokes that enables the existence and perpetuation of a living tradition and without which the transmission itself would eventually cease.

An important aspect of the creative event Hodgson emphasizes is its “inherent potential for enlarging the resources of any human beings seeking truth in their lives” (p. 82). Through making a public commitment, an individual is drawn into further understanding and making sense of this creative vision through the cumulative
interaction with others. “It was in dialogue, in an exchange of insights and of objections with others in a like situation, that he came to realize what sense of himself and of the universe would serve and what would not” (p. 82). Through this search, the individual is faced with something about the human spiritual condition that is relevant both personally and societally. Hodgson specifies, “The implications of the initial commitment could be worked out fully only as the initially creative vision was confronted ever afresh from a new perspective in the course of cumulative interaction and dialogue among those to whom the initial events were meaningful” (p. 82).

**Cumulative Interaction within Shia and Ismaili Perspectives: The Interpretive Quest**

In this section, I will take a look at how the creative vision of the divine revelation has been understood through initially Shia perspectives and then Ismaili perspectives and how cumulative interaction has resulted in interpretive efforts which have given expression to the Ismaili living tradition over time. A comprehensive treatment of interpretation within the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition is beyond the scope of this study. Consideration of illustrative cases and discussion of significant principles, however, will lay the groundwork for the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to curriculum inquiry which follows. Esmail (2000a) distinguishes between objective time and subjective time in the historical life of a community. This subjective mode of time is a quality of time “in which one is related to, and bears a kinship with, one’s ancestors and with the inheritance of an age, a legacy which one carries forward into the future” (p. 3). I am proposing it is this inheritance of interpretive principles which will infuse the necessary vitality in our curricular inquiry to continually confront the creative vision of the living tradition anew.

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15 The transliteration system for Arabic and Persian words in this document is adopted from the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2nd edition), with minor modifications. The use of diacritical marks has been kept to a minimum to make the text accessible to the general readership.
The Qur’an as an Inexhaustible Wellspring of Inspiration: A Shi’i Interpretation

The Qur’an-i Sharif is the foundational text for Muslims. It has shaped Muslim consciousness over the course of centuries. For Muslims, the Qur’an is the word of God, which entered human time and history. The Noble Qur’an has guided the thought and conduct of Muslims belonging to different communities of interpretation and spiritual affiliation, from century to century, in diverse cultural environments, lending itself to a wide spectrum of interpretations. Muslims regard the Qur’an as being a unique phenomenon in religious history that considers itself the culmination of a series of revelations. It participates in human history in that it is an eternal book of guidance that must be understood and pondered if it is to serve as the moral and spiritual guide for human conduct. (Jiwa, 2004, p. 1)

The term Qur’an means “recitation” or “reading” or “collection” (Sonn, 2006, Esack, 2005). These meanings are significant as they reflect the Muslim belief that it is the word of God, not the prophet who delivered it and therefore it is timeless. From these words, we can understand that the Qur’an is not always used in the concrete sense of a scripture but also refers to an oral discourse revealed by God over a period of twenty-three years in the context of the requirements of society (Esack, 2005). The word wahi which means revelation is used in several different ways, each one furthering the idea of inspiring, directing, or guiding those which receive the revelation. The Qur’an can be conceived as an event rather than a speech which summons, seizes the heart and being of the individual, and calls the individual to action (IIS, Introductory Notes on the Qur’an, 2004). For Muslims, the Qur’an is a fount of inspiration in their lives as they strive to follow and apply the moral guidance received by Prophet Muhammad to create and shape the ongoing life of the righteous community.

The Qur’an affirms a dynamic interaction and an encompassing relationship between material and spiritual aspects of life (Nanji, 2010). The realm of faith, din, and the realm of human affairs, dunya, are not seen to be conflicting; one does not dominate or devalue the other. Both are seen as necessary and symbiotically integral to the

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16 His Highness the Aga Khan’s speech at the Opening session of ‘Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur’an and its Creative Expressions,’ International Colloquium, IIS, 19th October 2003.
practice of faith. There is no divide between the secular and the religious or between the material and spiritual. Rather, “human conduct and aspirations have relevance as acts of faith, within the wider human, social, and cultural contexts” (Nanji, 1996, p. 206), thereby creating the notion of Islam as a way of life that is embodied and unified. To be in accord with God’s will then is seen as an engagement with, and a commitment to, attending equally to both the material and spiritual aspects of life and harmonising these aspects within an integrated vision.

In the Qur’anic view, human beings have been appointed as vicegerents of God on this earth and this assumes a responsibility towards creation, including fellow beings, as well as accountability to the Divine. This relationship is signified in the word, *islam,* which is to maintain the posture of submission to God (Jiwa, 2004). Each individual carries the responsibility of a trustee who is accountable to God and the community (Sajoo, 2010). As the covenantal relationship with God is sustained through the community, the moral and spiritual vision is filled through one’s personal life and through contributing to community life (Nanji, 1996). “It is the quality of mind and spirit of human compassion and caring, the building of community through personal and collective commitment, that according to the Qur’an separates those who make a difference from those who shuffle through life unconcerned” (Nanji, 1996, p. 3). At its essence, the term ‘islam’ refers to the inward stance or spiritual posture of an individual who accepts responsibility for actions guided by transcendent authority. In Arabic, ‘islam’ means submission and it is this acceptance of ideals and transcendent authority that forms the core of the Islamic religion. Islam as a religion and as expressed through a myriad of cultures is derived from this submission of the individual devotee to the Divine grounded in a commitment of communal unity (Hodgson, 1974). The ever present consciousness of God or the divine presence, *taqwa,* is what shapes an individual’s conduct towards God and towards fellow human beings and motivates one’s integrity towards a unified and mindful life (Sajoo, 2010).

Historically, Muslims have invested significant efforts to understand and illuminate such ideals. One critical issue is the way in which this “speech of God” enters historical discourse. Another related issue was whether divine mysteries were accessible to the human mind or whether they were to be accepted on authority (IIS, Introductory Notes on the Qur’an, 2004). It was these issues that eventually divided and
differentiated the nascent Muslim community of the Prophet’s time into different schools of thought. Consequently, how this moral vision is interpreted holds a diversity of viewpoints within the Muslim community and is inextricably connected to interpretations of leadership and authority amongst various groups or communities of interpretation within Muslims, particularly those of the Shia and Sunni. The origin of the division of these two major schools of thought, Sunnism and Shi‘ism, can be traced back broadly to the question of succession of the Prophet (Daftary, 2007). Each of these groups had come to develop their own conception of the “true” Islam based on their interpretations of historical events and conceptions of religious authority.

Upon the Prophet’s passing, there was a need to appoint a successor to lead and ensure the continuity and integrity of the Muslim community which was in the process of becoming a rapidly growing empire. According to the divine revelation, the Prophet was the ‘seal of prophets’ which meant he was the final prophet and therefore, could not be succeeded by another prophet. In the Sunni view, the Prophet had not left formal designation of his successor. Through a process of communal debate, the appointment of Abu Bakr, one of the Prophet’s close companions, was made. This appointment founded the historical institution of caliphate which subsumed both the religious and political authority of the community (Daftary, 2007). Over time, the caliphs accorded religious authority to the ulama who were religious scholars or clerics of the community.

The Shia community held a significantly different stance with regards to authority and leadership of the Muslim community and maintained that the Prophet in fact, did appoint a successor who would be the rightful spiritual guide and leader of the community. This claim is based on interpretation of specific verses of the Qur’an by the Shia, on the nature of the relationship between the Prophet and his cousin and son-in-law, Ali b. Abi Talib, and on the key historical event of Ghadir Khumm which initiated the interpretive aspect of Shi‘i belief (Lalani, 2000). This event took place when the Prophet was returning from his farewell pilgrimage and stopped at the site of Ghadir Khumm to
take Ali by his hand proclaiming Ali to be his successor.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, the Shia have maintained that Ali was the legitimate successor of the Prophet and that this designation was received by the Prophet through divine revelation (Daftary, 2007). Following the Prophet’s death, the Shia believed the most important question facing the Muslim community was the continued teaching and elucidation of the Islamic message. The necessity of an authoritative figure who had a spiritual function was based in the Shi‘i belief that the Qur’anic teachings reflected inner truths which were not accessible through human reason exclusively (Daftary, 1998). A successor who possessed this legitimate authority and divine knowledge, according to the Shia, could only come from the family of the Prophet, also known as the \textit{ahl-al-bayt}. The key to understanding Shi‘ism “lies in the way in which they approached the question of authority, a question which was firmly bound with the need to understand the inner core of the Islamic message and the values contained in that message” (Esmail & Nanji, 2007, p. 3). The response to the question of authority was loyalty to Ali who was the first in the lineage of leaders called Imams. In the Shi‘i view, legitimate authority for the Muslim social and spiritual order can only belong to the designated Imam who is a descendant of the family of the Prophet and who is appointed by divine designation, \textit{nass}. From a Shi‘i perspective, it is the Prophets and the Imams who have inherited the divine knowledge, \textit{ilm}, necessary to translate and interpret the divine word. For the Shia Ismailis\textsuperscript{18}, it is the Imam who provides the interpretation, \textit{ta‘wil}, and the teaching, \textit{ta‘lim}, of the Qur’an appropriate to the time and age to guide believers towards moral upliftment and spiritual enlightenment. This impetus of interpretation has crystallized and shaped Shia Ismaili belief and doctrine through time.

In Ismaili thought, the interpretation of the divine revelation is paramount as the divine word is seen to have layers of meanings (Jiwa, 2004). The exoteric, referred to as

\textsuperscript{17} This famous proclamation is translated from Arabic as, “He of whom I am the master, of him Ali is also the master.” (Daftary, 2007)

\textsuperscript{18} The Shia community itself subdivided into various groups over questions of rightful leadership and also of divergent trends of thought and policy. The Shia Ismailis emerged in the middle of the 8\textsuperscript{th} century as an independent branch of the Shia.
zahir, is the literal meaning of the Qur’an whereas the esoteric or batin, which is understood as the inner or hidden meanings can lead to deeper understandings of faith, and can symbolically hold a plenitude of meaning which is rich, varied and inspires a continuity of engagement between the Divine and the human (Esmail, 2004, 1998). The esoteric does not nullify the exoteric; instead it is seen to go beyond the literal to elaborate meaning not to contradict or dismiss the exoteric. In keeping with the principle of din and dunya, faith and world, as an integrated vision for the practice of life, the esoteric enhances the exoteric moving from a level of specific and temporal to one that is cosmic and eternal. Rooted in the Ismaili tradition, this interpretive experience or spiritual hermeneutic builds and shapes itself as part of an individual’s intellectual and spiritual growth (Nanji, 1980). Whilst the Imam holds the legitimate authority to interpret the divine revelation, human beings, according to the Qur’anic account of creation, have been endowed with the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong in following the divinely inspired guidance of the Imam. Similar to the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Christianity, the origin of Islam is rooted in divine command for a moral order that requires human endeavor, struggle and possibility to discover the equilibrium that allows for balanced action as a way of submission to the divine will (Nanji, 2010). This human endeavour speaks to the importance of the human intellect in engaging with interpretations of revelation.

Reza Shah-Kazemi (2011) claims the contemporary relevance and universality of the Qur’an can only be illuminated by a creative interpretative engagement with the revealed text where “Muslims are called upon to ponder thoughtfully the principles embodied in the verses, and to use their intelligence to arrive at solutions—moral, intellectual and spiritual—to the complex issues generated by ever-changing conditions” (p. 1). Reflection or meditation, tafakkur, as well as to ponder, tadabbur, to comprehend, tafaqquh, to use one’s intellect, aqila, and to learn, ta'allum, are key notions occurring repeatedly in the Qur’an underscoring the need for intellectual engagement. This type of interpretative approach, according to Abdullah Saeed (2009) is a defining feature of Shi’i
readings of the Qur’an\textsuperscript{19}. Historically, the multiplicity of meanings of the Qur’an had great importance in Ismailism. Each verse and, more importantly, the collective content of the Qur’an are believed to be open to interpretation for symbolic or inner meanings (Esmail & Nanji, 2007).

Esmail (1994) suggests that in responding to the historical problems of the time, the Qur’an places its response in a larger, grander statement of the human condition. He reflects that the role of the transcendent in one’s finite existence needs the kind of inquiry that brings the full range of human faculties and orientations into consideration, including thought, feeling, will and bodily life. The search for meaning is not to arrive at a predetermined truth. It is to access the creative potentialities of the human spirit, and here Esmail includes all forms of human creativity (literary, philosophical, scientific, artistic), and to spark an inquiry of wholeness, to understand and remake and transform the world anew. This quest for the good is one of ongoing understanding and ongoing interpretation; it is not the revealed but the revealing, and this process and engagement requires effort and commitment from the individual. Esmail (2004) proposes the vital and continuous role of creative intellectual engagement in the quest for good.

What behoves us is to raise the question anew as to what is really meant by the life of the mind and by action in the world; and to raise the question too as to what relationship these things might have to the revealing word that summons us to transcend ourselves. (p.16)

The spirit of inquiry and interpretation and its revelations which summon us to transcend ourselves can be inspired by the spirit of the intellect embodied by Imam Ali. Shah-Kazemi (2006) describes this interpretive spirit as “a spirit that surpasses, while

\textsuperscript{19} Saeed (2009) explains the central theological role played by the Imams, descendants of Prophet Muhammad, in Shiism, “While the recognition of the line of imams varies among Shii persuasions or tariqahs, all regard the imams as inspired and specially equipped to provide proper guidance on the meaning of the Qur’an, especially with regard to its batin or inner meaning” (p. 62). Shah-Kazemi (2011) maintains that the Imam’s knowledge is a “stimulus for individual intellectual creativity, not a substitute for it” (p. 5). For further elaboration on specifically the Ismaili Imamat, see article on the IIS website, \textit{The Ismaili Imamat}, www.iis.ac.uk.
comprising, the activities of the rational mind, as well as encompassing domains not nowadays associated with the intellect, domains such as moral comportment and aesthetic sensibility" (p. 22). The following section looks at Imam Ali’s spirit of the intellect and its creative engagement in interpreting the revealing word as a summons towards transcendence of the self.

**The Alid Tradition**

Ali, or as he is referred to by the Shia Ismailis, Hazrat Imam Ali is respected in all Muslim traditions or communities of interpretation as an inspirational figure due to his wisdom and virtue. He is known for upholding principles of justice and for his governance virtues of fairness, courage and trust. He is acknowledged as one of the most insightful readers of the Qur’an and to have had profound knowledge of the text. He is reputed for his inimitable eloquence as attributed in a famous work, *Nahj al-Balagha*, The Peak or the Way of Eloquence. This work is a compilation of his discourses and sermons and reflects his thinking on ethics and his emphasis on knowledge. He is also known for his profound spiritual wisdom. Ali’s knowledge has been regarded as the source and inspiration for many central Islamic sciences including the study of Arabic grammar, Qur’anic exegesis and jurisprudence. He has been frequently referred to in later works of philosophy and ethics (Daftary & Hirji, 2008). His Highness the Aga Khan IV has made continual references to the principles of interpretation Hazrat Ali has brought to the interpretation of Islam which are grounded in the use of the intellect within the ethic of the faith.


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20 Alid – reference to descendants of Ali.

21 His Highness Aga Khan IV is the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims and a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, the first Imam, and his wife Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter.

22 Muslim Societies and Civilizations, Student Reader, 2010, Institute of Ismaili Studies.
sayings of Ali as timeless and universal, transcending the boundaries not only of time but of different faith traditions. Ali’s sayings and interpretive engagement with knowledge need to be considered not because he was a political or religious leader of great stature but rather because of “their intrinsic worth, intellectual profundity and spiritual fecundity” (p. 7). At a preliminary level, the interpretive tradition can be understood as the use of the intellect in everyday life to better understand faith and its purpose in the life of an individual. From a more sophisticated perspective, Shah-Kazemi stresses three factors inherent to this intellectual perspective: the centrality of revelation; the harmony between revelation and the intellect; and “the distinction between the intellect, conceived as the principle of the articulation of consciousness, and reason, understood as one of the expressions of this principle” (p. 23, emphasis in original).

The centrality of the revelation means that the entirety of Ali’s life and his teachings were centred on the Qur’anic revelation and how this revelation was embodied in the Prophet’s being. Shah-Kazemi suggests Ali’s life can be understood as an interpretation of the above. This interpretive quality, the desire to move beyond the superficial and access the deeper, inner meanings of things, whether these were related to religion, to politics, to ethics or to social contexts, was reflective of the kind of intellectual penetration to which Ali devoted his life. The continual and unyielding quest to know more about the ultimate nature of reality leads to the second factor which emphasizes the harmony between revelation and the intellect. Instead of being seen as mutually exclusive, the two concepts are seen as creatively reciprocal, each requiring the other for a state of wholeness and integrity. It is the spirit given by the letter of the revelation that enlivens the spirit of the intellect, thus sparking a creative engagement with all faculties of the intelligence, particularly the reflective capacities. The objective of this engagement is not to seek flat unilateral meanings in forms of knowledge. It is to ‘dis-close’ rather than ‘en-close’ layers of meaning and as one of Ali’s sayings propose, “To unearth the buried treasures of the intellects” (p. 29). Shah-Kazemi makes a clear distinction between the concept of intellect and that of reason. He describes the former as “capable of a direct contemplative vision of transcendent realities” (p. 22), whereas the latter is more indirect working with logic and arriving only at mental concepts of those realities. Reason is a mode of the intellect which enables intelligible meanings and
rationally discernible thought relating to the realities known to humans. He suggests however, that the intellect is a 'going beyond' the limitations and defined thought of reason; this something more is a spiritual sensibility not just a rationalistic one. In the act of interpretation, human realities do need to be deconstructed. But it is these intuitive and contemplative faculties that ‘re-member’ or ‘re-construct’ realities in ways that reason alone may not be capable of reaching. The spirit of the intellect from an Alid perspective transcends the rational faculty and is seen as a spiritual faculty (not devoid of reason) that is the source of life and existence. It is this ‘in-spiration’ that is the ‘in-breathing’ and insertion of spirit into human consciousness which generates knowledge and self-awareness. In this view, ‘the true intellectual’ is one who “not only thinks correctly but also acts ethically” and one who ‘puts all things in their proper place’ through acts of justice. “Correct thinking, impeccable virtue and authentic being are inextricably tied up with the intellect” (p. 35) and are the concern of the true intellectual. Ali is associated with the complex attitude embodied by Ismailism of the orientation towards fundamental questions of truth and their realisation in society, which is an embodiment of thought, action and realization (Esmail & Nanji, 2007). Such attitudes were given various forms in subsequent eras, and for the Ismailis, always guided by the divine knowledge, ilm, of the Imam and in accordance with intellectual faculties on the part of the believers to comprehend and actualize the Islamic message. For the Shia, the role of Ali is pivotal in the shaping of their response to the revelation (Lalani, 2000).

**The Early Ismaili Imams and their Teachings**

Azim Nanji (1987) discusses the comprehensiveness of scope and specificity of method as a significant feature of Ismaili thought. He explains that what Ismailism shares in common with other schools of Islam is the ideal of the community being governed by divine will rather than human whim. Ismailis have maintained, in alignment with other Shi’ites, that it is through the agency of the Imams who are descendants of Ali that this ideal would be realized. The doctrine of the Imam has received a central and specific emphasis in the Ismaili tradition as it is believed it is the Imam who has been endowed with spiritual authority to interpret the message of Islam. This view encompasses and requires the intellectual efforts of the believer since true understanding is defined as “the ultimate unfolding of human reason (‘aql) to its fullest potential under the guidance of the Imam. It is the working out of this process that
provides the key to understanding the heart of Ismaili spirituality” (Nanji, 1987, p. 185). Examples of how the centrality of interpretation evolved over time can be found in the articulation and teachings of the early Ismaili Imams Muhammad Al-Baqir and Ja’far al-Sadiq.

Al-Baqir’s theory on Imamat emphasized not only the hereditary and divine character, but also the necessity of providing true knowledge and understanding through interpreting the inheritance of the Qur’an. Arzina Lalani (2000) presents some principles through which Al-Baqir interpreted the doctrine of Imamat. The hereditary character of nass or divine designation was imperative as in the Shi‘i view, the choice of an Imam is not determined by the community. Authoritative knowledge, ilm, is inherited and passed down from one generation to another allowing for interpretation of both the exoteric and esoteric aspects of the Qur’an as well as knowledge of changing times and adversities. Lalani also discusses some of the debates and questions raised in response to Al-Baqir’s theology. One of these questions concerned the distinction between faith, iman, and islam, submission, and their connection. Another question inquired as to whether there existed degrees of faith. Al-Baqir’s view was that faith was based on the four pillars of patience, certainty, justice, and struggle. This view demonstrated his belief of the relationship between virtues and a person’s faith. In response to the question of the degrees of faith, Al-Baqir’s stance was that faith can increase or decrease with knowledge and improving one’s actions or deeds. The inextricability of faith and world is manifested in his conviction that knowledge, action and faith are interrelated. As knowledge is acquired, deeds can be improved, and if deeds are improved, there results a stronger and deeper sense of faith. The interrelated nature of faith, knowledge and action highlights the importance of the intellectual interpretive engagement of the believer.

Al Baqir’s son and successor, Ja’far al-Sadiq, developed these interpretations further. Al-Sadiq was known for his superior intellectual qualities not only within the Shi‘i partisans, but also in the wider community which included Sunni schools of thought (Daftary, 2007). He was also reputed to have significantly influenced the development of mystical interpretations of Islam (Esmail & Nanji, 2007). Al-Sadiq systematically propounded the doctrine of Imamat in response to the need for a re-orientation to Shi‘ism caused by the tumultuous Abbasid revolution (Daftary, 2007). The principle of
nass, divine designation of a chosen person from the ahl-al-bayt, was further distinguished to profess that the authority of the Imam lay in a specific individual, whether he made claim to the caliphate or not. This distinction was important as it separated the religious institution from the fate of particular political movements and it also allowed for the systematic development of religious ideas and the communal continuity of Shi’ism. Al-Sadiq also further developed the principle of ilm, or divinely inherited knowledge, which affirmed the Imam’s authority to decide on points of conscience for Muslims through providing guidance to the inner meaning and significance of the Qur’an. This essential spiritual function of interpreting the inner meaning of revelation is known in Shi’i thought as ta’wil.

“The notion of ta’wil affirms the Shi’i belief in the existence of the separate exoteric and esoteric dimensions in all religious scriptures and teachings, necessitating the spiritual comprehension of, and initiation into, their hidden and true meaning” (Daftary, 2007, p. 84). The Arabic sense of ta’wil is to go back to the first and original meaning. The word ta’wil is derived from awl which means returning to the origin or source. It signifies discovery of subtle, hidden meanings through interpretation (Poonawala, 2001). In Ismaili thought, the goal of ta’wil is to “enable the believer to penetrate beyond the formal, literal meaning of the text and to create a sense of certitude regarding the ultimate relevance and meaning of a given passage in the Qur’an” (Nanji, 1987, p. 185). This exegetical basis is assumed by all interpretive efforts in Ismaili thought by way of accessing levels of meanings towards ultimate truths that endure through time. Whilst the outer or literal meanings, the zahir, changed over time due to temporal circumstances, the truths represented in the inner meanings, the batin, were unchanging and represented the true message common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Daftary, 2007). Reinhart (1996) describes such an interpretive process as the edifice of Islamic intellectual activity, thereby suggesting that believers are guided to

23 Ta’wil is defined as the elucidation of the inner or esoteric meaning, batin, from the literal wording or apparent meaning of a text, ritual or religious prescription. Ismaili ta’wil was distinguished from tanzil which is understood as the actual revelation of scriptures through the intermediary of the Prophet Muhammad and from tafsir, which is explanation of the apparent or philological meaning of sacred texts (Daftary, 2000).
reflect upon the signs given by God, in nature and in revelation, for what it is that humans are required to do. “Each of these revelational topics invites or demands interpretation, elaboration, and explanation” (p. 178) starting at more literal levels and progressing to more esoteric forms of meaning or ways of reading or making sense of the world.

Interpreting Revelation and Reason; Interpreting Knowledge and Action

Ismail Poonawala (2001) reminds us that ta’wil also played an important role in the Shi’i Ismaili formulation of synthesis between reason and revelation based on Neo-platonic thought as well as Shi’i doctrine. Rationalism, understood within the context of historical time, has been an important feature of Ismaili thought from the beginning as was exemplified in the efforts to harmonize the rational thought of Greek philosophy and the tenets of the revelation (Esmail & Nanji, 2007). A number of Ismaili intellectuals, during what is known as the classical Fatimid period in the ninth and tenth centuries, showed a keen interest in balancing and synthesizing speculative reason with the authoritative knowledge, ilm, of the Imam in ways that were considered compatible with the Qur’anic wisdom (Nanji, 1987). Da’is of this period, who were educated as theologians, scholars, and proselytizers of the community, integrated Ismaili theology with different philosophical traditions to create highly complex metaphysical systems of thought (Daftary, 2007).

The term da’i refers to ‘summoner’ and da’is were concerned with the education of the Ismaili esoteric doctrine or ‘wisdom’ as it was known. The da’is were selected carefully and subjected to rigorous training and discipline. To be accepted in Ismaili circles, the ideal da’i was expected to lead an exemplary ethical life and also have superior knowledge of the prized intellectual sciences. Intellectual accomplishments such as jurisprudence, logic and rhetoric along with knowledge of diplomacy and public relations were necessary preparation before a da’i could emerge into the community to promote the social, moral and spiritual welfare of people according to the teachings of the Imam (Esmail & Nanji, 2007). The accomplishment of high educational qualifications, keen organizational abilities and distinguished moral and intellectual attributes were also privileged and a source of attention and investment during the Fatimid period (Daftary, 1998). In addition to teachings of the Islamic tradition, da’is
were expected to be well versed with the teachings of different religions and to be familiar with the local language and customs of the community within which they were immersed. Many of the da’is were highly trained in specialized institutions in Cairo and became accomplished scholars in disciplines such as theology, philosophy and jurisprudence (Daftary & Hirji, 2008). The educational efforts of the da’is were both institutionalized as well as informal, with interpersonal relationships, particularly those involving the master and disciple being highly valued (Zeghal, 2014). The need for a careful balance between the zahir and batin was emphasized during this period in the work of the da’is. Both were considered to be complementary aspects of religion and one could not meaningfully exist without the other. To consider only one dimension would be partial or incomplete in any scholarly attempt (Glasse, 1989). Through developing and expounding theological, metaphysical and philosophical doctrines, these Ismaili intellectuals were able to show their “originality of thought, mastery of pre-Islamic religions and Judaeo-Christian scriptures, as well as their profound knowledge of Hellenistic and Islamic philosophy” (Daftary, 2007, p. 222).

An illustration of the self-conscious attempt to interpret and amalgamate philosophical and theological thought can be seen in the work of the eminent da’i, Nasir-i Khusraw, who sought to harmonize the esoteric understanding of Islam with the wisdom of the ancient Greek thinkers in his work, the title of which can be translated into Synthesis of the Two Wisdoms or Twin Wisdoms Reconciled. In this work, Khusraw addresses the complementarity and interdependency of the two aspects of zahir and batin with each playing a fundamental role in the constitution of the human being and the constitution of the cosmos (Ormsby, 2012). Philosophy and science lie in the realm of the exoteric, zahir, while the ta’wil addresses the esoteric understanding of the revelation, the batin. And knowledge of both are essential as these realms are inseparable. Eric Ormsby explains that these oppositions are not absolute, they intersect and infuse. “Thus, philosophy by its very nature may be concerned with the outer, phenomenal world while Ismaili hermeneutics delves deeply into the inner, spiritual world, but neither is at odds with the other” (p. 9). They stand in a continuum as different dimensions of one reality; from the mundane to the existential. Khusraw has elaborated on the principle of ta’wil by dividing it into three stages: the first stage provides a body of rituals and doctrines for a historical community; the second stage
transposes these practices to levels of meaning beyond objective or historical time; and
the third stage is the fusion and metamorphosis of the two leading to transcendence for
the believer. This cyclical view of history is an important dimension of Ismaili thought
and represents a dual understanding of time as one interpretation of the Qur’an (Nanji,
1980).

Another significant Ismaili Muslim scholar and da‘i who flourished in the first half
of the 11th century was Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani. Al-Kirmani was known for his
profoundly creative mind which enabled him to gain mastery over scientific, philosophical
and theological discourses of his time and integrate this learning in influential treatises of
Ismaili thought (Walker, 1999). Al-Kirmani was called to Cairo from Iraq and Iran to
address dissension taking place on issues of doctrine. One of the key issues Ismailis
were being criticized on was attention to the exclusiveness of the batin, the inner
meaning of the revelation and whether the zahir, or observances of outwardly practices
of religion were being dismissed. If the teaching conveyed by the Imam provided deeper
meaning to the sacred word, do both remain valid? Does one modify or nullify the
other? What constitutes faith and what are the required works? Al-Kirmani drew on his
own multidisciplinary background of philosophy, the theoretical sciences and theology in
offering his interpretation of a response to this issue which is referred to as double
observance by works and knowledge. In this interpretation, Paul Walker explains al-
Kirmani’s insistence for the believer to have both knowledge and good deeds in order to
be a person of faith. Good works are a representation of the exoteric while the pursuit of
knowledge is a representation of the esoteric. This view of faith, where action is an
integral part of spiritual development, is the basis for the hermeneutics of ritual in
Ismailism and for the interplay between the ideas of zahir and batin (Nanji, 1987). The
zahir is comprehensible, perceptible and accessible to all whereas the batin is not as
readily apparent, requires authoritative teaching and willingness from the individual to
undertake a quest of understanding. In the context of the da‘is, teaching is a form of
ta‘wil. “It is to put everything that occurs in the visible realm into its real context, thereby
providing life to what is otherwise dead . . . in speaking, discussion, instruction and
representing the unseen by a thing that approximates it appropriately” (Walker, 1999, p.
79). The title of al-Kirmani’s classic exegesis, Balm for the Intellect, is indicative of the
“essential spiritual goal of the intellectual exercise—a sense of contentment and
satisfaction that comes to the human mind in its proper interaction with Revelation, rather than mere vindication of the power of the rational faculty as over against Revelation” (Nanji, 1987, p. 187).

Wilfred Madelung (1977) attributes the success of the Ismaili da’is to the intrinsic appeal of the message of Ismaili teachings. He purports that from its beginnings, Ismailism has offered a comprehensive and coherent view of the Divine, the universe and the meaning of history. “While its core embodied general Islamic and Shi’i tenets and ideals, it integrated some of the hellenistic, spiritual and intellectual heritage which . . . had indubitably become part of Islamic civilization” (p. 54). And although Ismaili polemicists may accuse the da’is of catering to people’s beliefs and sentiments in a manipulative way, Madelung states that, “Ismaili doctrine did not borrow indiscriminately but rather selected what it found congenial to its basic convictions and amalgamated it into a coherent synthesis of its own” (p. 54).

A final illustration of the historical interpretive effort in the living tradition of the Ismaili Muslim community is Hasan-i Sabbah, a prominent da’i who led the community during the Alamut period in the 12th century, which was a period of intense persecution for the Ismailis. In this hostile time, the Ismailis were concerned more about their survival then in the philosophical speculations and intellectual arguments characteristic of the Fatimid times. They concentrated on reformulating the Shi’i doctrine of ta’lim which Hasan had expounded in a more vigorous form (Daftary, 2007). From early on, the Shia had held firmly to the belief that spiritual matters could not be left to human caprice. Instead, the understanding of religious truths was the prerogative of the Imam who was appointed by divine designation and held the religious knowledge, ilm, for the spiritual guidance of the community. This was the essence of the Shi’i doctrine of ta’lim, the teaching of religion could only be undertaken by authoritative teachers in each age which for the Shia were the Alid Imams who were direct descendants of Ali. Hasan put forth a series of propositions which re-interpreted the doctrine of ta’lim within the context of his time.

First, Hasan reaffirmed the inadequacy of human reason alone to understand spiritual truths and to know the Divine and that humans needed a teacher or authority for guidance on such matters. Second, Hasan argued that there could only be one teacher
who was the divinely appointed Imam in every age. This argument was contrary to the multiplicity of religious scholars, *ulama*, accepted in Sunni communities. Third, Hasan held that the authority of the Imam was based in a higher authority. And finally, in relation to the above, Hasan claimed that the authority could only be known in the very nature of knowledge through the dialectical relationship of the teacher and the individual seeking the knowledge. The individual’s reasoning would enable him to realize his need for authoritative teaching and, when reasoning had reached this point, the Imam would satisfy the need. The Imam did not need to resort to extrinsic proofs of his legitimacy; his being and claims sufficiently proved his legitimacy (Daftary, 2007). The doctrine of *ta’lim* according to Hasan’s interpretation was more rigorous than the traditional Shi’i view of this concept and served as a powerful ideological tool for the community.

Nanji (1987) reflects on the activity of the *da’is* as the birth and development of an inner consciousness which reveal the themes of quest and transformation. He claims that the concept of quest is central to the notion of *ta’wil* as it is through this process or tool of comprehension that an individual begins the search for layers of meaning. The quest becomes a prelude to transformation which makes possible the acquisition of deeper knowledge and meaning. Although the illustrations above vary in context, the narratives draw forth motifs of commitment, search, initiation, interpretation and transformation. The interpretive quest can be thought about as a series of awakenings leading to increasingly enlightened states. This working out of divine will and human destiny is conceived in Ismaili thought as human life having an exalted destiny whose ascension ultimately has as its goal a return to its origin. Nanji emphasizes, however, that this quest takes place in the context of the world where spirit and matter exist in complementarity. “The essence of Ismaili thought shows no propensity for rejecting this material world; in fact, without action in it, the spiritual quest is regarded as unworthy” (p.197). He reasserts the complementarity saying, “It is this juxtaposition of *zahir* with *batin*, of the material with the spiritual, that the world of the believer comes to be invested with full meaning” (p. 197). This heritage that continues to inspire Ismaili life is portrayed well in the words of Aga Khan III, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, the 48th Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims.

Life in the ultimate analysis has taught me one enduring lesson. The subject should always disappear into the object. In our ordinary
affections one for another, in our daily work with hand and brain, we most of us discover soon enough that any lasting satisfaction, any contentment we can achieve, is the result of forgetting self, of merging subject with object in a harmony that is of body, mind and spirit. (1954, p. 355)

The Transformative Quest of Ismailis in Modern Times

This section will provide a modern day illustration of how the interpretive quest is being guided by the current and 49th Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, His Highness the Aga Khan or Karim Aga Khan IV, in response to the contemporary environment and in the effort to sustain and give continuing expression to the Ismaili living tradition. Since the 1900s, the Ismailis have become a global community spread over twenty-five different countries including Central and South Asia, parts of China, Africa and the Middle East, Europe, North America and Australia. The Ismaili community is a community consisting of a plurality of cultural and social traditions and heritages, yet bound to a distinct and sacred historical authority, the Imam of the time. And while the spectrum of diversity involves languages, human and physical geographies, rituals, built environments, family and work, there exists nonetheless at the core a fused horizon of common history around a living and vibrant tradition. The forces of globalization, with belief and value systems encountering each other, present incredible opportunities to the community to share and build human partnerships. Correspondingly, they also present challenges in the effort to understand how best to understand and embrace human plurality. The community is therefore immersed in the phenomena of continuous identity construction, definition of its ethical and moral capital, interaction with the mix of traditions, and interpretation of its tradition within the context of modern times.

His Highness Karim Aga Khan assumed the spiritual leadership, the office of Imamat, of the Ismaili community in 1957. He succeeded his grandfather, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan and is the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili community. Both of these learned and reflective Muslim leaders have been responsible for the development of the Ismaili community over this century as a community that is seeking to organize itself in a manner that is able to contribute to and benefit fully from the advances of modern progress whilst simultaneously maintaining a continuity of its religious tradition (Esmail & Nanji, 2007). This process of modernisation of the community was initiated and enabled by Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, the 48th Imam,
through his pervasive influence on every aspect of the community’s social context. Aga Khan III established schools, hospitals, financial institutions, housing societies and systems of community administration in the form of governing boards. The Muslim tradition of a communitarian ethic and responsible individual conscience shaped and guided the reform initiatives undertaken. These innovative developments significantly changed the community’s social organization and patterns of behaviour to be more resonant with the modern environment. His institutions benefitted not only his followers but also non-Ismaili community members (Daftary, 1998). An example of educational advocacy Aga Khan III is renowned for was his bold emphasis on female education which was a departure from the conservative practices of the day.

As a central component of the extensive social reform initiatives, Aga Khan III established a constitution for the Ismaili community which provided an administrative and leadership structure for the social governance of the community through councils. The structure and mandate of the council was designed to organize and support the community whilst allowing them to settle and adapt to any country of residence. The Aga Khan acted as the religious and administrative head of the community thereby, enabling the evolution of the Ismailis into a progressive community with a distinct Ismaili identity (Daftary, 2007). His processes of modernisation were based on the premises of clarifying and strengthening the religious identity of the community according to the principles of Islam and balancing that effort with modernising civil, social and organizational structures of the community (Daftary & Hirji, 2008). Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah’s interpretive efforts maintained a continued adherence to the core principles of Islam and a “judicious amalgamation of the classical heritage of Islam with the phenomenon of modernisation” (Esmail & Nanji, 2007, p. 18).

Karim Aga Khan IV has continued the reform efforts of his grandfather with development efforts that have long-term objectives for the Ismailis. Such efforts represent the Ismaili world-view of the integral balance and interdependency of the spiritual and materials aspects of life. Like his predecessors, Aga Khan IV continues to emphasize Islam as a thinking, spiritual faith which is based on tolerance, compassion and upholding the dignity of each human. His mandate, as per the Shia tradition, is to “safeguard the individual’s right to personal intellectual search and to give practical expression to the ethical vision of society that the Islamic message inspires” (Institute of
Ismaili Studies, 2010, Introduction to His Highness the Aga Khan, p.1). Yet the phenomena affecting the Ismaili community today are very different than in the time of his grandfather. The Ismaili community, particularly in the West, is already modernised and is well integrated into the Western cultural fabric\textsuperscript{24}. The challenge is not to modernise the community as such, but to harmonize the understanding and practice of Islam as a faith and a way of life within the modern environment. As discussed in Chapter One, Ismailis are experiencing the forces of secularization and of Muslim fundamentalism and are vulnerable to the impact of these forces. Secular pressures of individual achievement, feeling distanced or alienated from faith or transcendent matters, and the negative stereotypes and generalizations of Islam can be difficult forces to comprehend and respond to in meaningful and informed ways, particularly for younger generations.

Accordingly, the reform efforts of Karim Aga Khan have been widespread in a global sense in advocating ongoing education, learning and a holistic approach to the conception of quality of life. He has established the Aga Khan Development Network under which umbrella lie numerous social, economic and cultural institutions seeking to realise the social conscience of Islam through improving the quality of life, not only of Ismailis or Muslims, but of individuals residing in that country who are in need of support. As a symbolic investment to the country (Jodido, 2007), he has built Ismaili Centres in cities around the world\textsuperscript{25} to serve as spaces of worship and as spaces of reflection, dialogue, contemplation and learning for the wider communities. He has created the Aga Khan Award for Architecture and the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto to reflect and encourage an engagement with the vibrancy of Muslim heritage through enabling cultural encounters. As a progressive Muslim leader, much of his time has been devoted to promoting Islam as a major world civilization with its plurality of social, intellectual and cultural traditions (Daftary, 2007). The Aga Khan has opened up various

\textsuperscript{24} The Ismailis have been guided by Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV to uphold unwavering allegiance to the country of their residence and to actively partake in their civic responsibility through contributing to the welfare and progress of the national society in which they live.

\textsuperscript{25} Vancouver, Toronto, Lisbon, Dushanbe, London, Dubai
institutions of formal learning which include the Aga Khan Academies, the Institute of Ismaili Studies, the University of Central Asia, the Aga Khan University and the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilizations. These educational institutions seek to establish themselves as globally recognized academic institutions aiming to develop qualified and meritorious human resource capacity capable of contributing to civil society and democracy. The intention here is not to enlist the accomplishments of this prolific and unique Muslim leader who is “deeply aware of the demands and dilemmas of modernity, and dedicated to promoting a better understanding of Islamic civilizations with its diversity of expressions and interpretations” (Daftary, 2007). My intention is to gain some insight as to the paradigm shaping these development and reform endeavours which are deeply steeped in the Islamic tradition as interpreted by the Ismaili Imamat.

In explaining this paradigm at the Tutzing Evangelical Academy upon receiving the ‘Tolerance Award,’ the Aga Khan said, “One of the central elements of the Islamic faith is the inseparable nature of faith and world. The two are so deeply intertwined that one cannot imagine their separation. They constitute a “Way of Life” (May 20, 2006). Thirty years earlier, the Aga Khan had described Islam as a way of life encompassing all dimensions of an individual’s life.

This means that every aspect of the individual's daily existence is guided by Islam: his family relations, his business relations, his education, his health, the means and manner by which he gains his livelihood, his philanthropy, what he sees and hears around him, what he reads, the way he regulates his time, the buildings in which he lives, learns and earns. (His Highness the Aga Khan, Presidential Address at the International Seerat Conference, March 1976)

The proposition is that the practice of faith and the living tradition suffuse the totality of one’s life regardless of how either mundane or uplifting the activity or circumstance may be. It is through continual attention to the principle of human responsibility to the Divine, as manifested in one’s thoughts and actions, as an individual and towards others, that the everyday is raised to the transcendent level. This
disposition is sometimes referred to as God-consciousness or *taqwa*\(^{26}\). Practical expression to the ethical vision of the Islamic message can be fulfilled each day through each and every action, small or grand. In addition, the individual’s right to personal intellectual search is also given primacy in the Aga Khan’s guidance to the Ismaili community. Each institution established by the Aga Khan has the ethos of the enlightened mind, whether it is a space of worship, of formal learning, or of architectural design. Of prominence to the teachings of both Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV are the themes of progressive spiritual advancement through self-discipline towards self-realisation and equally, the idea of material progress through purposive and responsible action. In speaking of the future of the Muslim world, Aga Khan IV has emphasized understanding the Islamic concept of human fraternity, the necessity of fostering Muslims intellectuals inspired by Islamic heritage, and the development of Islamic art and architecture (Esmail & Nanji, 2007). These elements can be instructive in bringing about a Muslim renaissance which he believes lies in the Islamic heritage awaiting interpretation for the context of present day. He expresses these sentiments below:

> The Holy Prophet’s life gives us every fundamental guideline that we require to resolve the problem as successfully as our human minds and intellects can visualise. His example of integrity, loyalty, honesty, generosity both of means and of time, his solicitude for the poor, the weak and the sick, his steadfastness in friendship, his humility in success, his magnanimity in victory, his simplicity, his wisdom in conceiving new solutions for problems which could not be solved by traditional methods, without affecting the fundamental concepts of Islam, surely all these are foundations which, correctly understood and sincerely interpreted, must enable us to conceive what should be a truly modern and dynamic Islamic society in the years ahead. (His Highness the Aga Khan, Presidential Address at the International Seerat Conference, March 1976)

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\(^{26}\) The human quality that encompasses the concept of the ideal ethical value in the Qur’an is summed up in the term, *taqwa*, which in its various forms, occurs over two hundred times in the text. It represents, on the one hand, moral grounding that underlies human actions, while on the other hand it signifies ethical conscience which makes human beings aware of their responsibilities to God and society. Applied to the wider social context *taqwa* becomes the universal ethical mark of a truly moral community.” Azim Nanji, 2008, *Dictionary of Islam.*
Principles of Interpretation within the Living Tradition

I began this chapter by looking at the idea of living tradition as presented by Alasdair MacIntyre (2007). MacIntyre features the prominence of a ‘quest for good’ which he says is indicative of the purpose of a living tradition. This quest is influenced by our historical and social contexts and is capable of bringing to the individual a unified narrative of life. In many ways, that unifying life narrative or integrated perspective is what faith traditions seek to do for an individual and for a community. This can happen through the enduring values of the tradition and how these values are interpreted and given expression over time. MacIntyre highlights the importance of the quest in furthering understanding the “goods” or the values of the living tradition and also in acquiring increasing self-knowledge towards transformation.

One way to understand the quest of a living tradition has been offered by Hodgson (1974) in his conceptualization of what makes a living tradition vital. Hodgson’s proposition is that a tradition must be useful if it is to retain its vitality. The cumulative interaction of thought, dialogue, and action of a community inspired by commitment to the creative vision of the tradition can enable vitality and continuing expression of the living tradition. Throughout this chapter I have presented the nature of cumulative interaction of the Shia Ismaili Muslim community through interpretive efforts in the historical development of this tradition. I have shown that interpretation and continual reinterpretation has always been a hallmark of the Shi‘i perspective and of Ismaili thought. The rationale for establishing this argument is to have the reader understand that the kind of curriculum inquiry being focused on in this study is an interpretive one. The Ismaili community and its thought and doctrines have evolved through principles of interpretation that have responded to the context of the time, given impetus to the development of a rich intellectual heritage, and rooted in a particular conception of leadership and authority.

Through illustrative (although not comprehensive) cases in this chapter, the following understandings emerge with regards to the Ismaili Muslim perspective on interpretation. First of all, the Ismailis believe that the message of the Qur’anic revelation is timeless, universal and invites ongoing reflection and engagement. It is through continual search for the inner and fresh meanings that one is able to
comprehend how to practice their faith according to divine will and according to the present time; hence the continued interpretation of the symbolic is essential to the practice of faith. The symbolic inner meanings represent the esoteric dimension of the faith, *batin*, which co-exists in harmony with the exoteric and more literal understandings, *zahir*. Both are complementary and necessary for a unified life narrative because it is within the context of the world that an individual discovers and engages his or her spiritual potentiality. This continual effort to suffuse the experience of the everyday with the consciousness of the Divine or the transcendent will be referred to as *unity of being* over the course of this dissertation.

Second, engagement of the human intellect in the act of continuous interpretation is essential to the understanding and practice of faith. Such an engagement entails continuous interpretation of the twin wisdoms of reason and revelation. The interpretive effort is characterized by their continuous reconciliation through amalgamating knowledge compatible with the tradition and through keeping the values of the tradition uppermost in this amalgamation. The active pursuit of multiple sources of knowledge including transcendent knowledge as a central element to interpretation will be referred to as *epistemological humility*\(^{27}\). Epistemological humility is our ability to intentionally seek knowledge recognizing that the human mind and its capacity is not absolute. It is also a recognition and a validation of the need for differing knowledge sources and searching for this knowledge in a plurality of disciplines, a plurality of voices, as well as a plurality of epistemic stances. The inquiry becomes an inquiry of wholeness which invites the transcendence of vocabulary boundaried by religious, academic, and cultural traditions. The call is to awaken all faculties of human creativity to enable new conceptualizations and paradigms of our world.

\(^{27}\) The term, epistemological humility, has also been used by Cush and Francis (2006) which they define as the provisional, limited nature of knowledge and the need to respect alternate viewpoints. My use of the term does not oppose this view but extends it to suggest that individuals need to seek out knowledge in all forms including transcendent knowledge.
Third, humans are designated exalted status by the Divine and it is through submission to the Divine and through service to fellow humanity that one is able to move towards this status; hence as a vicegerent of God, human beings are accountable for contributing towards a righteous community. As such, an interpretive principle which is essential to the sustenance and enactment of the living tradition is the responsibility of community realization which is the covenant of an individual with the Divine of serving as a trustee of God on earth. It involves acceptance of the inescapable responsibility towards the other and contributing to human development through ethical participation in community. In Shia Islam, the use of knowledge for the betterment of humankind is seen as a responsibility of the believer and is an essential practice of faith.

Interpretation of faith is not solely a reflective or meditative activity; it is the interpretation of how ongoing knowledge can be applied towards action. Through grounding a moral code in divine will, individuals are afforded opportunities to respond to the revelation by using their rational awareness to guide their actions (Nanji, 1996). Human conduct and aspirations are integral to acts of faith in wider social and cultural contexts within which religious consciousness is seen to contribute to the betterment of humanity and the realisation of its potential.

And finally and most importantly, the primordial belief which is necessary to the interpretive quest is the authoritative knowledge of the Imam who is vested with the ability to guide believers towards a dynamic, relevant, and temporally esoteric understanding of the tradition. As discussed earlier, the zahir meanings are context bound and need to be understood and appropriated by each generation over time. The engagement and willingness to go beyond the apparent, and to continually interpret the enduring ideals of faith is the batin. It is important to note the centrality of personal search or quest in the interpretive engagement. The batin are not fixed meanings to be discovered. It is the act of personal search that enables encounters with meanings. Esmail (1998) cautions that we must not approach the “anti-dogmatic” in a “dogmatic” manner.

What is ultimately significant is not what meanings are found to lie ‘behind’ specific passages, but that they are understood in this manner. The very notion of symbolism, which goes with what might be called the plentitude of meaning, are no less significant than what the symbols are thought to ‘symbolise.’ (p. 52)
It has been argued historically that such depth of spiritual knowledge is not easily accessible to human reason. It can be cultivated as it was at the time of the da'is but requires the teachings of the Imam to guide this learning. Throughout the past fourteen centuries, the Ismailis have sustained and given expression to their living tradition through the guidance of the Imam, a direct descendant from the family of the Prophet, who has interpreted the messages contained in the revelation for the advancement of the community. Through its sometimes tumultuous history of persecution, the glorified flourishing of civilization, the vast geographical dispersion, and the increasing diversity of cultural practices resulting from the geographical spread, it is worthwhile to pause and reflect upon how Shia Ismaili Muslims have retained and evolved their living tradition.

A possible response may lie in the nature of the quest and the Ismaili teachings in offering what Madelung (1977) referred to as a coherent and comprehensive view of the Divine, the universe and the history of the tradition. In addition to seeking a unity of being between the faith and world through both the zahir and batin meanings of the revelation, and practicing epistemological humility through searching out a plurality of knowledge sources, and contributing to the betterment of humanity through one’s actions towards community realization, the aspect of personal search and enlightenment towards an exalted human destiny has been an essential teaching of the Imams through time. An individual’s personal search further enables an interpretive engagement with faith through self-understanding, the discovery of possibilities within oneself and the discovery of awe and wonder within other forms of being. This principle of interpretation, attunement to beauty and infinitude, draws on our inherent creativity and the beauty of creation around us. Bringing about change and giving new expression through what Hodgson called cumulative interaction is an act of creativity that summons us to take note of the aesthetic quality of our human, physical and spiritual world. Attending to the beauty around us, through our physical, rational and spiritual sensibilities, can stir our sometimes latent human impulse to see possibility in our world and to create verbal, intellectual, organizational, and aesthetic expressions that move us beyond where we can imagine ourselves to be. Attunement to beauty and infinitude is the awakening of ‘seeing’ beauty in our world and ‘seeing’ endless possibility for the creation of beauty for self and society. This beauty lies in the enduring values of a living tradition, which through personal search guided by the Imam, can provide an infinitude of possibilities for
the human mind seeking enlightenment. The question now remains how such principles of interpretation can take shape in the curricular inquiry of the teachers and to what extent the interpretive efforts are present in the cumulative interaction of the teachers and their students.

**Conclusion**

The central inquiry of this study is a curricular inquiry of religious education for adolescents in the Ismaili Muslim community. The essence and paradigm of the living tradition is one of the most formative influences on the nature of the curriculum being developed as well as on the curricular approaches the education program is encouraging. In this chapter through a historical examination of the Ismaili Muslim living tradition, the case being put forth is that Ismaili Muslims, like other Muslims, are guided by the Qur’anic vision of establishing a righteous community according to divine will. This ‘creative action’ of the revelation has inspired a group commitment from the Ismailis over time to understand the inner meanings, symbolism and universal messages of the Qur’an as they apply to present times in forming a righteous community. Such understanding requires the guidance and interpretation from the Imam of the time as well as an intellectual engagement from the individual. The cumulative interaction then has taken the form of an interpretive quest in all its various forms discussed throughout the chapter. This quest has been characterized by the notion of harmony between faith and world, between reason and revelation, between everyday action and transcendent thought, and between personal search and community conscientization.

There are some salient educational implications that can be drawn from Ismaili thought for a curricular inquiry. How do we approach the study and practice of this living tradition as a quest and how do we nurture and inspire such a quest in our students? It is not sufficient to have a curricular approach that simply exposes students to new knowledge. This is indeed necessary, but it is also equally if not more important to cultivate a desire for seeking knowledge from a plurality of disciplines to enable Ismaili Muslim youth to situate their knowledge of the world and their tradition within a larger, informed framework. We can understand conceptually that the view of faith being intertwined with everyday life is a key perspective of Ismaili thought. How then does our
curricular approach engage this integration and dispel the bifurcation of faith being separate from the world, of tradition being separate from modernity? Ismaili students have grown up with a conception of practice of faith being mostly in congregational spaces. A curricular approach would need to broaden this outlook to illuminate practice of faith within the everyday actions of interacting with others, decision making, and conduct in public and private spaces. How do we teach students about maintaining a responsibility for reasoned engagement as well as sustaining humility towards the grace of a higher wisdom? A curricular approach would need to be mindful of honoring the intellectual engagement of students whilst also honoring the normative dimensions of the tradition. In other words, the reasoned engagement would be framed by the norms of the tradition. And finally, how does a curricular approach instill character-in-action as the core of teaching (Sajoo, 2010) and awaken students to the calling of the community as the vehicle through which this can be realised?

If we return to MacIntyre (2007), there are some natural threads we can draw upon to begin to form the curricular fabric. MacIntyre emphasizes that our life narratives take place within historical contexts and that understanding these historical contexts permit us to better understand how to formulate the narratives that are yet to come. He also spoke about the importance of social contexts and understanding how we are placed in relation to the other to enable us to choose intelligible actions and enable us to gain insight into the intelligible (or unintelligible) actions of others. And he spoke about the quest for good which brings us to realize the purpose of our tradition through seeking what is meant by goodness and also who we are in this quest. Accordingly, in a curriculum of living tradition, we can consider the importance of historicity and understanding ourselves as historical beings who have been formed by a past, are creating a story by our actions in the present, and have the potential to author our futures. We can consider the importance of understanding our living tradition within current societal contexts and how our practice of faith can contribute to our social realities in meaningful ways or deter and distort our social realities towards a myopic focus on self. We can consider the importance of personal search and intellectual engagement in the everyday moments with a consciousness of the transcendent, of beauty, of possibility. This may entail capacities towards critical and creative interpretations of the world around us. If we are to create a unified life narrative, the
quest may well be to reposition the tradition from being something that lives outside of us which we must be reminded to observe and attend to, and instead place the tradition inside of us where it is a call, a summons, or a reminder of

... the capacity that the human spirit has, in arenas of moral action, artistic creation or intellectual contribution to knowledge, to allow being to disclose itself anew to man. Under the tutelage of the revealed—in fact, the revealing—word, the phenomenal self learns that it is not the master of truth, nor the author of being, yet a privileged vehicle for the disclosure of a mode of being of which awe and wonder, worship and exaltation, and above all moral action in the world are natural counterparts. (IIS, Introductory Notes on the Qur’an, 2004, p. 5)

The curricular endeavor is more than teaching about the living tradition; it is teaching about the human narrative and a human’s potential within that narrative to create ‘wholeness’ for themselves and for their community with the grace of the Divine. The curricular endeavour as it is situated within this study, and within curriculum inquiry will be the focus for Chapter Three.
Chapter 3:
Curriculum as Hermeneutical Inquiry

The business of the educator—whether parent or teacher—is to see to it that the greatest possible number of ideas acquired by children and youth are acquired in such a vital way that they become moving ideas, motive forces in the guidance of conduct. This demand and this opportunity make the moral purpose universal and dominant in all instruction—whatsoever the topic. . . . to aim at making the methods of learning, of acquiring intellectual power, and of assimilating subject-matter, such that they will render behavior more enlightened, more consistent, more vigorous than it otherwise would be [emphasis added]. (Dewey, 1909, p. 5)

The quote from John Dewey above was the introduction to my statement of intent on my application to the SFU doctoral program. Five years later, as I am approaching the final stages of my doctorate work, I am reflecting back as to why I had chosen this particular excerpt to express my intention and my earnest desire to explore and know something more about curriculum. Dewey’s words represent one of my core beliefs as an educator. The study of curriculum and its actualization with students should have a transforming effect on all us, both students and teachers. In the initial stages of my teaching career, it was this belief and quest to make curriculum a motive force for children that shaped how I learnt to teach. I still remember being questioned by the principal in my first year of teaching as to why I was not following the basal reading series sequentially and why I chose to select literature from various different sources to compose the reading program for my grade five class. I remember crafting authentic conversations using grammatical structures for my French junior high secondary students so my classes were not reduced to rote memorization and endless worksheets to learn a language. I remember feeling spirit and life I could barely contain when I was able to lift ideas that mattered from the curriculum and work with the students on unearthing these ideas. They were not always straightforward to assess or to plan for
but I felt that the students would be able to ‘move’ with these ideas rather than having them as latent and possibly temporary knowledge. I also remember feeling lifeless and weighty in the classroom when having to teach material where ‘motive forces’ were not visible for me or my students. Dewey’s words articulate for me what matters about curriculum. What matters about curriculum is that the experience of learning becomes a force that urges movement, movement towards a way of being that is a more vigorous, enlightened and consistent way of living in this world amongst and with others. Hence, my doctoral study had to also both honor and probe this belief. I entered the program thinking I may research the idea of enlightened leaders and how such leaders can create conditions for transformative curricular practice. I now understand that it doesn’t really matter what position of leadership one holds; what matters is how we as educators collectively create such conditions for our students and for each other as colleagues. And part of this process of creation is to understand and interpret what it means to be enlightened, why we need more vigor, why behaviour needs to be consistent, and what is meant by motive forces. When I read Dewey’s work, I was immersed in teacher development efforts within the religious education context. His moral call appealed to me. I saw it as non-negotiable in the work we do with children. Why would we teach religious education if it was not to render our children, and ourselves, more enlightened, vigorous and consistent in their (and our) being? The quest of a living tradition can become a way to understand the questions I have posed above and enact responses to them.

As part of my professional role, I often visit classrooms to learn about how the IIS curriculum is being implemented by teachers, how it is being received or experienced by students, and what sort of teacher education work and support we need to pursue within the faculty. In the second year of the program, I was working with some teachers on articulating the ‘big ideas’ of the curriculum and had been asked to conduct a lesson observation as to how these ideas were developed in the classroom space for students. The extract below is from part of the observation notes of that class.

*I am seated in the classroom mindful of the positive and supportive presence I need to exude so the teachers whom I am observing are not uptight about my presence as their supervisor. There are eight students present this evening seated in two groups of four students each. The classroom has been well organized, the class proceedings are listed*
on the board, an attractive PowerPoint is projected on the screen, the two co-teachers present themselves as professional, warm and caring, yet focused on the execution of the detailed lesson plan that sits before me. They begin class talking about the concept of sadaqa, acts of kindness, and ask students to generate examples of sadaqa in their lives. After sharing some thoughts, a brief review is done of last class and a connection is made to the next learning activity, which asks students to develop a story using a hadith i.e. saying of the Prophet Muhammad. Students are asked to create a narrative where Prophet Muhammad may have used this hadith and to retell the story to the class. Hadiths selected for the students have been carefully printed and pasted on colored paper and all selections speak of kindness and ethical action towards others as a form of practice of faith.

The teachers circulate to the groups re-explaining the activity, assisting students with interpreting their hadith, and encouraging them to craft their story. As students present their narratives to the class, the interest is piqued as some are curious to see how their peers have created their story. Others listen politely and conduct themselves in typical routinized classroom behavior. The teachers move on to explain how the hadiths exemplify the life of the Prophet and draw out the themes of social justice and care as inspiration for our actions today. Again, the students listen politely, one or two students yawn. I find myself wishing the teachers would push further rather than presenting what is mostly incontestable, our faith (as other faiths) urges the development of an ethical outlook which guides how we relate to the world. Who would argue with that? And the students don’t. One of the teachers then says, “But it’s not always easy to do that, is it? Sometimes it’s difficult to do the right thing.” Ah, now we’re getting somewhere, this is exactly where we need to go, I think to myself. I perk up anticipating the response of the students. The teachers do not wait, they move on to the next activity. (Field Notes, November 2011)

The question that arises for me is to what extent this learning experience has rendered the students more vigorous, enlightened and consistent in their behaviour, not as a final state, but a movement in those directions. I also wonder to what extent it has moved the teachers or myself in similar directions as to those we aspire to for our students. Fast forward three years, I am having a conversation with another teacher regarding the process she is thinking through to develop her curricular narrative for the
term. I ask her, “How is the study of Cordoba in the ninth century going to render your students more enlightened human beings? How will it influence the way they understand, interpret and act in their world? And if not, why would any child want to come to class?” The position I am putting forth is that for our religious education classes to be meaningful to the students, the study of curriculum has to offer the students ways of understanding the world and ways of interpreting the world that they may not be able to access elsewhere. These are not necessarily superior ways of being and knowing, but rather, ways of being and knowing themselves and their worlds that are rooted in both their faith and their experience of the world. How can curricular inquiry offer students epistemic stances where they understand the enduring values of tradition as motive forces in their lives?

Taylor (2011) refers to Iris Murdoch’s critique on the narrowness of moral philosophy in asking what is it that we ought to do. He suggests we need to look beyond obligation and ask the more important questions of what it is to be good and what it means to have a good life. There is some resonance here with MacIntyre’s (2007) concept of the quest for good never being fully realized but a sense of continuous movements, or motive forces, in understanding the good and also what is noble and admirable about this good. I think it is this dimension that was missing from the lesson above. Ethical action or the guidance of conduct involves one’s being, that is, understanding, and it involves doing, that is, interpreting the understanding to action and it also involves loving or being constitutively moved by the sense of good. The students may have understood ways of being grounded in care and social justice from the Prophetic tradition; they may have also understood that these ways need to translate or be interpreted into acts of kindness in their lives. What I am not certain was stirred is the what or why of this good and also the struggle of ‘loving’ this good or being ‘moved’ by this good to render their behaviour towards a consistent commitment to their tradition. And it is this very question that I am asking in this study of how curriculum inquiry can facilitate understanding and interpretation of self, our world, and our living tradition within this world, and if indeed, curriculum inquiry can inspire a commitment and a facility to integrate this triad into a unified life narrative.
Understanding Curriculum as Inquiry: The Reconceptualist Movement

Curriculum inquiry is conceived as thought, study, and interpretation used to understand curriculum, which is characterized as experiential journeys that shape perspectives, dispositions, skills, and knowledge by which we live. Curriculum inquiry inevitably must consider a multitude of questions that have perplexed educators throughout history; for example, what is worthwhile, why, where, when, how, and for whose benefit? (William Schubert, 2008, p. 399)

The field of curriculum studies has been described as rich but also messy. Flinders and Thornton (2009) highlight both the complexity and contentious nature of curriculum inquiry. They claim the hallmarks of the field include “unpredictability over inevitability, flexibility over rigidity, and sufficing over idealism” (p. iii). The lines of inquiry in the field reflect a diversity of perspectives of social values, historical trends and ideologies resulting in both richness of thought and messiness in constructing thought and translating ideas to practice. Schubert (2008) adds that curriculum inquiry is not easily categorized into one single paradigm. The process is eclectic, exudes uncertainty and requires a spirit which allows a continuous interplay between the “synoptic and heuristic, between paradigms and imaginative speculation that moves beyond them” (p. 401). Curriculum inquiry is a journey that seeks to understand meanings and aspirations; it enriches, confuses and complicates a sense of possibility in the inquirer. The study of curriculum and its inquiries is vast and many have endeavoured to represent curriculum inquiry historically, synoptically, methodologically and philosophically. 28 One of the most significant shifts in the field has been the move from developing curriculum materials to understanding the influences and forces that shape or ought to shape curriculum.

The synoptic text, Understanding Curriculum, (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008) is devoted to presenting this significant paradigm shift that has evolved

in the field of curriculum, a movement from curriculum development to curriculum understanding. William Pinar and his co-writers explain that the traditional field of curriculum was largely characterized by the development of textual materials representing bodies of knowledge intended to shape school subjects. The preoccupation of the current field, however, has shifted to understanding. They quote David Gordon (1988) who says, “Education functions, at least in secular societies, as a text that says something about the things society considers sacred.” Understanding curriculum is the effort to understand the relationship between curriculum and the world and also the relationship between school subjects and the individual issues within specific subjects. Curriculum inquiry is no longer about solving technical problems of ‘how.’ Instead, it is a human inquiry that provokes the ‘why’ questions, the larger questions of education and society. The aim of understanding curriculum is not to discover eternal truths; it is to provoke thinking and profound reflection on how life history, gender, race, social contexts, theology and politics all come together to influence the educational experience.

The work of these theorists illustrates a radical shift in the definition of curriculum from school materials to curriculum as symbolic representation. Curriculum understood as symbolic representation makes reference to the “institutional and discursive practices, structures, images and experiences that can be identified and analyzed in various ways i.e. politically, racially, autobiographically, phenomenologically, theologically, internationally, and in terms of gender and deconstruction” (p. 16). The contemporary field of curriculum is defined to a large extent by this endeavour to understand curriculum as symbolic representation. The authors describe the paradigm of curriculum development as procedural and bureaucratic in its conception and implementation. They claim that the aim of curriculum development is fundamentally to rationalize institutional maintenance or to guide incremental improvement whereas the function of curriculum theory now is to understand before moving to change or action. In the contemporary field, accordingly, theory and practice are not seen as distinct entities with the former belonging to university scholars and the latter belonging to teacher practitioners. They are seen as embedded in each other. The authors refer to Short, Willis and Schubert’s (1985) conception of curriculum inquiry which supports the “individual developing the responsibility to ask fundamental curriculum questions about
his/her own growth and its consequences for the growth of others that reconceives the theory into practice problem as practice and theory embedded in one another” (emphasis in original, p. 56).

Curriculum inquiry in the contemporary field, according to these authors, is intended to provoke questions as much as to answer questions through stimulating self-reflection, self-understanding and social change. Issues of interpretation and meaning become central to understanding curriculum as it is through reading and re-reading, interpreting and re-interpreting discourses that understanding is developed. Pinar and his colleagues emphasize that understanding is not defined in a positivistic sense of searching out a reality external to the lives of those involved in this effort. Understanding in this sense is defined as “a ‘reading’ of reality that reinterprets that reality, and in that reinterpretation, changes both the interpreter and the interpreted” (p. 62). Curriculum inquiry as Jennifer Greene (1992) suggests is suspending the impulse to ‘get it right’ and embracing the effort to make it meaningful. The interpretive nature of the contemporary field has moved curriculum research from a purely scientific tradition to one that is concerned with theory from artistic, humanistic and social fields. The term given to these inquiries is the reconceptualization of curriculum.

The reconceptualist movement, as stated above, is a movement away from looking at curriculum through psychological and behavioural perspectives to one that is more grounded in the humanities. Pinar et al. (2008) consider the disciplines of history, philosophy and literary criticism as being most influential in formulating the initial curricular inquiries of this movement. The interest spurring the reconceptualist movement arose from the aspiration to ‘humanize’ the curriculum and as a result, to make more ‘human’ the classrooms and learning experiences encountered by children. Many curriculum scholars, now known as reconceptualist scholars within the curricular field, advocated for the importance of humanism in curricular thought and practice. Some early foundational scholars include James B. MacDonald, Paul R. Klohr, Eliot W. Eisner, Maxine Greene and Herbert A. Kliebard. These scholars argued for the presence of aesthetic, literary and relational sensibilities as integral to the study of curriculum. Among these scholars, Dwayne E. Huebner was also seminal in introducing and developing conceptions of curriculum derived from philosophy, aesthetics and
theology. Huebner’s work will be used as the curricular theoretical framework for this study and will be elaborated upon later in this chapter.

From the work of reconceptualist scholars, there emerged a greater focus and clarity on sociocultural and personal dimensions of curriculum (Flinders & Thornton, 2009). Two particular features articulated by Pinar (2009) in defining the reconceptualization of curriculum were their value-laden perspective and their politically emancipatory intent which results in a heightened awareness of the complexity and historical significance of curriculum matters. Issues that reconceptualists identify are not problems to be solved as these issues are embedded in culture at large. Pinar argues that what is necessary is a fundamental reconceptualization of curriculum, its functions and its possibilities for emancipation. This commitment to a comprehensive critique and theory development is what distinguishes the reconceptualist phenomenon. Phenomenological and hermeneutical curriculum inquiries, the areas that this study is concerned with, have developed within the reconceptualist movement.

**Phenomenological and Hermeneutical Curriculum Inquiry**

In his book, *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry*, Edmund Short (1991) explains the purposeful nature of curriculum research which is to inform curriculum action. Curriculum research involves seeking, creating and justifying knowledge relevant to the choices made about curriculum. The type of inquiry, therefore, should be appropriate to the question being studied or to the nature of knowledge being sought. This study’s endeavour is to gain insight as to how curricular inquiry can facilitate a meaningful integration between the living tradition and modern life such that this it brings about a harmonious and enriched life experience for the individual. The quest for good in the Ismaili Muslim tradition has been described in the previous chapters as an interpretive quest to better understand the self, the world, and the tradition and to interpret these three elements in a manner that enables a unity of being. Understanding and interpreting are significant ideas in phenomenology and hermeneutics and have been theorized as practical wisdom for curriculum studies (Chambers, 2003). The inquiry being pursued for this study uses phenomenology as an entry point as it places importance on understanding experience. Its main emphasis, however, lies in
Phenomenology is concerned with the understanding of lived experience in a particular way, lived in a specific place, in relation to others (Chambers, 2003). Phenomenological inquiry is a form of interpretive inquiry which focuses on human perceptions and what is primary in human experience (Willis, 1991). It is concerned with the question, “What is it that the individual sees in life?” Although human experience is constituted by perceiving, thinking and acting, the beginning point is perception. Phenomenological inquiry is an investigation into distinctively human perceptions of individuals which result in artistic or aesthetic descriptions that may relate to other people. The cyclical and interconnected process of perceiving, thinking and acting are integral to human experience and can bring about a self-consciousness where individuals consider and reconsider, perceive and reperceive meanings and actions anew. Willis claims it is this consciousness about self-consciousness that makes human experience unique and rich in learning. This consciousness of our perceptions is referred to as our inner ‘life-worlds’; it is where our own distinctive human experience begins as we are aware of how we feel about the external world before we engage in meaning making or action about those feelings. Phenomenological inquiry renders life-world descriptions of perceptions. When engaged and interpreted, the inquiry then becomes increasingly hermeneutic. An example would be considering what individual perceptions have in common with human experience or how contexts influence perceptions.

“Phenomenology is a disciplined, rigorous effort to understand experience profoundly and authentically” (Pinar et al., 2008, p. 405). Accordingly, consciousness is an important category for the phenomenologist. Maxine Greene’s (1971) phenomenological inquiry of curriculum redefines the idea of consciousness as being
attentive to perceptions and experiences of the world. Greene speaks about consciousness as moving toward the world not away from it.

Consciousness, being intentional, throws itself outward towards the world. It is always consciousness of something—a phenomenon, another person, an object in the world. Reflecting upon himself as a conscious object, the individual—the learner, perhaps—reflects upon his relation to the world, his manner of comporting himself with respect to it, the changing perspectives through which the world presents itself to him. (p. 257, emphasis in original)

Greene suggests phenomenological approaches to curriculum can remind us of what it means for students to be present to themselves. Martha Zacharias (2004) in her review of Greene’s work elaborates on this presence. “We also need to intensify our consciousness in the everyday drone of life activities and situations; we need to make continuous earnest efforts to be intensely conscious and aware, so that a focus for new perspectives, insights, and learning can emerge” (p. 2). Such origins of significant quests for meaning ought to be held in mind, Greene posits, to enable students to project beyond their present horizons and elevate the taken-for-granted moments in everyday life.

Greene uses literary consciousness, specifically “the critic of consciousness,” to elaborate upon the intersubjectivity between the reader (or learner) and the (curricular) text claiming that texts are not isolated structures. They have been given life by their authors. The reader in entering the discourse of the text also creates, or recreates, the text according to his experience by framing it in terms of his consciousness. Although phenomenological views are centered on the experience and not the analysis, Greene suggests that the continual reconstruction a learner engages with “culminates in a bringing something into being by the reader—in a ‘going beyond’ what he has been” (p. 255). The curriculum, then, in order to overcome the meaninglessness often associated with disciplines, must present itself as a consciousness of possibility, an invitation to the learner to search for meaning through relating his life to the knowledge. In other words, this consciousness or awareness invites possibilities for the learner to be attentive to his engagement with the world. Greene emphasizes, “That the individual, in our case the student, will only be in a position to learn when he is committed to act upon his world” (p. 263).
In her review of Greene’s work on *Curriculum and Consciousness*, Janet Miller (2010) further interprets Greene’s thoughts on consciousness as a process that enables individuals to exert agency in this world towards a better state of things. She refers to Alfred Schutz’s (1967) call for “wide-awakeness” which urges the individual to struggle in order to be truly present to his experience. Wide-awakeness according to Greene situates the search for and construction of meaning as primary; meaning of relations to everyday life and of self in relation to the world. Miller reminds us, “Greene is interested in acts of consciousness that grasp the appearance of things, that jut into the world, that enable persons to create and take initiatives that could and should contribute to humanizing and yes, even transforming possibilities in education” (p. 128). Miller captures related sentiments about Greene’s work in making reference to the notion of “going beyond” which Greene sees as a consciousness of possibilities, that is, “whatever is chosen and acted upon must be grounded in an awareness of what could be held in common with others in a world filled with difference, and of what might be possible to transform in that world” (p. 128).

When students and teachers come together as conscious and wide-awake beings, possibilities unfold for what previously may not be seen. Pinar et al. (2008) highlight the transformative nature of phenomenology in reference to David Jardine’s (1987) work stating, “Phenomenology embraces the world as we live it, but in the process, invites us to change the way we live. Our taken-for-granted notions of self-understanding, reflection, and practical competence are all reconceived in phenomenological inquiry” (p. 413). The idea of consciousness in relation to the other and as a way of transforming our being is the space of praxis often associated with Paulo Freire’s (1971/2000) thinking on conscientization and liberation. Freire suggests the development of consciousness allows people to be responsible, self-affirming and enter into a reality they can change, a reality where it is easier to love and to care.

Another important scholar of the phenomenological hermeneutic tradition is Ted Aoki who first made the distinction between curriculum as lived and curriculum as planned (1990). Aoki invited both teachers and students to be increasingly conscious of the lived experiences of curriculum and the potential wisdom that could be accrued through interpretation of experiences. Aoki (1993, 1984, 1980) points to an internal crisis in curriculum which stems from our commitment to technological progress and to
the improvement of personal and situational life. His proposition is in order for education not to alienate, it must be transformed by a reclaiming of the fullness of body and soul. Such work will require an “inspired curriculum, a curriculum that can influence the ways people can be attuned to the world” (p. 62). In such a curriculum, “teaching is understood not only as a mode of doing but also a mode of being-with-others . . . Teaching is a world of leading out—leading out into possibilities” (p. 361). A school with such a view would emphasize and nurture the becoming of human beings. Its origin lies in an understanding of “teachers and students as embodied beings of wholeness and restores the unity of body and mind, body and soul” (p. 362). Inspired curriculum does not negate the doing, but enfolds doing and being in the individual where doing has a purpose of self-formation.

Teacher-centred curriculum, student-centred curriculum or subject-centred curriculum often compete for priority whereas the inspired curriculum centres curriculum thought on a broader frame of human/world relationships. This frame permits access to “the deeper meaning of what it is for teachers and students to be human, to become more human and to act humanly in educational situations” (p. 95). Aoki cautions that when we focus exclusively on any single frame of teacher, student or subject matter, we risk becoming indifferent to the other frames. Using the more integrated frame of human/world relationships changes our perspective towards curriculum content. Instead of the “what are we going to teach” question, we would be asking more frequently, “why am I teaching this and what does teaching this or learning this mean for our relationship with the world?” What results is a dialectical engagement with the curriculum, where we as teachers and students are breathing life into the curriculum content through giving it meaning, and the curriculum is inspiring life in us through revealing new layers of meaning.

Max van Manen (1984) outlines the characteristics of a phenomenological inquiry. First, phenomenological inquiry, as seen above, investigates lived experience. As individuals, we are deeply immersed in and mostly unaware of our life worlds. Phenomenology asks us to pay attention to the daily, taken-for-granted, natural attitudes of our practical life. Second, phenomenological inquiry seeks the essence of experiences. In reflecting on our taken-for-granted views, phenomenology seeks to understand the nature of experience and the meaning of events by asking the ‘what’
questions rather than the ‘how’ questions. Third, phenomenology is the conscious practice of thoughtfulness which van Manen describes as a ‘minding,’ a ‘heeding,’ an ‘attunement’ (Heidegger, 1962) to what it feels like and means to be alive. At its essence, phenomenology is an expression of thoughtfulness. Fourth, phenomenological inquiry does not produce knowledge for its own sake; knowledge is produced to disclose what it means to be human. The focus is on the study of being in this world and requires knowledge of historical, cultural and political traditions. A key phenomenological idea is that human beings exhibit the will, capacity and imagination to choose in light of their own ‘horizons’ (Pinar, 1988). Individuals give meaning to their lived situations thereby increasing their self-understanding in relation to others within community.

Referring back to Hodgson’s framework, a vital living tradition requires continual effort to interpret and understand the creative vision(s) of the tradition. It requires a consciousness of the group commitment and how this commitment is being undertaken by the community. And, it requires attentiveness to the cumulative dialogue taking place which gives the living tradition new expressions; expressions that hold meaning for individuals to enrich their human narratives within the societies in which they live. Approaching curriculum in a phenomenological way allows for increased understanding, not only of the particular subject matter being studied (in this case, the Ismaili Muslim living tradition), but also of how the discipline is embedded in society and enacted amongst humans. In this way, phenomenological curriculum inquiry increases consciousness of an individual’s relation to their lifeworlds and of the interpretability of those lifeworlds.

George Willis (1991) reminds us of the risk and challenges of separating phenomenology and hermeneutics. The human acts of perceiving, thinking and acting do not happen in a linear, sequential manner and meaning making is not postponed from perceptions. As perceptions and consciousness are analyzed, the inquiries become increasingly hermeneutic, that is, increasingly interpretive. Cynthia Chambers (2003) describes phenomenology as seeking the universal through the particular and hermeneutics as continuous interplay and movement between the part(s) and the whole. Hermeneutics gives further insight into understanding and how understanding is formed through discourses, through historicity (both individual and collective), and through social contexts. Hermeneutical inquiry also sheds light on barriers to understanding and how
these barriers may be situated in the above aspects. In this mode of inquiry, humans are seen as intersubjective beings who construct understanding through their encounters. Being attentive to these understandings can reveal insights as to the lived experience. In curriculum inquiry, hermeneutics has served to broaden the phenomenological effort to include the social negotiation of meaning, along with personal attunement to understand truth (Pinar et. al., 2008). Hermeneutic phenomenology, then, concerns itself with historical consciousness, phronesis29, dialogue, interpretation, community, and language (Atkins, 1988).

David Smith (1991) in his work on hermeneutical inquiry argues that contemporary curricular paradigms and their institutional enactments require continuous interpretation and re-interpretation. Hermeneutical inquiry provokes us to ask how we understand the place of children in our lives today and what influences the way we think, speak and act alongside them. Smith describes the hermeneutical imagination in the following way:

The hermeneutic imagination works from a commitment to generativity and rejuvenation and to the question of how we can go on together in the midst of constraints and difficulties that constantly threaten to foreclose on the future. The aim of interpretation, it could be said, is not just another interpretation but human freedom, which finds its light, identity, and dignity in those few brief moments when one’s lived burdens can be shown to have their source in too limited a view of things. (p. 189)

Smith (1991) presents three themes entailed with hermeneutic inquiry as grounded in Schleiermacher’s (1978) work: that of the creative spirit of interpretation; the critical role of language in human understanding; and the interplay between the part and the whole in the process of interpretation which is known as the hermeneutic circle. The process of creative engagement with interpreting texts has been termed as ‘divinitory’ by Schleiermacher. Effective interpretation requires a movement back and forth between the specific and the general, the micro and the macro. In this way, the common and the

29 The term *phronesis* is rooted in Gadamer’s (1960) study of the ancient Greek thought of Plato and Aristotle. It refers to man’s urgent need for self-knowledge or moral knowledge.
singular can permeate each other yielding a unity of meaning and creating increased consciousness as to what is constraining self-understanding and what is encouraging it. Smith furthers the creative engagement to emphasize the dialogical, intersubjective and conversational nature of human experience and draws on Edmund Husserl’s thinking of the unity between self and other (other referring to humans as well as relationships with the universe). Building on his view of commitment and generativity for humankind, he proposes that interpretation when engaged creatively and intersubjectively can lead to a “renewed embrace of the Other and the world in the service of a fuller appreciation of the human prospect” (p. 192).

The unity of self and other being discussed above is not limited to the individual or local human encounter. Smith proposes that the hermeneutic imagination has the capacity to reach across national and cultural boundaries and bring about dialogue and understanding. He observes that in the Western context, teachers are working in classrooms which are increasingly cosmopolitan in nature. Hermeneutical inquiry, in this regard, must be deeply attentive to language and probe what is at work in particular ways of speaking and acting and whether these ways enable us to create experiences of wholeness and integrity for children. Hermeneutical inquiry should also deepen the sense of the interpretability of life. Here, the earlier theme of consciousness is evoked as hermeneutics asks us to meaningfully deconstruct our thoughts and actions and propose alternate creative ways that open up new courses of thought and action. An important part of this interpretive process is the understanding about our specific localities which will be discussed further in subsequent sections. Additionally, the question of human meaning and how we make sense of our lives is central to the hermeneutic endeavour. The hermeneutic circle works to situate the weightiness of everyday life within the grander scheme of life. To

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30 This diversity is a reality within the Ismaili Muslim community in Canada. For example, the religious education teachers in this study work with Ismaili Muslim students who have their origins globally (Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe).
enable this is to let go of what limits us in our thinking and remain open to new conceptual resources that may deepen our understanding of engaging with our world in responsible ways as is reflected in Jardine’s (2006) words below.

It [Hermeneutics] articulates how the world is a living world of living ancestry that perennially has to take up the task presented by the arrival of the new and the young into that living world. As such, it provides a way to re-think what we experience in our day to day lives as teachers, what we understand teaching to be, what we imagine about the relations between the young and the old, and what we understand knowledge and tradition and language and conversation and art and play and imagination and words and images and the methods of science to be. (p. 269, emphasis in original)

In his work, Smith has made various references to the relationship between postmodernism and hermeneutics reflecting that conversations about postmodernism are interpretive, hermeneutic endeavours. The concept of interpretation as being central to curriculum inquiry has been furthered by two postmodern scholars, Noel Gough and William Doll Jr. In their book, Curriculum Visions, Doll and Gough (2002) present a series of essays from curriculum theorists who discuss a postmodern perspective to curriculum inquiry. Both of these curriculum scholars are searching alternatives to the modernist paradigm of curriculum embedded in the empirical-analytical tradition and are seeking multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary, hermeneutic approaches to curriculum inquiry. Gough, through his postmodernist stance, argues for a more nuanced and located understanding of our historical and social contexts and how these influence our fields of visualization or what we are able to see. Doll proposes a dynamic interplay of complexity, community, self-understanding and cosmology to deepen our understanding and interpretation of our world through curriculum.

Gough (2002), in his introductory essay to the book, explains that the curriculum inquiry being pursued is one of generative and embodied visions enacted through both struggles and through curriculum renewal and invention. Gough asks us to reconsider the idea of vision suggesting it can be embodied through sight, but also disembodied through seemingly remote and abstract prospects of the future. He juxtaposes notions of vision typically found in educational literature as positive orientations to future goals with negative critical orientations which call attention to absences in what we do not see.
His central point is if we wish to generate curriculum inquiries that are worthwhile, we need to acknowledge our own histories and fields of visualization as responsible, embodied and engaged actors. Gough claims our fields of visualization are configured by the frames we choose; they are not fixed and determinate. Our work, he suggests, is to understand our locality and how what we see (and don’t see) is determined by our interpretation of this locality. Curriculum inquiry is the interplay between “specific, idiosyncratic, local problems and issues, informed by very eclectic conceptions of how curriculum studies might be performed in emerging global theatres of academic practices” (p. 10). In doing so, we call into the interpretive process resources from ontology, epistemology, methodology, axiology, and what he refers to as metaphysical resources. What is important about Gough’s stance is his proposition that the future is not some distant entity waiting to be arrived at; the futures are in the here and now and are intrinsic to present action and existence. We need to exercise, therefore, wisdom and virtue in our curricular inquiries to construct critical and creative responses to visions that are within our grasp in the present and within which both our pasts and futures are enfolded. These temporal visions are located in our present consciousness and our search is to visualize them now by seeing the possibilities and interpreting our world in ways that are different from our everyday experiences.

Doll (2002) contributes to the discussion on curriculum inquiry by asking us to reconsider our conception of curriculum. He suggests transforming the idea of curriculum from a preset plan or predetermined ideologies to “an image hovering over the process of education, giving direction and meaning to that process” (p. 24). The process of acquiring knowledge is not linear or sequential, and therefore, we need to shift curriculum from an externally controlled process to one that finds a sense of control emerging internally. Doll bases his work on John Dewey’s conception of education as experience and Alfred Whitehead’s ideas on cosmology and complexity. He finds convergences in the work of these scholars and posits that instead of curriculum inquiry being about achieving preset, external ends, we consider a more unified holistic perspective where control emerges from the activity itself. He refers to Martin Heidegger’s work on ‘potentiality of being’ and emphasizes the relational aspects between the curriculum, the child and the text as leading to the potential of unrealized spaces. As these elements interact, there results dynamism of action which coalesces
around further growth and betterment, for the individual, for society and for the cosmos. Doll sees curriculum not as a thing but as a system of relationships. Curriculum inquiry, in his view, is an interpretive effort into understanding these relationships and making meaning of these relationships as they apply to self, to community, and to the universe at large. Central to the process of understanding and meaning making is the emergence from present structures that are, to interrelating and dynamic structures that can be. Doll proposes a framework for curricular inquiry that enables a holistic perspective grounded in relationality. His ideas include the concepts of *currere*, complexity, cosmology, conversation and community.

Aligned with the theme of fields of visualization presented by Gough above, Doll refers to Pinar and Grumet’s (1976) conceptualization of *currere* which means to run a course. Here, Doll is interested in the autobiographical nature of *currere* which is the personal experience of the individual with curriculum. Pinar and Grumet have described *currere* as “self-conscious conceptualization” of the self. This means that it is through the reflective act of developing understanding that transformation occurs for the individual. The profound implications for curriculum are that this type of autobiographical interpretation for the teacher and the learner reframes the educational process to a dialogical and transformative process. The interactions between the learner and text, between the teacher and student, and between the students give birth to a new curricular spirit aroused by the question, “What does this mean to you?” Doll suggests that curriculum is a complex endeavor and considering the curriculum as a dynamic web of interactions will require vision and perseverance from curricularists. The web of interaction surpasses human interaction with text; it also refers to interactions between disciplines and epistemologies. Doll reminds us that the ancients harmoniously integrated the scientific with the storied and the spirit-ful. Revitalizing the curriculum and recapturing the creative energy and aesthetic-ness of life and being would require a cosmological approach to curriculum inquiry which integrates the rigor of scientific endeavor, the imagination of narrative and story, and the creativity of spirit. Finally, Doll speaks to the importance of conversation and of community as the vehicle by which we transform and transcend ourselves. Curriculum inquiry is an exploration of the alliances we develop with ourselves, with our communities and with our cosmos. New visions of
curriculum need to be conceptualized which release creativity, newness and intelligence to ‘see’ and to interpret in our present what our futures can be.

In summary, phenomenological and hermeneutical curriculum inquiry enables a thoughtful, creative engagement with understanding, interpreting, and acting in our world. Phenomenology is about understanding our lived experience and increasing consciousness by being attentive to that experience and the meaning it holds and has possibility for. Relationality with other beings is of significance as experience takes place amidst social contexts and in encounters with the self, with others and with the cosmos. In that sense, there is room to explore and invite different ways of knowing including transcendental forms of knowledge which are integral to the Ismaili Muslim living tradition. Hermeneutics broadens the consciousness of experience by seeking interpretations through paying attention to the historical nature of experience, to languages and discourses, and to social contexts. The creative, generative spirit is essential in hermeneutic inquiry as it refuses foreclosure on any given question asking the inquirer to remain open to further journeys of deeper understanding (Chambers, 2003). Understanding and interpretation at any given time is a temporary resting place which renders educators in a continual quest for pedagogical and curricular possibilities that are transformative for themselves and for students. This interpretive spirit and continual quest are also of great significance to the Ismaili Muslim living tradition as one of the timeless principles of the tradition is personal enlightenment for the benefit of humanity.

Thus far in the chapter, I have looked closely at phenomenological and hermeneutical inquiry from the field of curriculum inquiry. Themes have been drawn out that are relevant to a curricular endeavour of religious education and also, that are consonant with the inherited living tradition of the Ismaili Muslim community. The kind of curriculum inquiry being argued for is a phenomenological hermeneutical effort that: increases consciousness and a ‘wide-awakeness’ to our participation and engagement with the world; renders us increasingly thoughtful as educators and as human beings; conceives of curriculum as a living phenomena of complex relationships between the teacher, the students and the discipline; recognizes the temporal nature of our existence; embraces a myriad of epistemological sources to better understand our contexts and localities; urges us to expand our intellectual capacities to envision creative
possibilities for transforming our world; and situates our experiences of understanding, interpreting and acting as a progressive quest to contribute to the betterment of humanity.

The following section will present the work of Dwayne E. Huebner which is used as one of the theoretical constructs for the study. Huebner’s phenomenological and hermeneutic endeavours envelope and integrate the essential themes articulated above within a paradigm of curriculum inquiry intended to ‘humanize’ curriculum and enact its motive forces towards conduct that is increasingly vigorous, enlightened and consistent. His curricular conceptions privilege transcendence within the mundane, creative ways of conceptualizing curriculum, generative intentions, visioning possibilities for our world, and transformation of our environment to be just, caring and honoring of children.

Reconceptualizing Curriculum as Transcendent Possibilities: Dwayne E. Huebner

Huebner was the first scholar to introduce phenomenology to the field of curriculum in the 1960’s at the beginning of the reconceptualist movement. He also introduced traditions of existentialism and theology to the field and has been referred to as the intellectual parent of the reconceptualization (Pinar et al., 2008). Unsatisfied with the positivist scientific background of his doctoral work, Huebner shifted to studying philosophy, theology, and psychology which led him to delve deeply into Heidegger’s work, *Being and Time*, and the hermeneutics of Ricoeur and Palmer. He led the way for other curricularists who joined him in opposing behaviourism, scientism, dehumanizing technology and the bureaucratization of schools which were seen to be characteristic of the traditional field of curriculum. Instead, Huebner insisted that the curriculum field needed the presence of all major disciplinary areas (not only behavioural psychology), a presence which would then raise new questions to age-old problems (1962a). He made four claims, which were considered radical at the time, regarding the changes required for curriculum as a field of study (1966a). First, the educative process was tied to ‘technique’ and excluded ties to the human spirit. Second, there existed an overdependency on values articulated as goals and objectives and learning was seen as a prime characteristic of an individual’s temporality. Third, what was needed was a
curricular conception of the design of an educative environment where valued activity could take place. And fourth, this design of an educative environment is inherently political where the curricularist or curriculum worker strives to attain a just environment.

Like Taylor (1991), Huebner recognizes and laments the effects of modernity and how technology has made humans increasingly automated and governed by a means-end psychology. But also like Taylor, he acknowledges the benefits of modern progress and makes a case for the struggle of man’s technique and man’s spirit to happen in the classroom, for it is in the classroom that man’s spirit should be uppermost. “It is here that men should discover how to make technique serve man rather than man serve technique” (1966a, p. 96). Huebner is concerned with elevating the human spirit. Goal oriented conceptions of curriculum can imply that students should be molded within predetermined frames whereas the human spirit is much more complex than that. Huebner sees education as an act of influence, awesome and complicated in its own right. The school should be a meeting ground, accordingly, where an individual is “aware that he has a destiny and a social group seeking to determine that destiny” (p. 98). Curriculum thought, inadequate curriculum thought, has replaced the pursuit of destiny and its possibilities by pre-determined destinations. Huebner’s propositions called for a radical and riveting change to curriculum inquiry.

**Education and the Human Spirit**

Keeping with his claim of the primacy of human spirit as paramount to curricular ventures, Huebner describes this human spirit as ‘moreness’ (1993), an acknowledgement that the universe is fuller, deeper, more complex, and mysterious than we can ever hope to know. The ‘moreness’ in the world is a spirit that infuses each

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31 The masculine gendered language used in Huebner’s earlier work was acknowledged and efforts were made to edit the language. However, according to the editor Vikki Hillis (2008), “meanings specific to the historical context and climate were being lost as contemporary discourses erupted in their place . . . we invite the creative understanding of the reader in regard to the masculine gendered language. As evidenced in the essays that follow, Huebner’s keen sensitivity to the transformative and healing powers of language are paralleled only by his equal awareness of its oppressive and enslaving capabilities” (p. xiii).
human being hence acknowledging the presence of the transcendent within us. ‘Moreness’ means our possibilities are always before us; we are never complete human beings and life is a journey of constantly encountering ‘moreness’ and being more than we currently are. Education becomes a way of attending to and caring for that journey along with our co-journeymers. Huebner deems that educators and students can get blinded by social, cultural and political systems and structures and this limited vision can impede their participation in enacting possibilities for their future. He suggests we can retain the comfortable and familiar nature of the educational landscape whilst also creating new images to introduce the spirit or spiritual within this landscape. Huebner elaborates through making reference to new images of content and teaching as ways to integrate the spirit into our educational conceptions.

Spirit or a sense of the spiritual is present within content if we imagine the term, content, in the way Huebner speaks of it. The most powerful form of content is the ‘other,’ human beings who see the world differently and hence, open up possibilities for what the individual can or has yet to be. People are sources of criticism\footnote{Huebner uses the term ‘criticism’ as a form of critique rather than negative judgment.} as they raise questions of what I am, what I could be, what I should not be. Texts are also seen as sources of possibilities and human creativity. What new possibilities does this offer me? How can my life be different because of it? Questions that should guide planning of content could include, “How can the student see himself or herself anew in this content? And, how can a person be supported as he/she gives up part of their old self to become a new self?” (p. 410). Resonant with the hermeneutic tradition, the act of play, discovery and interpretation can facilitate the move towards greater complexity.

Teaching is another important image where the spiritual dimension can be recognized. Huebner reflects that teaching needs to be grounded in life; it is not a way of making a living, but a way of making a life. If the image of teaching is seen as a vocation, the teacher is called to a particular way of living. Huebner outlines three calls that beckon the teacher, but that also cause tension or conflict for the teacher: the call of
the students; the call of the content; and the call of the institution. These calls are not necessarily consonant with each other and each call places a certain demand or obligation on how a teacher lives their life. The response to the call of the students is a work of love. In listening and caring, in disclosing worlds of beauty and grace, in leading the student through journeys of hope rather than despair, in assuring the student that the encounter with the ‘other’ is one of empowerment, these acts of love enable students to experience the transcendence within them. The teacher responds to the call of content by the work of truth. Teachers respond to particular discipline areas or content by keeping them truthful and useful. In Huebner’s view, they do this by retaining the luminosity of the discipline, uncovering the vitality and making available for students how disciplines critique and renew themselves. The response to the call of the institution is the work of justice. The school is not a neutral place and is replete with competing interests. The work of justice entails realizing the limitations of individuals and forming alliances that can question practices and respond in sensitive ways towards the service of students.

The above illustrations are effective in furthering Huebner’s thesis of conceiving spirituality as dwelling in all educative efforts rather than being a distinct area of study. The classroom is the place where the struggle of technique and spirit can be uppermost if spiritual life is lived with intentionality within the educational setting, not as an overlay but as an integral ethos. To create such spaces, Huebner suggests teachers will need to seek out communities of hope where possibilities for ‘moreness’ can be explored with fellow co-journeymen. Teachers, in addition, can cultivate a discipline of mind which includes developing spaces for imagination and the spirit. In other words, if teachers are to create environments that invite the ‘moreness’ of their students, they too need to discover and rediscover their own sense of spirit, of ‘moreness,’ of transcendence, and of possibility. Huebner’s curriculum claim is that we need to be attentive to our experiences for the presence of the human spirit. Through re-interpreting our educational constructs as enhancing of the spirit, we can shape curricular and pedagogical practices towards teaching moments that are concerned with the making of lives and our processes of becoming.
Curriculum and Temporality

As curricularists set goals and objectives for their students, they are identifying aspects of life considered to be worthy of continuity or evolution, succession or duration (Huebner, 1967). The problem of curriculum, therefore, is also a problem of living historically as an educator and in looking forward, to “identify threads of continuity to unite diverse moments in time . . . moments of yesterday and tomorrow” (p. 133).

Articulation of goals and objectives becomes an interpretive process of statements of a desired tomorrow which, according to Huebner, does not capture the full extent of a human being. Huebner critiques the term ‘learning’ as troublesome to use exclusively as the central concept in curriculum. He explains that man is a transcendent being which means he has the capacity to rise above or go beyond his current state to be something else. Accordingly, a human being lives in both conditioned and unconditioned states, states of freedom and necessity. Conceptualizing curriculum through constructs of goals, objectives, and learning can become problematic if these constructs attend only to the conditioned, finite aspects of the educational process where certainty is sought as a measure of success. If on the other hand, education views the individual as a temporal being, continually changing and capable of changing his environment, then the individual and world are not seen as separate entities where education needs to ‘do something’ to an individual to bring about a desired change in the world. Rather, the educator sees the individual as already embedded within the world (such as Heidegger’s conception of Dasein as being-in-the-world) which releases powerful possibilities for curriculum design and the educational experience.

Being able to see the individual already situated in the world is one way of recognizing the temporality of humans. Huebner elaborates by explaining that the past and the future are not distinct compartments of life or time. The future already faces the individual in anticipating his/her potentiality for being. The past has thrust the individual into the present preparing him or her for this potentiality. This means the past and future are intertwined in the present; the former propelling the individual forward and the latter beckoning to the individual. How an individual understands himself or herself in the present moment of vision, and how he or she understands the unfolding of their own biography with the unfolding history of society becomes the dialectical space educators can create. This dialectical space has a third component which is the social group who
affirm or negate, support or question one’s projection of potentiality. The dialectic between individual, world and other lead to the continual creation or re-creation of the human being in the educational journey. Huebner asks educators to consider how they design their educational environments and emphasizes that the educational environment must enable students to make possible moments of vision where they can draw on their past and see the present as a horizon to project their own potentiality into the future. This process must take place not only within the temporality of the individual but also within the temporality of society. Humans shape society but society also shapes humans. A concern for temporality considers the rhythms of continuity and change, succession and duration for both the individual and society. The educator is central in their responsibility to create such an environment through curricular endeavours.

The student, either by his own understanding or that of others, must be able to envision his own projected potentiality for being as it exists in the past-present-future. This is the uniquely human quality of the environment and it requires the presence of human wisdom. This is the unique function of the teacher, the human aspect of that specific educational environment, who shares the rhythms of continuity and change, necessity and freedom, with his students. (p. 141)

**Designing Educative Environments**

Huebner has identified inadequacies in ways of thinking about curriculum which he diagnoses in our means-end approach to education. His thesis maintains as long as we continue to conceptualize curriculum as objectives to be achieved, we will remain hostage to the ‘self-augmenting world of technique’ rather than endeavoring to enhance the human spirit. He proposes the paradigm of thinking about humans as temporal beings which opens up possibilities for curricular endeavours as creating moments of vision or projecting one’s potentiality into the future. These possibilities are supported by the historical past and are given fecundity in the present for releasing the aspiration of the human spirit which will create and re-create the world of the future. Huebner also proposes that as curricularists, we conceive of educational activity more broadly as valued activity instead of limiting ourselves to learning activity which he sees as essential, but which can also be technical and constraining (1966a, 1967). Educators can strive to design educative environments where students can live in educationally valuable ways.
Given the rapid and continual change of both societies and individuals brought about by modern progress, Huebner observes that we no longer need to ask the question of how a human being changes, grows and learns. We need instead to ask the reverse question which is what impedes a human being from changing and growing? He suggests three factors which impact human transcendence, the going beyond of where a human is in the present moment. These factors are language, social encounters and an individual’s capacity for awe and wonder. Paying attention and raising consciousness about the meaning and possibilities that can be released in each of these aspects become important work for the curricularist and teacher in creating educative environments where the transcendent can be accessed.

Language is an important phenomenological and hermeneutic construct; it allows us to experience the world and also liberates us from our experience of the world. On one hand, language is essential for an individual to function effectively in this world. Yet, language can free an individual from his world temporarily and allow him to dream, to see values, to see possibilities and horizons otherwise not visible. Huebner suggests the study of disciplines and in particular, the study of science and poetry, can be useful vehicles for transcendence as in both these disciplines, language is continually growing and emerging which then facilitates growth and emergence for the human. Seeking new language forms contributes to the evolution of others and also enlivens an individual’s participation in the world.

To use dead language expressions is to be overcome by the inertia of the world as known; but to seek to keep language vital and alive is to contribute to the creation of the world. The joy and power of language is not that it enables man to fit into the world, but that it leads man beyond the world as presently operating into a tomorrow which may be better, more beautiful, and more in harmony with the human spirit. (1966a, p. 104)

Huebner gives us pause to reflect on the inevitably of the human relation as he emphasizes that relating to the other is not a goal of life or education, it is a verity of human existence (1963). Many of our encounters are instrumental and functional serving a means-end purpose. And whilst Huebner acknowledges that these types of encounters are necessary, for social encounters to engage transcendence, it would necessitate a certain posture from individuals in conversation. This posture would be
one of openness to new horizons, of fraternity, of an ethical obligation to the other, and of a willingness to be transformed through the encounter. Here, the theme of becoming and ‘moreness’ resurfaces as in the inherent tension of difference coming together, also lies the source of new life and possibility.

The third factor which Huebner advances is how the human capacity for awe and wonder can invite involvement at new levels of existence. Huebner encourages the curricularist to seek out opportunities for students to interact with what he calls “non-man made” or to use a theological term, creation. And whilst the natural environment certainly does elicit awe and wonder, beauty can also be found in art forms, in encountering poetic imagery, in learning about a new microscopic discovery, and in hearing about noble action undertaken by another individual. It is not so much the fact that beauty is produced, but rather enhancing our ability to see beauty in our environment as life-giving sources to the human spirit.

Here, Huebner points to the potential of aesthetic and ethical curricular frameworks in creating educative environments. His proposition (1966a, 1966b) is to recognize the nature of knowledge as multifaceted and to bring these differing perspectives and epistemologies to design our educational environment. Huebner speaks about valued activity, that is, what we value when making curricular decisions. He purports that in addition to incorporating value frameworks based on the technical, the scientific and the political, engaging with ethical and aesthetic value frameworks would further open up the educational experience for students to the grace of the world and, to their own potential in creating beauty and order to an otherwise discordant, fragmented world. He asks educators to consider if limiting our curricular discourse to technical and scientific ways of conceiving curriculum and educational experience constrains the fullness of the present for “the sterility of a known future” (1966b, p. 104). Huebner furthers this inquiry by asking how ethical and aesthetic frameworks, such as those used in the disciplines of art, philosophy and religion, can bring forth mysteries, uncertainties and doubts for our students rather than reducing “mysteries to problems, doubts to error and unknowables to yet-to-be discoverables” (p. 104).

The ethical value framework invites students to engage with constructs: of being response-able, that is their ability to respond to their world through their encounters,
interactions, and creation of knowledge, and language; of learning and creating through
correspondence with others; of understanding the promise offered by knowledge of the
different disciplines; of interpreting and acting on the world; of awareness of their
influence to affect change; and of forgiveness for the possibility of error which enables
the human to continue the quest of the spirit in discovering and creating the world anew.

Huebner maintains that all artifacts, routines, organizational structures and
chunks of human activity can be interpreted as having aesthetic dimensions.
Educational activity has the potential of beauty. Because art or the aesthetic object can
stand apart from the everyday experience of production and consumption, it is symbolic
of the unconditioned. It can allow us to see possibilities in our life distanced from the
everyday taken-for-granted routines. It thus offers a sense of wholeness, of design, of
harmony and of balance. Educational activity can be viewed and critiqued for its unity,
its integrity and the contentment it brings to learners. Additionally, educational activity
reflective of an aesthetic framework can engage educators and students in symbolic
meaning. Educational activity can reveal meanings for the educator and student of their
place amidst society and of unrealized possibilities in our life forms and in our world.
Huebner urges educators to ask at the end of the day, “Was this a beautiful day for me
and for the students—balanced, harmonious, tension producing and reducing? Was it a
day filled with truth, that is, did it symbolize what life really is and can be like?” (1966a, p.
108). As students participate in the making of their own knowledge, they tap into their
intrinsic potential to influence their environment and their destiny. “Esthetically valued,
knowledge has more than power; it has beauty. As a man-made form its balance and
harmony, its composition, its integrity and wholeness, point to the peaceful possibilities
inherent in human existence” (1966b, p. 116).

**Towards a Just Educational Environment**

Huebner (1966b) asserts that education is an act of influence and educators
need to recognize the power of mutual influence that exists in the educational
environment. All educational activity has moral dimensions and instead of limiting the
nature of our questions as to what goals and objectives are being met, we need to be
conscious of the present moment and ask ourselves if we are living the best we can in
this moment. He maintains that the teacher epitomizes the struggle of integrating the
everyday functional existence and the human spirit in that, it is the teacher who is engaged with children working alongside their social group to determine what their destinies will be. Huebner was one of the first curriculum scholars to speak of the curricularist as a political liberating agent of change seeking a just educative environment (Pinar et. al., 2008) which paved the way for subsequent scholars to understand curriculum politically. The notion of political is not understood in a negative way of gaining ‘power over’ individuals. It is understood as the teacher recognizing and acting upon the responsible, creative influence of their role to enable ‘power to’ individuals (Huebner, 1975a). It is seen as the personal and professional power required for the fulfillment of dreams and vision.

Referring to the work of Paul Tillich (1963), Huebner offers the image of culture as that which keeps something alive, fosters its growth and takes care of it. He asks us to think about the responsibility of designing educational environments in similar ways as we are selecting content from the vast world to make it available for students, for their care and well being. Students spend a significant part of their youth in schools and he urges us to consider how schools can be a reflection of what we would wish to see in the public world (Huebner, 1975a). Huebner acknowledges that teachers work within an aggregate set of conditions many of which may be experienced as constraints or limiting factors. Here, his view is that teachers can work with the given limitations of an environment and transform the educational conditions if they have a quality educational vision. He asks us to think of educational conditions as incarnate educational possibilities, “sometimes hidden from view, but awaiting the creative touch of the visionary who can imagine these possibilities coming to life . . . The designed educational environment is a fusion of given conditions and vision—it is the creation of meaning” (1966c, p. 172). Huebner (1966c) reminds us of our pivotal role in the making of meaning claiming that meanings don’t simply exist and to ignore our responsibility to create meaning would leave meaning to emerge from the mundane activity of individuals. How we choose to design our educational environments is shaped by whether we aspire towards educational environments of justice, beauty and vitality which offer promise for our students, or environments dictated by routines of grades, schedules and assignments. Limitations will always exist, however, it is only a human being who
can be political and shape their world by acting boldly and courageously in the human institution of education.

If curriculum is conceptualized narratively, it is always in a state of becoming; society and traditions are dynamic and are also always in a state of becoming (Huebner, 1964). Accordingly, curriculum, its interpretation and its influence on the design of an educational environment is also in a continual state of change where acts of interpretation are required within determinate frames. This is because with the human enterprise comes mystery and unpredictability and educational processes must make room for that uncertainty rather than exclusively seeking the known. The teacher, in their search for the just environment then, must value intellectual difference amongst the social group and steer a positive course through the differing values towards forward movement (1966c). Creating a just environment also entails valuing multiple forms of knowledge and being attuned to the various educational and social contexts as well as the various kinds of wisdom offered by the differing disciplines. Finally, Huebner points to the responsibility of the individual to the community in the political act suggesting the teacher or curricularist creates the just environment through their own responsiveness to the events of the world. The significance of temporality (1975b) is brought forth once again in having us understand that there is never one final solution to curricular problems. Paying attention to the emerging biographies of the individuals we work with, valuing the multidisciplinary wisdom of the arts, philosophy, theology and politics (in addition to scientific and technological), and seeing the child as part of our dialectic (1977), that is, part of our past, present and future can continue to give our curricular work the vitality and viability needed for a just educational environment. If we conceive our educational environment and activity symbolically, we can discover and rediscover the nature of existence as lived and the unearthing of value, that is, what we are today and what we can be tomorrow (1966a).

The study of curriculum is really the heart and soul of the study of education. All of man’s knowledge, wisdom, and skill is required to build a just educational environment. The study of curriculum can be and should be a great liberal and liberating study, for through it the specialist must come to grips with the great social and intellectual problems of today. (Huebner, 1966a, p. 112)
Reflections on Huebner’s Principles of Curricular Interpretation

Huebner’s work is highly suitable for a study of curriculum inquiry in a faith based context. Although his curricular conceptualizations germinated fifty years ago, there is much enduring wisdom and foresight in his theoretical propositions. As he acknowledged more recently (1996), there has been extensive progress in the field of curriculum studies. We need to take note, however, of the following: curricular thinking and practice is still largely informed by the technical foundations of education; the significance of the imagination and our human creative impulse continues to seek affirmation in education; we need to increase our access to the world’s intellectual traditions and be aware of their historicity and their achievements; and education, curriculum and teaching continues to be a political act where the well being of children is entrusted to us. These conceptions are of great import in any curricular endeavour today. Huebner’s work has a timelessness that has found different expressions in subsequent educational narratives over time. Many curriculum scholars from the reconceptualist movement built upon the phenomenological, hermeneutical and political traditions he introduced to curriculum inquiry. “Efforts in the late 1970’s and 1980’s to understand curriculum politically, phenomenologically, aesthetically and theologically can be directly traced to Huebner’s groundbreaking scholarship in the 1960’s and 1970’s” (Pinar, 2008, p. xx). Huebner himself was a student of many traditions through his career. Initially a student of the physical sciences and mathematics, he began his educational career teaching elementary school. He completed his graduate work in education and sociology thereafter, and was introduced to interdisciplinary studies, which prompted him to move away from his positivist background and to pursue interests in philosophy, existentialism and theology. In an autobiographical statement crafted in 1975, Huebner concludes by saying, “I am convinced that the curriculum person’s dependency on scientific thought patterns . . . has broken his linkage with other very great and important intellectual traditions of East and West which have profound bearing on the talking about the practice of education” (1975c, p. 449).

This statement is deeply significant to this study as one of the foundational premises of the research study is to draw from the intellectual traditions of both Islam and the West to propose an approach to curricular inquiry that facilitates a movement
towards a unity of being, epistemological humility, attunement to beauty and infinitude, and community realization. Huebner’s early thinking aligns seamlessly with these principles of interpretation. He has been declarative about education’s overdependence on the technical and its lack of engagement with the human spirit. He saw unity of being through the transcendent being embedded into our everyday experiences rather than an overlay distinct from the immanent. Half a century ago, he asked curricularists to consider the limitations and constraints of our language and to explore different ways of knowing that would bring valued activity to education, an effort that is actively pursued today in curriculum work. Huebner’s own interdisciplinary practice and his ability to draw knowledge from various disciplines are manifest in epistemological humility. Huebner’s insistence on the ethical and aesthetic frameworks of curriculum as well as the inevitability of the human relation in disclosing human potential resonates with attunement to beauty and infinitude. He enlarges our conception of the transcendent through awe and wonder of our environment, as well as through the possibility offered in the human encounter. Finally, Huebner has maintained that it is children and youth who bring meaning to all educational endeavours and thinking. The educator’s prime responsibility is to create just conditions for children to find and pursue their destinies alongside their social group. Community realization, accessing and inspiriting the potential of a human to discover, create and reshape their world, is axial to the curricular undertaking.

Huebner (1987b) describes traditions as “the communal recollections and hopes which give structure, meaning, and value to individual and collective life” (p. 381). We have a tendency to think of traditions as being external to us and having a life of their own. In actuality, traditions are carried and embodied in people and in communities. Within community, as teachers and students, we are called by tradition to engage in

Critiques of Huebner’s work have pointed out that towards his later years, his writing leaned increasingly towards Christian theological perspectives which may have limited value to curriculum scholars thinking about “public morality in pluralistic societies with democratic ideals” (Henderson & Kesson, 2001, p. 373). These authors also claim Huebner never fully explored the deliberative artistry required for the translation of the ideals presented in his work to the day-to-day experience of curriculum practice.
struggles of value and meaning and to live intentionally, which Huebner articulates as always in search of new integrating meanings and values. Teaching, Huebner reflects, maintains “the life-enhancing qualities of tradition—sources of beauty, truth, and freedom” (p. 381) so we are able to partake in the unfolding and making of human history. Such is the curricular inquiry inspired by Huebner’s principles of curricular interpretation which clearly find resonance in the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition of interpretation. The teachers in this study have been called by the tradition and are partaking in the unfolding and making of human history in the Ismaili community. They are carrying and embodying the tradition in their curricular and pedagogical practices with their students, amongst each other and amidst the larger community, guided by the IIS curriculum they have been charged with implementing. This curriculum represents a certain intentionality, the intentionality of the living tradition. The following section will introduce and provide an overview of the IIS Secondary Curriculum, a broad based programme in religious education and the humanities for Ismaili Muslim students globally.

The IIS Secondary Curriculum: An Inheritance of the Living Tradition

Thobani (2007) eloquently articulates a framing aspiration which would be helpful for the reader to understand the kind of curricular approach being sought in the development of the IIS secondary curricular materials.

Approaches to Muslim education are required that draw upon higher ideals of education in Islam, embodied in the original vision of the prophetic message. These ideals have served as the inspirational fount of diverse intellectual traditions that evolved in Muslim societies, and their underlying principles have been expounded over the centuries by inspired thinkers and educators. Among these principles are the pursuit of knowledge—which calls for the unfettered purchasing of wisdom for the good of all; the nurturing of personhood—facilitating the maturation of the individual into a rational, responsible being, gifted with the potential for limitless growth; respect for the intellect—as a universal propensity and divine endowment to humanity, progressively unveiling the mysteries of the cosmos and the self; the quest for enlightenment through inspiration—answering to the inner need to engage with the fundamental, existential questions in human life; and finally, acknowledgement of the diversity of interpretations and historical situatedness of these
principles—to be true to the plural reality of Muslim societies and the latitude of meanings accommodated in the Islamic message. (pp. 19-20)

The secondary curriculum developed and published by the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) is an international education program for students ages 12-16. Currently still within a developmental phase and designed as series of modules, it introduces students to a program of instruction and educational experiences that “explores Islam as both faith and civilization in world history and in contemporary times” (p. 7, IIS Secondary Curriculum, Teacher’s Guide, 2010). The IIS in London, UK, is the academic body responsible for the development of curricular materials for Ismaili religious education programs globally, in over twenty-five countries, for students of kindergarten through to grade twelve. The IIS Secondary Curriculum is a formal educational presentation of the narrative of the Ismaili community and proposes a developing framework through which young Ismailis are invited to engage intellectually with their religious, civilizational and historical inheritance. This curriculum is grounded in civilizational, humanistic and normative perspectives that inform the study of Muslim societies and traditions within historical and contemporary contexts. Normative principles are framed within these ideas rather than a traditional doctrinal approach. The curriculum has a praxis oriented philosophy which aims for students to embrace possibilities for transformative action and leadership for the benefit of families, community and society at large.

The development of these curricular materials is guided by three philosophical approaches. First, the IIS Secondary Curriculum seeks to engender the study of religion and civilizations within a broad intellectual outlook which invites engagement with ethics, philosophical thought, culture, and human issues of critical significance today for individuals, communities and societies. Whilst being grounded in their own Ismaili tradition, students are also educated about the historical and cultural contexts in which this tradition has been, and continues to be, expressed. The second principle the

34 The term normative refers to a range of considerations approached from interpretations specific to the Shia Ismaili tradition.
The IIS curriculum endeavors to nurture students' intellectual abilities so they may experience faith as a way of understanding, interpreting and engaging with their world. The intellectual approach is not limited to a rationalist epistemology; it encourages an appreciation of spiritual values essential to a community of faith. This coming together of faith and world is presented in a dynamic way suggesting that a life of faith is an ongoing personal pursuit or interpretive quest and is enacted in the everyday experiences of the individual, community and society. The educational aims,
values and outlooks of the secondary curriculum (see Table 1) resonate with the philosophical principles discussed above.

The IIS Secondary Curriculum has been designed around eight modules which can be implemented over the span of four to six years of secondary education. These modules are designed with an emphasis on one of three thematic areas: i) history, society and civilization; ii) religion, spirituality and ethics; iii) culture, intellect and learning. The thematic domains are integrative and provide opportunities for interdisciplinary as well as cross-module connections. A summary of the eight modules is provided in Table 2. The principal weight of the IIS curriculum, in the breadth of its situation, understanding and interpretation, considers the framework of humanity as a way of living one’s tradition. The IIS Secondary Curriculum seeks to approach tradition, or Islamic tradition, as an opportunity to engage creatively with issues of human culture. The call to the youth is to draw inspiration from the Islamic tradition to create genuine thought and genuine action as they define their place within human society.
### Educational Aims

The specific aims of the IIS Secondary Curriculum are to:

- develop in students a sound knowledge and understanding of their Ismaili tradition, history and culture, and encourage them in the practice of the faith;
- help students understand the concepts of authority in Shia Islam, and in other Muslim traditions;
- nurture in students an intellectual and ethical commitment in their own faith, while also encouraging them to understand and respect the traditions and beliefs of other people;
- acquaint students with social and ethical issues facing Muslim communities, religious traditions and other societies in the contemporary world;
- assist students to examine and reflect on their present and future roles in their family, community and society;
- enable students to become sensitive to the spiritual dimension in human existence, and to find meaning in and draw inspiration from their faith;
- encourage students to pursue life-long learning that will enable them to broaden their intellectual horizons.

### Values and Outlooks

The curriculum seeks to assist pupils to reflect on their role in, and relation to, the diverse social contexts of which they are an integral part. Pupils will be invited to:

- affirm their loyalty to the Imam of the time and belonging to the global Ismaili community;
- contribute actively to the welfare and progress of their family;
- adopt positive relations with peer groups inside and out of school;
- partake in the activities and life of their local Ismaili community;
- acquire and exercise civic values as responsible citizens of the countries in which they live;
- develop awareness of issues and concerns that Muslim communities and societies face around the world;
- share experiences, interests and ideals held in common with students of other religious traditions;
- engage with issues and dilemmas that affect the wider society and humanity as a horizon.
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<th>Module</th>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim Societies and Civilizations</td>
<td>History, society and civilization</td>
<td>An introduction to people, places and events of significance that came to shape the first six centuries of Islam, beginning with its genesis in Mecca and the establishment of the early caliphate in Medina, and tracing the growth of dynastic empires in Damascus, Baghdad, Cordoba and Cairo. Using the city as a space of dynamic creativity, the content represents the flowering of Muslim civilizations in all their manifold aspects. The development of Shia traditions, and the emergence of the Ismailis in this phase of history, features as an integral part of the broader Muslim narrative.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim Devotional and Ethical Literature</td>
<td>Culture, intellect and learning</td>
<td>An investigation of the variety and richness of literature that has developed in Muslim societies over time from the Prophet’s age to contemporary times. The creative application of language by Muslims in varying contexts and cultures are revealed through a wide range of literary forms and genres including religious texts, historical biographies, moral fables, mystical poetry and devotional hymns. Examples are drawn from diverse Muslim traditions, including Shia and Ismaili literature.</td>
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<td>Encounters in Muslim History</td>
<td>Culture, intellect and learning</td>
<td>A presentation of narratives of encounters and exchanges amongst Muslims and with other societies from the 12th-18th century. Key events and figures, major achievements and challenges, the interplay of forces and influences, and unfolding dynamics in the political, economic, social, intellectual and cultural arenas are highlighted. Significant aspects of the history, thought and culture of diverse Ismaili communities during this period are interwoven into these narratives of exchanges, detailing their interactions and interdependencies within these systems.</td>
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35 Sourced from Encounters in Muslim History, Volume 1, Teacher’s Guide, IIS, 2014, pp. 8-9
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<tr>
<td>Ethical Pathways to Human Development</td>
<td>Religion, spirituality and ethics</td>
<td>An engagement with the issue of social development through the examination of the impact of poverty, homelessness, illness, illiteracy, and social injustice on communities globally. A contextual approach is adopted to issues of development, and their impact on the quality of life of people in different regions. Case studies of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) are presented as examples of innovative approaches to holistic development underpinned by spiritual and ethical ideals of Islam. The social conscience of Islam is represented through its historical tradition as well as the call to action for institutions and individuals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslims in the Contemporary World</td>
<td>History, society and civilization</td>
<td>The Muslim world within the contemporary period serves as a central reference point within which the Ismaili community as it emerged and evolved in modern times is used as a case study. The transition of Muslim societies from the pre-industrial age to the 19th and 20th centuries and their social, cultural and political dilemmas and opportunities are presented. The impact of modern movements and ideologies on societies globally and the implications for Muslim contexts are also raised. Special attention is given to the role of the Ismaili Imams in the modern period and their guidance of the Ismaili community in a time of far-reaching and rapid change.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faith and Practice in Islamic Traditions</td>
<td>Religion, spirituality and ethics</td>
<td>A presentation of dimensions of religious meaning and practical expressions in a community of faith, as understood in the Shia Ismaili and other Muslim traditions. These aspects are approached from a variety of perspectives through exploring the significance and functions of faith, prayer, ritual, devotion and spaces of worship in Muslim contexts. The theme fosters an appreciation of the significance of faith and practice as a source of ultimate meaning in one’s life. Reflection is encouraged on personal experiences as members of the Ismaili community, while also making references to other religious traditions.</td>
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<td>Module</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intellectual Traditions in Muslim Contexts</td>
<td>Culture, intellect and learning</td>
<td>A focus on the development of key intellectual traditions in Muslim history through exploring legal, philosophical and mystical schools of thought that arose historically and the underlying factors for their emergence. Historical debates that engaged the minds of Muslim thinkers, including Ismaili philosophers, are presented with diverse sets of intellectual strategies formulated as creative responses to issues. Special attention is paid to the contributions of notable Ismaili scholars, thinkers and scientists to Muslim intellectual history. Students are led to reflect on the need for renewed thinking to address political, social and ethical concerns facing Muslim societies today.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Qur'an and its Interpretations</td>
<td>Religion, spirituality and ethics</td>
<td>An acquaintance with the diversity of understandings of the Qur’an which have developed in Muslim traditions over different historical periods and across various cultural contexts. This theme presents a historical and contextual study of significant concepts related to the Qur’an including prophethood, revelation and authority as interpreted by Shia Islam and other Muslim traditions. Students are led to reflect on the multitude of interpretations of the Qur’an that have come to be expressed by Muslim traditions and scholars over time. They also learn of the variety of ways the Qur’an has been applied in Muslim contexts, from theological and juridical readings to literary and aesthetic renderings. The relevance of the spiritual and ethical aspects of the Qur’an for the contemporary context are highlighted.</td>
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The IIS curriculum strives to engender an expression of faith that is both contemporary and still rooted in historical tradition. Binaries such as tradition and modernity, faith and world, individual and community, religious and secular, are investigated and examined in terms of their relations to different contexts. The curricular program is a departure from conventional theological studies programs by taking a broader view more characteristic of humanities programs. This is an important distinction as it suggests the active participation of students in shaping their religious life experience as opposed to a more traditional view of religion as being a distinct entity, separate from daily life, to be practiced only at congregational times. Ethical perspectives and the acceptance of pluralism within human societies are illustrations of lenses offered to students to guide their participation amongst family, locally and globally, within and outside the Ismaili community. The approach is one of educating rather than indoctrinating, seeking to inspire curiosity, character and commitment in the students.

The IIS curriculum presents three pedagogical approaches¹⁶ to guide teachers in their curricular planning and implementation processes: guided enquiry; reflective articulation; and creative expression. These pedagogical approaches are consonant with the philosophical aims of the curriculum. The guided enquiry approach proposes that the content is not an inert body of information to be transmitted to the students. Rather, teachers are encouraged to create conditions for inquiry in the classroom which enable students to engage with issues from a historical lens, a contemporary lens and also a personal lens. In integrating the three perspectives of historical, contemporary and personal, students are then led to articulating their understanding and also to enhancing their learning through the diversity of thought others bring to the conversations—reflective articulation. Students are subsequently given an opportunity to synthesize and apply their learning through creatively expressing their meaning making using fine and performing arts, creative writing, debating, or other such mediums. The pedagogical approaches provide opportunities for students to explore

¹⁶ The pedagogical approaches are intended to be exemplary rather than exclusive.
curricular content from multiple perspectives, articulate and connect their understanding to that of their peers and also to broader disciplinary concepts, and then interpret their understanding to create personal meaning for themselves through expression which may provide insights about their faith and their lives.

The mandate of the IIS Secondary Curriculum as presented earlier puts forth two propositions: one, to develop perspectives that engage with religion, ethics, thought and culture within a broad intellectual framework; and second, to engage students in critical human issues of concern to both individuals and societies today through drawing on enduring principles of the Ismaili tradition. The first proposition suggests that religion is not incompatible with secular life. In fact, as Esmail (1995) contends, “Religious life is the vehicle through which the ideal makes its appearance in human affairs . . . what the ideal releases in human culture is the power of aspiration” (p. 455). The second proposition suggests that this aspiration then be applied to address human issues of today through renewed thinking. To address such issues requires a firm and confident sense of the Ismaili interpretation and its value systems. The curricular inquiry then is to pursue genuine intellectual engagement where the moral and spiritual ideals of the Islamic past may prove to have creative resonance for today through giving new expression to tradition (Esmail, 2001). As Esmail so aptly asks,

But why could future Muslim generations in the West not remain true to their spiritual vocation while achieving a harmony with their cultural surroundings, with the languages and the scientific and humanistic knowledge of modern times at their disposal—and indeed, placing these resources in the service of the spiritual and ethical vision of their faith? (1995, p. 457)

**Conclusion**

Chapter One situated this study within the current environment and presented challenges having implications for religious education in the Western context. Secular conditions have resulted in the practice and presence of religion being shifted from public to private spaces which limits societal contact with various religious traditions. In concert, modern progress has resulted in equally significant shifts with primacy being given to the flourishing of the human individual. Tradition and modernity may be seen as
incompatible concepts; new definitions of traditions and modernities are being constructed to enable individuals to interact with the plurality of contexts within a globalized environment. New and diverse notions of faith and transcendence are also being formulated according to how individuals make meaning of these terms in relation to their life experiences and environments. And finally, rapid technological progress has resulted in the media being a key educational source within which misperceptions of faith, and particularly Islam, are generated regularly. These contextual features call for approaches to Muslim education that enable teachers and students to develop sensibilities which prepare them to live well in the world of today and encourage them to draw on their faith for an interpretation and articulation of what it means to live well, as individuals and as community. As illustrated in Chapter One, scholars of Muslim education, and religious education in general, are engaged in discourses about faith as a lived experience. This study seeks to add to these generative discourses and to better understand the nature of this effort through the curriculum inquiry undertaken by teachers in the Shia Ismaili Muslim living tradition.

Given that living traditions are, by definition, not fixed entities and evolve through responding to the changes and issues of the time, it is essential to gain an understanding as to what has sustained and given vitality to the Shia Ismaili Muslim living tradition through history, and how the tradition has been interpreted and reinterpreted through time. Chapter Two provides a brief historical sketch and presents an interpretation of factors that have influenced the sustenance and expressions of this living tradition. Through illustrative historical case studies, readers are acquainted with the diverse ways the Shia Ismaili interpretation has evolved over time and guiding principles that have influenced this continuous evolution. The chapter is summed up by articulating certain principles of interpretation which will be used as lenses to understand the interpretive quest of the teachers in subsequent chapters. These hermeneutical principles are: unity of being where individuals seek to create for themselves a unified life narrative; epistemological humility where individuals recognize and continually pursue knowledge from a plurality of sources including transcendental knowledge; attunement to beauty and infinitude where individuals see possibility for transformation in all forms of creation around them (human, man-made and natural); and community realization where the individual understands their role in society as a vicegerent, trustee,
caretaker and nurturer of God’s creation. The central question Chapter Two raises is how these interpretive forces are given expression in the lived experiences and lived meanings of the Ismaili secondary teachers through their curriculum inquiries.

In this present time of the Ismaili community, the secondary religious education teachers find themselves within a formal educational structure for the teaching of Islam, both broadly and from a Shia Ismaili perspective. As they engage with the curriculum developed by the IIS, they bring a certain consciousness and interpretation to their efforts. These efforts in the educational field are referred to as curriculum inquiry. Chapter Three introduces the notion of curricular inquiry and focuses on the emphasis of curricular understanding as developed by the reconceptualist movement in the field of curriculum studies. Within this emphasis, phenomenological and hermeneutical curricular inquiries are discussed drawing attention to the themes of being attentive to and conscious of experience; understanding and interpreting experience through historicity, social context and one’s moral orientation; understanding curriculum as a complex system of relationships; and being attuned to visioning and creating possibilities for the shaping of our individual and communal future worlds.

Within Chapter Three, the work of Dwayne E. Huebner is studied closely for its relevance and resonance to this study. In his curricular conceptions, Huebner has articulated what can be thought about as curricular principles of interpretation. His thinking shows strong alignment with the interpretive elements presented in Chapter Two. Some of the principles representing Shia Ismaili Muslim beliefs are the inseparability of faith and world, the importance of the inner esoteric meanings of texts and practices of faith, the esteemed value placed on the human intellect as an integral part of faith, the responsibility of vicegerancy for each believer in this world, and a posture of humility before the Divine. Speaking from theological, philosophical and curricular perspectives, Huebner advocates for the integration of ‘technique’ and the human spirit; he points to the embeddedness of transcendent knowledge in our encounters with disciplines, humans and our environment; he sees education, the curriculum and the classroom as temporal spaces of possibility where valued activity can create moments of vision for students and teachers; and he views the advocacy of students and creating a just environment as integral to the role of the teacher.
Huebner’s conceptions are instructive for engaging curricular inquiry in our educational context.

The chapter concludes with an overview of the IIS Secondary Curriculum and situates the curriculum as a response and an approach to Ismaili Muslim education; an approach intended to enable a broad based intellectual outlook as well as a rootedness in the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition. The approaches of the curriculum are evidently influenced by historical tradition as well the contemporary environment. The curriculum endeavours to develop perspectives in teachers and students that: understand faith as an engagement with the world not separate from it; that give primacy to the human potential for creativity and change within an ethical and communal framework; that locate the living tradition within the larger pluralistic contexts of communities and societies; and that nurture sensibilities to the ongoing pursuit of personal enlightenment as a responsibility and act of faith. There seems to be a resonance between the history of the living tradition, curricular inquiry from a hermeneutical phenomenological paradigm as manifest in the work of Huebner, and in the philosophical framework present (and still taking form) in the IIS Secondary Curriculum.

What we now need to understand is the nature of the lived experience of curricular inquiry for the secondary teachers and how they are engaging, creating and being challenged by their own interpretive approaches. Chapter Four will present the methodological framework of hermeneutic phenomenology used for this study. The hermeneutical research process used to engage the teachers in interpretive inquiry will also be discussed. Central to the hermeneutic inquiry is to gain insight as to how the teachers are negotiating what is known as the hermeneutic circle, that is, how teachers are interpreting parts of their experience and using these interpretations to make meaning of the greater whole. Henderson and Gornik (2007) offer a reflection on inquiry, “Curriculum work done wisely is a journey of discovery, intensely dramatic and grounded in soul-searching, private and public autobiographical issues, their own and their students” (p. 53). They suggest the insights needed for this kind of inquiry cannot be taught or memorized. It is the practice of inquiry which develops the consciousness and insights to broaden our fields of visualization or our horizons. In that light, the hermeneutical process used for this study was not created solely for the purpose of collecting data. It was conceived as a hermeneutical phenomenological curricular
inquiry process to generate increased consciousness and insights as to the possibilities of the curricular endeavour and its potential wisdom.
Chapter 4:
A Hermeneutical Research of Community Transformation

In an earlier chapter, I had expressed that hermeneutics was not simply a research method being used for this study. The hermeneutical inquiry, as I understand and embrace it, is a lifelong interpretive quest for individuals. Life and educational life more specifically, at its essence, is about the continual interplay of the universal and the particular, the dialectic between the whole and the parts. How we conceive of, understand, interpret, and enliven curriculum can create educative environments which encourage our students and ourselves to continually live in the hermeneutic circle; that is, to continually interpret the parts or particularities of our experiences within the universal or whole of the horizons we aspire towards. And reciprocally, the educational environments created by our curriculum design can also enable a continual interpretation of the universal nature or wholeness of life and how this universality is enacted through our daily experiences. We can elevate each mundane moment to a level of significance through authentic engagement in the interpretive process where we seek layers of meaning and where symbolic elements of the human narrative summon us forth to rise above who we are and draw us forward to who we can be. In that spirit, I begin this chapter through sharing a deeply personal narrative which represents a part of my hermeneutical inquiry within the whole of my interpretive aspiration.

The scene is still crystal clear in my mind although it took place sixteen years ago. I was at my SFU convocation ceremonies to celebrate and formally recognize the completion of my master’s degree in education. My three month old son was cuddled that cold, crisp autumn day in cozy layers of blankets fast asleep and I prayed he would remain so until the ceremony was over. My extended family was in attendance sitting patiently through the hundreds of graduands receiving their degrees anticipating the thirty seconds they had come for when it would be my turn to walk across that stage in all its
formality, pomp and officiousness. As my line drew closer and closer to the stage, I remember the feeling of excitement and anticipation. But it was not the excitement and anticipation of completing the master’s degree. Instead, it was my interest and wonder at the PhD students being conferred in their red finery as they approached the Chancellor. They were small in number and the ceremony was distinct from the rest of us. What was so special about their journey and their contribution? It was at that moment that I opened my heart’s door to the dream of pursuing a post-graduate degree. There was something notable about these individuals who had undertaken a journey which I knew had been a transformative one. Whilst the master’s graduates seemed to dissolve one into the other in the mass of blue, the PhD graduates each had an individual elegance about them. It was an elegance that spoke to me as if they had seen the world in a way which enabled them to understand their position within the world more deeply. This prospect filled me with wonder and although I knew it would be a while until I would begin my own doctorate journey (once my children, although I only had one at the time, were school age), I knew with certainty in the depth of my being, I too needed to experience alternate ways of seeing the world when the time was right for me. My eyes searched for my infant son to ensure he was still sleeping. As I waited for my name to be announced hoping it would be pronounced correctly, I transitioned from my soulful dream to a more pragmatic thought of being mindful not to trip in front of this massive audience as I walked across that stage.

Fast forward exactly a decade later, I felt a knock at my heart’s door suggesting perhaps it was time to begin this journey. I now had two children who were school age. Over the last ten years, I had the blessing of holding several leadership positions in teacher education and educational program development. I had made the transition from a professional life in the secular educational world to one in the Ismaili Muslim community. My role within the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB) had grown both in scope and responsibility over the seven years since I first started. I had just been appointed Academic Director to steward the implementation of the new professional secondary religious education program for Canada. I was not, in any way, naive about the immense challenges and singular focus this role would require for the first few years of program conception and implementation. Most of my family members felt the thought of beginning a doctorate program at the same time as beginning a new
professional role (in addition to my family obligations) was insane. I, too, wondered the same. The logical thing to do, as I was advised, was to wait a few years until the secondary program was somewhat established and then begin the postgraduate work. My family was concerned about the toll these simultaneous commitments would take on my health and my family life knowing full well how demanding my professional life had been for the past seven years.

But there were a few alternate voices as well; voices who opened up spaces of possibility for me. These voices came from three individuals, my father, my spouse and a trusted colleague, who suggested otherwise. Their voices resonated with the voice of my heart that saw the doctorate journey and my service to the institution (to ITREB) as being not just interconnected but essentially inextricable. It came down to the fundamental question of why am I pursuing this degree? Is it for the prestige of a Doctor title? Is it to prepare myself for further career advancement? Is it to fulfill a desire for ongoing learning? I'm not sure any of those reasons were or still are compelling enough to make the emotional, financial, time and intellectual investment a PhD requires. What will hold me steady when work demands are flying at me faster than I can keep up with, when I look at my children with guilt wondering if they are feeling enough of my presence as their mother, when I am restricted as to how much time I can devote to my parents not knowing how much remaining time I have them in my life, when there is scant a day or hour when I am not feeling the pressure of having to read or write to advance my studies? What will bring me back to my computer, to my books, to my thoughts with resolve day after day, week after week, month after month?

I come back to the convocation scene I described and the elegance of the graduates I saw, individuals who had and in all likelihood, continue to contribute to their organizations and institutions, to the lives of others in meaningful ways so as to better the life of the community within which they belong. I desire to do the same. As a researcher, I want to engage in work that will nurture the growth of my community. I want to continually live in the space of praxis where the theory is meaningful only through the enactment of practice and where practice takes on meaning through a consciousness of understanding. I strive to be an educator working alongside others to raise educational processes out of an industrial individualistic paradigm to one that is more communal and representative of lived experience, of the human spirit, both inside
and outside the classroom. I have been told that the goal of a PhD is to make an original contribution to research. I would add to that aim in asking how my contribution will facilitate or spark the contribution of others. It is in this way, I would submit, that research has the potency to inspire community life and community well-being. Upon completion of this research when I approach the Chancellor at my convocation ceremony, it will be symbolic of my moral submission in endeavouring to be a participant in a journey; one of many travellers who are in pursuit of understanding how their place in the world contributes to creating the bond of humanity.

Denzin & Lincoln (2000) situate human science qualitative research within the broad aspiration of connecting to the hopes, needs, goals and promises of a free democratic society. They offer the following definition:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

In outlining the historical development of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln discuss movements or progressive shifts over time. The seventh most recent movement, which is referred to as the future, is described as research that is concerned with moral discourse and with the development of textualities. In this movement, social sciences and humanities serve as sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and most importantly for the purpose of this research, community. Greenwood & Levin (2000) further stress the broadening or reconceptualization of scientific inquiry. Their perspective reconceptualises science as a “collaborative, communicative, communitarian, context-centered, moral project” (p. 32). Viewed this way, scientific research presents itself as less utilitarian and more as an opportunity and a responsibility to enhance the lives and experiences of others. The concept of community is central to me as a researcher. Community and its ethos, which I believe we in large part are responsible for creating,
becomes the environment to flourish, to discover our potential or conversely, to wilt, to turn away, to create insecurity and uncertainty. In this regard, I found myself drawn to social and feminist research ethics as is presented in the work of Christians (2000).

Rather than searching for neutral principles to which all parties can appeal, social ethics rests on a complex view of moral judgements as integrating into an organic horizon, everyday experience, beliefs about the good, and feelings of approval and shame, in terms of human relations and social structures. This is a philosophical approach that situates the moral domain within the general purposes of human life that people share contextually and across cultural, racial, and historical boundaries. (p. 142)

Christians draws on scholars such as Gilligan (1983), Noddings (1984), Wood (1994), and Steiner (1997) to illustrate how research ethics can move away from the conventional formal ideas based in more traditional paradigms and encompass the primacy of human relations. These scholars advocate for research practices undergirded by the ethic of care, collaboration, compassion and nurturance. Christians also highlights Seigfried’s (1996) argument which attempts to draw the emphasis away from gender and replaces this term with engendering. The challenge she poses is to engender social morality where caring values and connectedness are central to all.

Christians’ illustrations are not limited to feminist voices. He references Buber’s (1958) primal notion of human relationships as being preeminent quoting his famous lines, “in the beginning is the relation”, “relation is the cradle of life” and “the one primary word is the combination I-Thou” (Buber in Christians, 2000, p. 150). Social ethics in this view is understood by our interdependence to humankind, that is, “unless we use our freedom to help others flourish, we deny our own well-being” (p. 144). Levinas’ (1982) ethics are another example of humans who create life together through dialogic encounters that make apparent our inescapable claims to each other. Our existence is defined by our obligation to sustain one another. “The primal sacredness for all without exception is the heart of moral order” (p. 144). One further contribution to research ethics presented by Christians is Denzin’s (1997) feminist communitarian model which presumes that human identity and agency is negotiated dialogically. The values, moral commitments and existential meanings we hold are not fulfilled in isolation but through human bonding. He claims that preservation of good cannot be determined in isolation;
it is nurtured within specific social contexts. Denzin’s communitarian perspective integrates personal autonomy and community well-being.

Morally appropriate action intends community. Common moral values are intrinsic to a community’s ongoing existence and identity. Therefore, the mission of social science research is enabling community life to prosper—enabling people to come to mutually held conclusions. The aim is not fulsome data per se, but community transformation. (p. 145)

It is not the specifics of these models that I am drawn to as much as the spirit of the model which is captured succinctly and powerfully in the statement above, the aim of research is community transformation.

Research Context: A Community in Transformation

Upon reflection, perhaps the term ‘community transformation’ is not completely appropriate as the term seems to denote transformation as something to be achieved. Perhaps it is more fitting to speak of a ‘community in transformation’ as this term may represent the dynamic, interactive nature of growth and change within a living tradition.

The research context for this study is the secondary education program under the oversight of the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB) for Canada. ITREB Canada is responsible for the provision of religious education to the Canadian Ismaili community. The secondary religious education program currently serves Ismaili students in grades seven to twelve in six major regions of Canada: Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa. The model for the delivery of secondary education is supplemental to the secular school system. Weekly classes of two hours are offered on weekends and evenings over the course of the academic year. This means the adolescent students of the community commit to this religious education program in addition to their secular education and extra-curricular obligations. The program is in its infancy and has made the transition from a volunteer teacher to a professional teacher model since 2009. Historically, formal weekly religious education classes have been offered to the Canadian Ismaili youth for the past thirty years taught by volunteer teachers with limited training. Although the secondary teachers are now professional teachers who have completed a double masters’ degree at the Institute of
Ismaili Studies (IIS) and the Institute of Education (IOE) in London, the governance and supporting administrative structures remain constituted by volunteers. The program, currently, would offer about 120 classes over the course of a week in the six main regions of Canada with teachers taking responsibility for four to five classes as well as episodic programming e.g. camps, community service projects, field trips, during holiday periods.

Upon completion of the Secondary Teacher Education Program (STEP) at the IIS and IOE in the UK, the graduates return to Canada and are placed in one of the Canadian regions to begin their new careers as secondary religious education teachers for the Ismaili community. The faculty of in-service teachers is faced with more than the implementation of curricular lessons; they are contributing to the development of a professional institutionalized education system in a faith based community. The ITREB governing national and regional boards, the Academic Director (AD) and Regional Academic Heads\(^{37}\) are responsible for the stewardship of this massive and complex educational program, which at its core lies the professional, personal and spiritual well being of its forty teacher faculty members.

The most important distinguishing feature of this community education program as compared to a secular school program with reference to its teaching faculty is that whilst teachers in a secular system are defined by their membership to a school district or a particular school, here, the faculty members are defined by their belonging to a cohort e.g. the Vancouver teacher cohort or the Toronto teacher cohort. The faculty learning community is one of the very few stable features in the structure of the Ismaili religious education program. Many features are in transition or change, especially since we are in the initial years of program formation. The academic year calendar and the timetables are being modified from year to year to suit the needs of the local communities and to facilitate optimal student attendance; the classroom facilities change

\(^{37}\) Regional Academic Heads are educational leaders employed to provide oversight, leadership and strategic direction to the educational endeavor for their Canadian region (e.g. BC, Alberta, Quebec, Ontario), similar to a principal or district superintendent role.
as refurbishments take place and new locations are opened; the faculty size and the membership is still in evolution; the governing board at the regional and national levels change over a one to three year period as these are volunteer appointed boards; the centre administration staff change annually and vary in effectiveness as these too are volunteer positions; the resourcing structure is not fully staffed with educational leadership for each regional cohort; and the curriculum materials are still in the development phase and therefore, a new curriculum is released each year by the IIS which needs to be internalized and implemented by the faculty. The educational environment of the secondary education program as it is currently placed in space and time is of continual change. As the institution and educators seek to develop sustainable foundations to the program, it is important to note that the stability of the program is directly contingent not only on the long-term retention of the teacher faculty, but also on their personal and professional well-being, their success and fulfillment in the classroom, their feeling of connectedness to the larger Ismaili community and their own spiritual flourishing as they engage in this work.

In this context then, the teacher learning communities or cohorts take on great significance as teacher education structures that can offer processes for teacher learning which are supportive and caring, academically rigorous, pedagogically thoughtful and perhaps most importantly, teacher learning that is rooted in the ethos of the Ismaili Muslim faith. These learning communities are where teachers create meaning of what it means to be an educator in the Ismaili community. They inquire into and interpret an international curriculum and determine how to adapt this curriculum appropriately to the Canadian context for Ismaili adolescent students. They negotiate, and in some cases create, organizational infrastructure processes and systems for the education program. They design pedagogical experiences that are invitational and meaningful for the students of the community. And most importantly, they are in the process of forming their identity not only as teachers, but also as role models in a faith based community. Teacher learning then, in this particular role, is more than learning to teach. Teacher learning is also learning to be a community leader. The scope of the teacher learning experience being discussed extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom and permeates into the community. In recognition of the multi-faceted,
dynamic educational role which emphasizes curriculum, pedagogy and community, the
teacher role is being defined and shaped as it is being lived.

The curriculum favors a teaching profile that views teachers as educators
rather than technical specialists in the education of young people. A
normative and humanistic approach to Islam calls for teachers to be
reflective practitioners and creative thinkers in undertaking their work . . .
youngsters look to their religious education teachers to help them acquire
some of the skills of navigating through the complexities of modern life, to
reveal ways in which faith, tradition and culture can speak anew to them.
(IIS Secondary Curriculum Teachers’ Guide, p. 15)

In addition to ongoing and sometimes turbulent change, and a redefinition and
reconceptualization of what it means to be a teacher of a living tradition, the secondary
teachers are immersed in an environment which is characterized by some of the
phenomenon discussed in Chapter One. The adolescents they teach are immersed in a
modernized, secularized Western society and are struggling to make sense of their faith
tradition as a living tradition. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, some teachers are
experiencing the same struggle albeit to a different extent. In many ways, the teachers’
aspirations are similar to the aspirations of this study. They wish to construct new
paradigms for the teaching of religious education, paradigms that are true to the tradition
and that embrace modernity. They desire to educate the Ismaili students, the
community and larger society on the diversity of perspectives and interpretations of
Islam, as well as represent with confidence and humility the principles of the Shia Ismaili
Muslim living tradition. And they seek to contribute to and learn from broader discourses
in education of curricular, pedagogical and community inquiries. STEP is about a larger
vision of communities in transformation; teacher communities, classroom communities,
the Ismaili Muslim community, and the broader societal community. The IIS Secondary
Curriculum provides a common horizon or framework for interpretation, understanding,
and application as this faculty engages with transformative possibilities.

The STEP professionalization initiative, as discussed in the previous chapter, is
nurturing a conception of curriculum that is one of a lived or living curriculum; one that
invites the engagement of faith within the everyday lived experience. The secondary
teachers are placed in a community of living tradition where their work is about
guardianship and trusteeship of the living tradition, its sustenance, and its expressions in
our contemporary world. The IIS Secondary Curriculum is one particular educational frame offered to the community and invites teachers to provide a forum for adolescents to make meaning of the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition within historical and contemporary contexts. This educational faculty of secondary teachers have made a group commitment and are entrusted with the phenomenal task of understanding and interpreting the creative vision of the Ismaili Muslim living tradition through their cumulative interaction amongst themselves and with their community. The study describes the lived experiences of the hermeneutical curricular inquiry being undertaken by a group of secondary teachers, and how they are engaging with principles of interpretation of the living tradition, their social contexts and their quest for good.

**Hermeneutic Phenomenology: An Interpretive Framework**

Curriculum inquiry, over the last several decades, has evolved from a commodity to become a central theme of educational experience (Schubert, 2008). It is the “theorizing and enacting of one’s life and responsibilities in the world” (p. 406). Using the concept of *currere* advanced by Pinar and Grumet (1976), it is the process of examining one’s course of experience and the struggle to understand how our past, present and futures shape one another. This process of theorizing and enacting, of understanding and interpreting, is characteristic of the hermeneutic tradition. When conceived as an interpretive framework, the hermeneutic tradition can serve as a powerful tool for curricularists to reshape educational thought and practice (Atkins, 1988). Schubert (2008) reminds us that although hermeneutic inquiry originated in the tradition of text interpretation, from a phenomenological perspective, text can be considered any idea, event or interpersonal encounter that is transformed by exchange of ideas over time. The social organization of continuous interaction among people and situations serves a practical interest in “deriving situational meaning and insight that improves decision and action in actual states of affairs” (p. 400). Through intersubjective relationships and attending consciously to meaning in the taken-for-granted everyday life, insights and understandings can be revealed. In this light, Schwandt (2000) outlines the praxis oriented, continually evolving nature of social inquiry.
Social inquiry is a distinctive praxis, a kind of activity (like teaching) that in the doing transforms the very theory and aims that guide it . . . acting and thinking, practice and theory, are linked in a continuous process of critical reflection and transformation. (p. 190)

In this research context, the teachers are grappling with understanding and interpreting the principles of the living tradition and transforming expressions of these principles according to the context and time. As was articulated in the first chapter, the impacts of secularization and modernization can cause divides and fragmentation in our experience of the world and can challenge our quest towards a unified life narrative. The teachers are striving to articulate a conception of Islam as faith and civilization that overcomes divides of secular/religious, tradition/modernity, Islamic/Western, individual/community and instead, provides students with intellectual engagements towards a unity of being. The teachers are also faced with a curriculum based in religious education and the humanities which requires sophisticated knowledge of a variety of disciplines such as literature, philosophy, and history. To add to this complexity, there are other areas of study required such as educational theory and practice, institutional or organizational development, community engagement, and the like. Understanding the realm of the transcendent, of the human spirit, is yet another epistemology towards which they need to remain open and humble. The teachers are searching to reveal to their students dimensions of the living tradition that are enduring through time, that give our lives meaning and purpose, that attune us to the beauty and wonderment of this world and the infinitude of possibilities calling to us. These possibilities are not solely for individual advancement, they are also for realizing the potential of the various communities in which we find ourselves situated. The IIS curriculum is not the single response to the sustenance of the Ismaili Muslim living tradition. It is a significant tool which is intended to enable an intellectual and creative engagement with the living tradition when considered alongside our own understanding, interpretation and interaction with the world. Accordingly, when curriculum inquiry is being referred to, this reference is not limited to the IIS curriculum text. It also includes how we inquire into, understand and interpret our own experiences within the context of the role we have taken on as community educators. In many ways, the teachers are creating a vision of the living tradition, of our community, and of the potentiality of students to reshape their worlds. The teachers’ inquiry into the curriculum is then
shaped symbolically to represent visions of life for themselves and for the students. Huebner (1966d) captures this representation beautifully.

For the curriculum does not simply do something for or to students through the content. It speaks to them about the educator, who he is, what he believes and feels, the kinds of meanings that he finds and projects into the world. The curriculum becomes the symbol of his life; to make this symbol stand out with beauty and truths requires artistic power. Somehow, the educator must not simply solve educational problems. He makes his mark on the world through his artistry, by projecting himself out into the world so he can say: “This is what I am, what I believe. Here is my contribution to the truth and beauty in the world. (p. 127)

Hermeneutics conceives of human understanding as a conversation in which a shared understanding results (Atkins, 1988). The conversational state of being we embody as humans is of great importance as we are continually in conversation, and hence, continually in the process of interpretation, with texts, with others, with our environments and with ourselves. When conceived hermeneutically, curriculum and the inquiries teachers and students can generate have limitless possibilities. Elaine Atkins draws on the work of Bruffee (1982, 1985) and Rorty (1982) to present a hermeneutic curricular vision of teachers inducting students into the conversation of educated human beings where they are “enriched by an awareness of the profound and tangled interdependence of human beings, by an understanding of the ways that we are all bound inextricably together by mutual interests, common purposes, needs, feelings and shared responsibilities” (p. 446). In the spirit of hermeneutics, the aim is not to find agreement but coherence amongst ourselves or as Heidegger says, ‘finding a footing.’ Atkins reinforces the social and conversational nature of hermeneutics within curriculum thinking which she articulates as “enabling students to develop a sense of the human community as standing on its own feet, choosing its own destiny, and embued with a sense of power, richness and inevitable limitations of the human bond” (p. 446). Within the context of living traditions, the hermeneutic perspective probes not only what human beings are, but sees humans always in the process of reconstituting themselves through understanding and interpretation. Accordingly, to understand the nature of conversations the teachers are immersed in with the curricular texts, their students, their peers and the community, the hermeneutic paradigm is a suitable framework for this study. In the subsequent section, I will provide some background and principles of
hermeneutic phenomenology mainly through the work of Max van Manen, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Two aspects of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics are looked at closely for their relevance to living traditions and to the relationship between understanding, interpretation and application.

**Understanding and Interpreting Lived Experience**

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the study will, in essence, focus on the lived experiences of the teachers’ curriculum inquiry and how their interpretations (or interpreting) of these lived experiences shape both their understanding and their actions as community educators. Hermeneutic phenomenological research contributes to our own thoughtfulness and our ability to act thoughtfully towards others through personal insight. Van Manen (1990) explains, “It is a curriculum of being and becoming . . . a human being is not just something you automatically are, it is also something you must try to be” (pp. 5, 7). More importantly, van Manen suggests this is a philosophy of the personal and the individual pursued against the background of “the other, the horizon, the communal or the social” (p. 7), a perspective which is resonant with the study’s educational endeavour to bridge the individual and communal.

Phenomenology can be understood as the descriptive study of whatever appears to consciousness, in the manner which it appears (Moran & Mooney, 2002). It is the study of lived experience or the life world (van Manen, 1990) and its emphasis is on the world as lived by a person, not the world as something separate or detached from the individual (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). In this philosophical tradition, everyday experiences are examined through attention to the manner in which things and meanings show themselves. The examination, or hermeneutic phenomenological reflection, seeks to represent the nature or essences of our experiences in a way that enables us to learn more about human experience (Van Manen, 1990). “We gather other people’s experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves” (p. 62).
Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer are amongst the foremost representatives of
phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is
known as the founder or father of phenomenology. Offering an amended view of the
Cartesian mind-body or subject-object dualism, Husserl’s position was that experience
was an integration of both and as such, phenomenology presented possibilities as a new
science of being (Laverty, 2003). Husserl was interested in understanding the structure
of the lifeworld or lived experience. The study of lifeworlds, which is understood as what
we experience pre-reflectively and includes what is taken-for-granted, encourages a re-
examination of common and sometimes mundane experiences to uncover new
meanings. Experience of consciousness in the world was a central focus of Husserl’s
work which he viewed as a co-constituted dialogue between a person and the world
(Valle et al., 1989). Consciousness, therefore, is always directed towards something by
the human mind and this human intention is referred to as intentionality. Intentionality
suggests we are always connected to the world and our intentionality allows us to move
towards meaning through paying attention to experience (Moules, 2002). Husserl
maintained that in order to contain the subjectivity of the researcher, one needed to
bracket or suspend their own judgements and beliefs to see the phenomena more
clearly. Hermeneutical terms such as understanding, interpretation and meaningfulness
are rooted in his work in the sense of human experience being dialogical, intersubjective
and conversational (Smith, 1991).

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a student of Husserl and trained by him in
phenomenological processes, conceived of a different vision of phenomenology. His
orientation was ontological of ‘being-in-the-world’ or Da-sein which he describes as a
‘thereness of being’ distinguished by the capacity for self-reflection regarding its
existence. Heidegger’s work moved phenomenology from descriptive to interpretive
asserting that phenomenology must be understood as hermeneutical (Moran & Mooney,
2002). Heidegger (1962) believed hermeneutics was a process through which the “basic

Other notable scholars such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Ricoeur have also formed and
made substantial contributions to this tradition. The three scholars featured in this chapter
allow for a closer look at the relevance of Gadamer’s work to the study.
structures of Being . . . are made known”, the “working out of the conditions on which the possibility of any ontological investigation begins” and it is “an interpretation of Da-sein’s being” (pp. 37-38). Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with human experience as it is lived or the understanding of lifeworlds where experiences are ongoing, formative and generative. Where Heidegger’s position departed significantly from Husserl’s was that whilst Husserl believed in ontological neutrality, that is, his claim that human beings can isolate themselves from their own prejudgements through bracketing, Heidegger recognized people as being constituted by and situated in their worlds (Moules, 2002). According to Heidegger (1962), pre-understanding is a necessary structure for being in the world and is not something one can step outside of. Therefore, meaning is found through both our construction of the world and the way we are constructed by the world. Interpretation is critical to this process of understanding as Heidegger claimed that to be human is to interpret. All understanding and all our encounters are connected to our fore-structures, that is, our own historicality. Understanding happens within the interpretive process of moving back and forth between the familiar and unfamiliar, parts of experience to the whole of experience, what is revealed and what is concealed. He refers to this interpretative process as the hermeneutic circle which is to form understanding through entering into interpretation of things. The concept of the hermeneutical circle can be traced back to Schleiermacher’s foundational thinking on understanding in asking, “How is all or any utterance, whether spoken or written, really ‘understood’?” (Palmer, 1969, p. 86) Understanding, according to Schleiermacher, is a referential and dialogical process where the hearer receives words and through a divinatory process, extracts meaning from these words. This art of understanding is the hermeneutical act. Palmer explains,

What we understand forms itself into systematic unities, or circles made up of parts. The circle as a whole defines the individual part, and the parts together form the circle. . . By dialectical interaction between the whole and the part, each gives the other meaning; understanding is circular then. Because within this “circle” the meaning comes to stand, we call this the “hermeneutical circle.” (p. 87)

inseparable and emphasized the importance of historical understanding in all interpretation. The term language is used broadly to include texts, dialogue and symbolic activities. For Gadamer, all understanding and thus interpretation involves prejudice for he did not believe that a knower could free themselves of their own prejudices or biases. Rather, it was more productive to develop an awareness of our biases and situate our meaning making accordingly. Gadamer associates interpretation with what he calls a fusion of horizons, which he describes as being able to see beyond what is immediately accessible or close at hand to us. Interpretation is a dialectical process where understanding happens in the encounter between the person and text or the person and experience. Interpretation is always evolving and enables us to see or access new ways of understanding and extends our horizons. “To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we are” (p. 379). Such transformation of understanding is called ‘fusion of horizons.’

Reaching towards New Horizons: Gadamer’s Hermeneutics

It is that last phrase of Gadamer’s that captures the impulse of this inquiry, being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we are, but instead, we reach towards new horizons for the potential of what we could be. Huebner (1967), who has grounded his conceptualizations in Heidegger’s work, also advances the imperative of the present moment enabling the potentiality of the future.

The present is the moment of vision when Dasein, finding itself thrown into a situation (the past), projects its own potentiality for being. Human life is not futural; nor is it past, but, rather, a present made up of a past and future brought into the moment. . . This means that human life is never fixed but is always emergent as the past and the future become horizons of a present. (p. 137)

I am suggesting that our enactment of the IIS curriculum invites us to seek these new horizons, horizons that are about a lived experience which can be illuminating for the knower or the believer. These are not only existing horizons to be discovered, but also horizons to be created through our interpretation of encounters with text, with humans, with self, and with the larger cosmos. I am suggesting that ongoing hermeneutic
engagement with the IIS curriculum and the core processes of our educational work within our communities can enable us to enliven the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition in ways that the tradition speaks to us meaningfully time and time again for our contemporary lives. This act of continual interpretation breathes life into how we understand the vision of the curriculum, of a community in formation, and of a historical tradition that, through continuous inquiry and exploration, is a living tradition.

Gadamer’s hermeneutics offer some relevant ideas to the hermeneutic engagement of the study. Gadamer (1981) is making an argument for the development of a consciousness or self-knowledge that is not set apart from the world, but rather is in full accordance with our desire to know about the world. Such self-knowledge would allow an openness of mind and recognition of the fact that not everything is the object of science. Gadamer points out that we live in an age where God has been obscured for us and the question of being has fallen into forgetfulness. He adds that although our world is continually changing, there are enduring human realities which are unchanging and which we as humans have very little control over such as birth and death, youth and age, commitment and freedom.

These realities have measured out what human beings can plan and what they can achieve . . . the planning and organization of life on our planet and outside it, will not be able to exceed a measure which perhaps no one knows and to which, nevertheless, we are all subject. (p. 180)

Faith as a lived experience is an awareness of transcendent presence in each moment as we live our lives. It is what was referred to earlier as the presence of ‘god-consciousness’ in our lives which conditions the way we not only experience but also interact with the world. The emphasis is on the lived experience and therefore, as Gadamer (1999) says, “the holy is perhaps more a way of being than of being believed” (p. 127). On a similar note, Huebner (1987a) remarks religious education is not a time set aside to attend a class. He suggests instead that religious education can be a “way of practicing the presence of God” (p. 569). It is a way about thinking of how we are in this world and what we do with others whilst having a consciousness, an awareness of a Divine presence. Huebner’s statement points to the unity between the transcendent and the mundane rather than a separation of the two.
What is being proposed is that through negotiation and redefinition of the conceptions of tradition and modernity, this ‘god-consciousness’ can be facilitated to be increasingly present in our daily experiences. Gadamer (1981) speaks to what he calls the differentiation European intellectual history has developed between art and science, philosophy and religion, and religion and art. Religion is placed within a disparate view rather than an integrated one. He proposes the need to “evaluate the significance of the civilizing process, made possible by science, in terms of our own cultural heritage and to discover ways of reconciling such progress with our moral and religious traditions” (p. 168). He acknowledges that on one hand, the progress of modern science has transformed our world and our understanding of the world. But he also emphasizes the rich tradition of human knowledge which continues to form us and our self-understanding and suggests the two should stand side by side. For Gadamer, a science of humans must accept modern science whilst understanding its limits, “We must learn to restrict our scientific capacities to a responsible knowledge, which is nourished by the cultural inheritance of humanity” (p. 219). Modern science and tradition need not be seen as opposing entities; we can seek harmony and relationality between the two.

Gadamer has articulated the tension of bridging what seems to be increasingly incommensurable, a struggle which we as educators grapple with given our task of teaching tradition in modern times. There is an assumption that because the teachers have undergone a rigorous double masters’ program and because they are employed as professionals (instead of the volunteer teachers from previous years), teaching religious education will be inspiring, appealing and meaningful for the adolescent children under our care. In some instances it may be, but by and large, it is a hugely complex task. Ismaili adolescents attend the weekly classes in addition to their secular school week. Classes take place in formal classroom settings; the structure is similar to that of school where students are led through a lesson by the teacher, sometimes participatory, other times less so. Attendance is often inconsistent as academic pressures as well as other commitments (sports, arts, and social events) take precedence over the religious education classes. The teachers are present week after week caught in a conundrum of making the class interesting so students will be motivated to return and of teaching the content of the curriculum and these two efforts are not always experienced as compatible. A parallel can be drawn to what Gadamer (1960/1989) has pointedly
spoken to; one being the illusion of mastery and control we believe we have over our world (technical knowledge or *techne*\(^{39}\)) and secondly, the urgent need for man’s knowledge of himself (moral knowledge or *phronesis*\(^{40}\)) to achieve a new self-understanding of humanity. How we as teachers redefine the boundaries between these ideas of what we are calling tradition and modernity towards a new self-understanding of humanity is precisely the complexity of the task with which we are charged. Reconciling the richness of tradition with the potential of modernity may indeed result in the meaningfulness students (and teachers) are seeking from their educational experiences.

At this point, it would be useful to reflect on why hermeneutic engagement with the IIS curriculum and with other educational processes might assist the teachers with the challenging task of redefining conceptions of tradition and modernity. In the following sections, I am going to highlight two principles drawn from Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics: first, traditions form us and we form traditions and being open and accepting to what is both familiar and unfamiliar allows us to see new meaning and possibilities for our lived experience; and second, understanding is never absolute and it is through continual inquiry, interpretation and practical application that we come to understand ourselves and our world. I will propose how these principles are relevant for our educational pursuit to reconcile past and present, tradition and modernity, and how the process of interpretation can enable us to enliven tradition so it can be meaningfully integrated into our lives and open up new horizons of possibility.

**Revitalizing the Voice of Tradition**

Gadamer (1960/1989) is resolute in saying all interpretation is governed by a process of tradition. There exists a relatedness of the interpreter to contexts of tradition which are inescapable. In other words, our preconceptions are shaped by and derived from traditions which we access through language. Tradition therefore becomes what

\(^{39}\) The terms *techne* and *phronesis* are rooted in Gadamer’s study of the ancient Greek thought of Plato and Aristotle.

\(^{40}\) See note above.
Gadamer refers to as a historically effected hold on our interpretive capacities. The process of tradition is a living force that enters into all understanding. It is not, however, an external force that determines how we understand the world or an entity in the past we can distance and free ourselves from. Rather, we are always situated within traditions and we live through this process providing it with its force.

This view is markedly different from the Cartesian view that dominates education in that history is seen as something external, objective and past, and that traditions can be studied as entities removed from ourselves. Heidegger (1962) explains the influence of tradition on human existence through his claim that Da-sein is its past. “It is its past, whether explicitly or not. And this is so not only in that its past is, as it were, pushing itself along ‘behind’ it . . . but something which already goes ahead of it” (p. 41). Heidegger, who provided the foundation for Gadamer’s work, argued for a new attitude that recognized the power of tradition and involved discovering the positive possibilities to appropriate and transform the history that has been handed down to us. “Da-sein can discover tradition, preserve it, and study it explicitly. The discovery of tradition and the disclosure of what it ‘transmits’ and how this is transmitted, can be taken hold of as a task in its own right” (p. 44). The appeal here is to rethink and accept tradition as a process and force that conditions all our interpretations and to engage with these traditions to create genuine understandings of the world as we experience the present. Part of this work includes being able to see the enduring human realities in tradition and how these remain constant through the passage of time.

In the act of interpreting then, sociohistorically inherited bias or prejudice are not characteristics an interpreter needs to rid him/herself of in order to arrive at a clear understanding. Instead, the interpreter is required to engage their own biases which, in itself, is a dynamic process of “risking one’s stance and acknowledging the ongoing luminal experience of living between familiarity and strangeness” (Kerdeman, 1998). The space of living between familiarity and strangeness is important in philosophical hermeneutics as it is a reminder of not having to free ourselves of all prejudices but also of not re-enacting our own biases. Garrison (1996) captures the ‘in-betweenness’ well saying, “the point is . . . to examine our historically inherited and unreflectively held prejudices and alter those that disable our efforts to understand others and ourselves”
A commitment is required, therefore, from individuals, to risk their prejudices and be open to altering these in their encounters and interpretations.

The concept of tradition, as it is being discussed by Gadamer and Heidegger, includes broadly our social, cultural and historical traditions that influence our perspective of the world and hence, how we interpret the world. In addition to these traditions, as educators in the Ismaili religious education system, we are also shaped by a specific historical and theological tradition, one that should not be understood as static in our encounters with curriculum text, with students in our classroom and within our own learning communities. Philosophical hermeneutics endorses not simply an awareness of these prejudices, but an active engagement with our prejudices. We need not simply read at face value (or text value) what the curriculum presents as content or what our experiences present. Rather, philosophical hermeneutics invites us to engage with the text, to identify and reflect upon our biases as educators, as believers, as social, political and gendered beings, and to venture into those luminal spaces where we are with both the familiar and unfamiliar. What about this curriculum speaks to our contemporary world? What seems to distance us from it? How does the curriculum resonate with our understanding of faith? How does it cause us dissonance? Why this choice of content? Why this language to present the content? How do we see past the literal to understand the symbolic layers of meanings of the text? Engaging in this way and attending to the “inner ear”41 of the text, can provide a living force to tradition, particularly the tradition informing the curriculum with which we are working, so it can be inspiring, thought provoking and meaningful to both ourselves and our students.

Hermeneutic engagement with tradition does not mean we can completely discard the tradition for another, for tradition itself has authority over us. It means that we use our reason to revitalize tradition so its effects are enabling rather than dominating. On this Gadamer (1960/1989) explains, tradition takes on authority in our

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41 The inner ear refers to listening to the special voice of the text and searching for the meaning the text offers in its encounter with the reader (Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 547).
lives as interpretation is always formed on authoritative prejudices. Authority, however, is not seen as total domination; in fact, authority is based on reason.

This is connected with the fact that authority cannot actually be bestowed but it is earned, and must be earned if someone is to lay claim to it. It rests on acknowledgement and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others. Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to commands. Indeed, authority has to do not with obedience but rather with knowledge. (p. 279)

The central place of reason and freedom in relation to authority and interpretation are of great significance in hermeneutical philosophy as it suggests we can revise and reform our preconceptions through reflection. All meanings, whether conscious or unconscious, are projected on the basis of prior knowledge and are carried with us. Reason and authority integrate in a dialectic relationship through the hermeneutical task in identifying which preconceptions are productive, that is, which ones further or advance interpretation and understanding of the world, and which ones are non-productive, that is, which ones perpetuate misunderstanding. Authority and reason are not conceived as opposites since “to be situated in a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible . . .” (p. 361). This perspective on the essential role of reason as a positive force to gaining knowledge of tradition is profoundly resonant with the Ismaili Muslim view on the primacy of the intellect in understanding and interpreting faith.

Freedom of knowledge, according to Shaun Gallagher (1992), is made possible by hermeneutical reflection which cultivates awareness to the prejudgements that condition our interpretations. He suggests that the relation of tradition to educational work is a transformative one in that educators learn to remain open to the multitude of possibilities tradition offers for interpretation and thus for learning. Gallagher captures this sentiment through the work of Scheffler (1973) in stating, “to learn is to enter into traditions, to inherit them, and to participate in the never-ending work of testing, expanding, and altering them for the better” (p. 92). Understanding then is not solely a subjective act. It is more of a participatory act of entering into the event of tradition and ‘conversing’ with tradition in a process that mediates the past and present. In this way, we as educators may be able to respond to the challenge of understanding tradition as lived and how our living tradition can take us beyond what our relationship to tradition
has already supplied us. Our continual revision of our fore-understandings and our openness to what fore-understandings are provided by language (through text or through the other) bring about projections of new meanings. This is because we move back and forth from what we comfortably know to what may be alien to us with the hope of making the unknown inalienable or part of a new fore-understanding. In doing so, we are living within the hermeneutic circle and accessing insights of our limitations as well as our possibilities. A hermeneutical engagement with the IIS curriculum can assist teachers in interpreting and redefining ideas of tradition and modernity, faith and world, religious and secular, spiritual and rational, if we actively use our reason to establish a dialogical relationship with text (or texts) thereby continually revitalizing the authoritative voice of tradition.

**Inquiry and Interpretation, Application and Self-Understanding**

Gadamer, Huebner and others who have theorized hermeneutical inquiry philosophically and within the field of curriculum support that faith and lived experience, secular life and religious life, tradition and modernity need not be experienced as separate entities in one’s life. The vision of the IIS Secondary Curriculum advocates for an integrated approach so that faith does not become irrelevant or outdated to the believer and contemporary life does not become impermeable to a sense of sacred. In this study, I seek to understand how a hermeneutic engagement can facilitate such an integrated approach for the teachers so as to give rise to new and unforeseen ways of seeing the world and uncovering new meanings for tradition to be luminal in our lived educational experiences. This section will expand on the formation of understanding through learning to live in questions (the unfamiliar) and increasing our understanding and self-formation through our practical engagement with text and with others.

Entering into conversation, whether with text or tradition is participative and dialogic and therefore, a willingness to venture into the unfamiliar is necessary for us to open ourselves to testing our preconceptions (Schwandt, 2000). The meaning from dialogic encounters is *produced* not *reproduced* and, according to Gadamer, is understood as temporal, processive and always coming into being. Meaning is not determinable by the interpreter; meaning is negotiated in the encounter or in the act of interpretation. Consequently, if meaning is not an external entity waiting to be
discovered, then the act of understanding is an applied, embodied one. It is a practical experience that determines who we are and how we see the world. It is lived and existential and furthers human growth. Gadamer (1960/1989) explains this in the following way:

Furthermore, where it is successful, understanding means a growth in inner awareness, which as a new experience enters into the texture of our own mental experience. . . it is capable of contributing in a special way to the broadening of human experiences, our self-knowledge, and our horizon, for everything understanding mediates is mediated along with ourselves. (pp. 109-110)

Gadamer (1981) proposes that what draws us to a text is never purely a neutral, objective concern. There are both conscious and unconscious interests that stir us and he suggests that these interests, our interests, lie in the questions of the unfamiliar rather than the answers. Understanding is achieved through incessant questioning and as long as the question remains, the dialogue remains open. Interpretation begins with the recognition of the unfamiliar, a question that has meaning and direction. Referring to Plato, Gadamer (1960/1989) states, “there is a profound recognition of the priority of the question in all knowledge and discourse that really reveals something of an object. Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that the thing be broken up by the question” (p. 363). Interpretation then always opens up possibilities of meaning and is never absolute.

Putting our prejudgements at risk and leaving ourselves open to the unfamiliar is the type of hermeneutical engagement that may deepen our understanding of what meaningful learning is for the children of our community. If we accept that educational experience is hermeneutical, then accordingly, what we experience in the classrooms and what our students experience can only be interpretations of understanding, ours and theirs. As teachers, we bring our interpretation of what we understand to our lessons; students are exposed to this interpretation from which they derive an understanding and formulate their own interpretation and so on. Understanding is interpretive and is a projection of meaning and of my own possibilities into the world (Gallagher, 1992). Why is this recognition important for us as educators when it is much less perplexing to think
about teaching and learning as simply matters of curriculum and pedagogy to be implemented?

Well, initially, if understanding is not absolute and there is always surplus of meaning (Heidegger, 1962), we can encourage our students to continue to seek meaning from our encounters with texts and to interrogate the traditions that lie within the text and the knowledge forms these texts may reveal. Second, if interpretation is productive, we are also called to pay attention to the meanings we bring to the text and those the students bring, for in those meanings lie our projection of possibilities for who we are and what we can be in the world. And third, if we learn to live in what van Manen (1990) calls ‘meaning questions,’ we enact education as a process of uncovering mysteries rather than solving problems through “knowledge, reflection, and thought to make (my human life) knowable to itself” (p. 17). Surely, this sort of thoughtfulness is necessary for educators who aspire for a ‘minding, heeding, caring attunement’ (Heidegger, 1962) of what it means to live a life of faith.

Gadamer (1981) helps us to understand that a unique characteristic specific to humans is their ability to wish and satisfy their wishes through will. In pursuing what he refers to as “performative excellence”, which asks the question of the good, human beings can make choiceworthy decisions which move ‘wishing’ to ‘willing’ in the process of practice or action. The word ‘act’ is of great importance here as Gadamer (1960/1989) maintains that all understanding involves application. “The person who is understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected but rather thinks along with the other from the specific bond of belonging, as if he too, were affected” (p. 323). Therefore, our practice is determined by our understanding and through practice of our understanding, we find ourselves in the process of self-formation (Bildung). Gadamer refutes the notion of human progression as a linear process from mythology to enlightenment and opts for a human existence that is in a relentless movement between illumination and concealment. His view of progress is that it must always be renewed in the effort of living. Van Manen (1990) has also articulated a similar view of progress which involves “humanizing human life and humanizing human institutions to help human beings to become increasingly thoughtful and thus better prepared to act” (p. 21). When our understanding is mediated through a broader sense of knowledge that is not a matter of formal reason alone, but also includes qualities of
inwardness, spiritual refinement and embodied being (van Manen, 1990), then our practice may reflect those same qualities. Huebner (1985b) offers a related sentiment on the spirit as enabling us to go beyond who and what we currently are.

Spirit refers to the possible and unimagined—to the possibility of new ways, new knowledge, new relationships, new awareness. Spirit refers to that which makes it possible to acknowledge that present forms of life—the institutions, relationships, symbols, language, habits—cannot contain the human being. (p. 344)

The type of hermeneutic engagement being called for here is not only a fusion of horizons (Gadamer 1960/1989), but also an opening of new horizons. We have our horizon of the present as we understand our lived experience. Within this, we integrate the horizon of historical consciousness through our active engagement with our prejudgements and traditions. Still further, we form our understandings through questioning what may not be familiar to us and add to the fusion, the horizon of the other which we strive to make our own. And finally, through application, we find ourselves in the process of continual self-formation which in itself has the potential to shape and reshape our lived experiences and our being in this world. The interpretive quest allows us to not only acknowledge but actually preserve and give continuous expression to the centrality of the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition. There is a certain authority about this tradition we need to be mindful of and in heeding this authority, we can and must also use our intellect in our search for understanding. Gadamer’s address of truth is that neither meaning nor truth is absolute; in fact, they are dynamic, contingent, evolving, and referential. This living, expansive view of truth always allows for possibilities to being open to what is not known so we can continue to pay attention to it. It invites the continuation of a conversation with text, with others, with self and with the Divine. One way of thinking about the intentionality of the IIS Secondary Curriculum is to have students and teachers seek and create meaning of their relationship with tradition, with each other, and with the Divine from their own humanity. This relationship can be actively pursued through inquiry and interpretation and applied through lived experience.

Gadamer (1981) raises the central question of paidiea—the education needed for contemporary human beings to be in adequate relation to their times, to be able to “apply” themselves to it, to its promises as well as its frustrations. This is the very
challenge and opportunity presented to us by the IIS curriculum and the Ismaili Muslim living tradition it represents; education for our contemporary adolescents so that they may be able to be in adequate relations to their time and apply themselves through a voice of tradition that speaks to them anew time and time again. Dewey (1909) has argued that we create the world through our participation in it and not as mere intellectual onlookers. Our self-formation as educators and how this self-formation guides our ongoing interpretation of and application to our world will surely create a form of paidiea that remains true to our tradition and true to the world we inhabit alongside others.

**Inquiry and Interpretation in the Shia Ismaili Muslim Tradition**

Thus far in this chapter, I have looked at hermeneutical inquiry in relation to curriculum and argued that hermeneutical inquiry enables a view of curriculum as one that is socially and historically determined, dialogical, seeks possibilities, and concerned with the disclosing of meaning and self-formation. A closer examination of the hermeneutics of Gadamer reveals constructs important to the conceptualization of this study. Gadamer speaks of understanding and interpretation as being ongoing and formed by our pre-judgements. In the hermeneutic process, we are continually revealing meanings that form our understanding and interpretation through our encounters with multiple written, social and experiential texts. Being aware of our fore-understandings, being open to spaces of ambiguity, and recognizing that meaning is created in these encounters are processes that enable us to enter luminal spaces. These processes, furthermore, allow us to engage with tradition as a dynamic, evolving force which we give expression to through our reason whilst acknowledging and benefiting from its authority.

Chapter Two portrayed the hermeneutical endeavour as deeply infused in the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition from the time of the revelation of the Qur’an. Throughout history, Shi’i perspectives have emphasized ongoing inquiry and interpretation as being integral to the understanding and expression of the Shia Ismaili Muslim living tradition. From the time of the Prophet to Ali, through the subsequent periods of history and to
present day, interpretive engagements, and more importantly, esoteric interpretive engagements give the Ismaili living tradition a life force. It is this motive force which enables adherents to engage intellectually with their world whilst simultaneously intellectually engaging with the transcendent. Therefore, of necessity, this section will discuss the concept of inquiry and interpretation as embedded in religious experience through the work of Aziz Esmail. Although far from comprehensive, what the section will elucidate is a contemporary articulation of the interpretive spirit within this living tradition.

Esmail (1998) in his work, The Poetics of Religious Experience: The Islamic Context, speaks of a religious vision that conditions an individual’s interpretation of the world and of their relations with others. Religion as a vision is implicit in the culture of members of a religious community, that is, it infuses habits of thought, speech, emotion, action and convictions about the world. This vision is not an afterthought that is translated but rather embodied in a way of life. Esmail presents a conception of religious experience where interpretation or interpretative activity is integral to the various facets of how we live. As we interpret this vision, we shape and inspire our life through defining what is significant and worthwhile to strive towards.

Similar to Huebner, Esmail suggests when we speak of interpretation, we pay attention to not only what is, ‘a bounded space,’ but also what is not, ‘a space beyond.’ The specificity of an interpretation also suggests the probability of alternatives other than the one that is being actualised. These possibilities are unrealised and point to human experience as being wide, varied and open.

--the experience, namely, of life as both closed and open; of facts which cannot be undone and possibilities not yet done with; of meanings which have taken shape, and meaning which is yet to be shaped. We are creatures of constraint; but creatures, nonetheless, with a sense of the

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Dr. Aziz Esmail is the former Dean of the Institute of Ismaili Studies. His work draws upon scholars such as Ricoeur, Heidegger, Wittgenstien and others who have engaged with the philosophy of language and symbolism. His views, while not definitive or authoritative of the Ismaili tradition, support the conceptual framing of this study.
infinite. Insofar as we have this sense, we are free—not free enough to experience and attain everything, but free by virtue of being able to imagine the infinite, and therefore, to this extent, capable of transcending, through forward imagination and effort, the finiteness of the given, the present. (p. 3)

It is this act of continual interpretation that makes the Islamic tradition a living tradition. According to Esmail, a living tradition “proceeds on the basis of continual re-making, not only of the new in terms of the old, but also of the old in terms of the new” (p. 5). There is a persistent interplay between new experiences and old ideas where old ideas are found in new experiences and also, new dimensions are added to old ideas. This dialectic or ‘labour’ ensures religion is not only looked upon as a static and fixed system of beliefs, but rather a vision of symbolic conceptions that Esmail refers to as being “open, elastic and indeterminate . . . it represents an ideal of justice and an ideal resolution of life, where virtuous action and well-being coincide . . . it provides a foundation for moral life” (p. 8). He provides the following perspective of the Qur’an in support of his view.

The Qur’an does not urge its listeners to subscribe to propositions of belief. What it does is to summon them to an outlook on life, and to action commensurate with that outlook. Philosophy and deed, ethic and act, are fused together, so that each imparts meaning to the other. (p. 6)

Thus, in this view, Islam is a religion that presents an epistemological and ontological vision, a vision of being that guides one’s orientation and ethical conduct in life. The continual interpretation encourages a dynamism which allows the remaking of the living tradition, that is, not limited to forms of a specific place and time and in fact, accepting of new meanings that arise in our experiences. The religious experience becomes a process of meaning-making that binds the religious community and also gives meaning to our lives and in doing so, promotes purposeful and ethical action. A distinguishing feature of the meaning-making process is it is critical in spirit. This criticality invites exploration, dialogue, relationship and the desire to know more. And, it is through this personal search that one strives to create their bond with the sacred or the Divine.
The case Esmail argues is one that moves away from religion as dogma and moves towards religion as a search for meaning in the life of humans. The word search is important as it implies an ongoing engagement rather than a fixed understanding. Search is also not used as a pursuit to find. Search is referred to as an interpretive activity that has no end. Religious experience is about continual interpretation of what Esmail distinguishes as symbolic concepts. He uses the illustration of a notion common to Judaic, Christian and Islamic traditions, the notion of a final judgement. When conceived symbolically rather than doctrinally, final judgement can represent ideals of justice, resolution of life and virtuous action. “Such an outcome is seldom realised in actual experience. But as what we might call a ‘horizon idea,’ it provides a foundation to moral life” (p. 8). Esmail encourages symbolic conceptions that allow a diversity of interpretations rather than striving for theologically definite ideas that narrow our range of understanding.

Esmail further explicates the importance of symbolic conceptions for religious experience as a vision of being. The ability to interpret ideas symbolically is not exhausted or limited by forms particular to any given time or place. Rather, this interpretation gives rise to new and unforeseen ways of seeing the world and uncovering meaning in ongoing history. He also raises the issue of language, contrasting informational and symbolic language, claiming that the difference between the two kinds of language is access to the scope of meaning. He contrasts two models of knowledge; one which satiates through the acquisition of facts and the other which can whet hunger through exploration. Esmail is not advocating one type of knowledge over the other. He himself resists such dichotomies claiming that these dichotomies are products of modern European history. The premise he is laying before us is the necessity of both the literal and the symbolic if religious experience is to be an act of continual interpretation. His view is aligned with Huebner’s view on the indispensability of artistic and aesthetic curricular epistemologies discussed earlier.

Why is the emphasis on religious experience and continual interpretation of such importance in Ismaili thought and tradition? Esmail helps us understand this question through presenting the following premises: First, the sacred is always perceived or experienced in the context of a relationship and not as an entity unto itself. He uses the example of the Qur’an where humanity is addressed by a prophet or messenger, that is,
when God speaks, it is through revelation. Therefore, the “divine is primordially revealed in a dialogical act” (p. 12). Second, Esmail furthers his first point by adding that the relational aspect means the sacred becomes known to man through intermediary forms of human psychology and culture. Third, Esmail argues that relationship of man to his own being and to the sacred is by its nature plural or manifold rather than singular which legitimates the idea of spiritual plurality or pluralism. And lastly, in light of the above, the language of faith which represents the bond between man and the sacred then can be understood as a ‘continuing rather than a completed symbolisation’ because of this relational context.

Through the work of Esmail, an understanding is being formulated that religious experience and the connection to the sacred is a relational phenomena. This relationship takes forms of human psychology and culture of which language is an essential part. The kind of language being favoured is a symbolic language, one that is indeterminate, based on human experience and open to both the revealing and concealing of meaning. As we choose to consider or adopt one meaning, we move away or conceal other alternatives. This continuous meaning making is an interpretative activity that allows us to create our world view and vision for being in this world and, understand how we choose to enact that vision. It is this ongoing interpretation, which symbolic language facilitates, that shapes one’s experience with the transcendent or the Divine. The intensely personal nature of this engagement accepts diversity and recognizes the influence of human experience and religious belief as integral to this quest.

This spirit of inquiry, of diversity in thought and perception, and of human experience is a complex but critical space in our teacher learning community. Often times, over the last few years, I have entered in conversation with teachers who are experiencing acute tensions with their role as religious educators and how to live out this role responsibly. The tension arises from what may be perceived as conflicting ideologies. One stems from the desire to acknowledge ethical and humanistic traditions common to most faith and moral communities such as dignity of human life and the practice of generosity and kindness towards mankind. The other stems from not wanting to appear too relativistic to students and to provide guidance and teaching to the faith doctrine of what it means to be Ismaili Muslim. These positions are not contradictory;
they require integrated ways of thinking we can introduce to our students. Esmail’s work liberates us from such dilemmas as he encourages thinking about religious experience from the perspective of what it means to be human as an initial entry point. What is meant by that is that belief systems and doctrines provide people with their religious identity and serve as ‘charters’ for a particular way of life ascribed to by the faith tradition. He reminds us, however, that these belief systems are secondary to primary symbols of human experience, symbols that transcend religious and secular divides. Esmail posits that symbols we encounter such as love, separation, and unity are human before they become specifically religious or cultural, and speak to the human condition at large. His argument facilitates an integrated view of interpreting faith and its tradition within the larger context of human experience and not distinct from it. Curricular practice for the teachers then becomes an act of hermeneutical inquiry, of searching for meaning both from our world of the social and political imagination, and also, drawing upon what Esmail refers to as the sacred imagination which is present in the symbolic texture of language.

Symbols such as division and separation, the language of lament, union, and integration, are highly resonant. They suggest rather than state, evoke rather than formulate. As symbols, they say a great deal because they do not say any one thing in too narrow or definite a form. Like depth in a painting, they hold meaning in reserve. They generate lines of meaning which emerge and radiate inwards and outwards during the act of reading. They release associations and reverberations. Symbolic language points to a hinterland of meaning. It points to the realm of unconscious meanings, like those which psychoanalysis investigates. It is meaning in a state of latency. (p. 21, emphasis in original)

It is this ‘latency’ I am proposing the teachers investigate in their ongoing inquiry and interaction with the curriculum texts, with their students, with themselves and with their learning communities. Esmail suggests that human beings experience the world, which is already impregnated with meaning, both materially and spiritually as these concepts are inseparable. He elaborates by saying, “It is not only the sacred which is perceived in terms of the world; the world too is perceived . . . in terms of the sacred” (p. 24). Inquiry therefore allows us to understand a conception of faith which does not dichotomize religious and secular but rather invites a search for meaning both from a universal existential perspective and from a specific tradition perspective. It is this layered
perspective I am suggesting is present in the IIS Secondary Curriculum. There is
meaning in its current state of latency, meaning which is the consciousness or the
intentionality of the curriculum.

The view being offered here is an epistemological view that is a departure from
traditional paradigms, that of religious knowledge being created rather than awaiting
mastery. Esmail refers to the thought of Sufi theorist Ibn al-'Arabi and specifically to a
central thread of his work, the pluralism of religious consciousness. Ibn al-'Arabi’s
conception of knowledge acknowledges the diverse points of view human beings have
on reality. The idea of God then is symbolic rather than an exact representation of
reality.

It is the form in which the Absolute makes itself known to man. Hence to
know the divine, one must know oneself. For there is always a form in
which the Absolute becomes known to man. This aspect of ‘appearing-
to-man’ is fundamental. One cannot really know reality except insofar as
it is conceived by human beings. Hence to know the divine (which is not
an independent object but a relation) and to know the human essence are
one and the same thing. In knowing the divine, one knows how one
conceives of the divine. (p. 27)

Here again, the theme of relationality and therefore, a diversity of interpretation is
presented. Ibn al-'Arabi’s work promotes a tolerance and an acceptance of a plurality of
religious views and also gives rise to questions that reach beyond the scope of religious
belief and concerns human relationship in action or knowledge of the world. These
intellectual questions are ripe for exploration within the IIS Secondary Curriculum
through the lenses of history, culture, philosophy and ethics. In this way, students can
develop their own unique relationships with the Divine or conceptions of the sacred from
their experiences and interpretations rather than be led to a singular conception.

To further elucidate the integrated view of faith and life or matter and spirit,
Esmail probes into Abu Ya’qub al-Sijistani’s work, a prominent Muslim author and
philosopher from the Fatimid times⁴³. He describes Sijistani’s conception of the world as rationalist, that is, the universe was a rational order. Everything, therefore, that explains religion and faith must also explain everything else. He shares an excerpt of Paul Walker’s summary on Sijistani’s thought citing, “The transcending intellectual reality that the Qur’an reflects . . . must contain a truth so all encompassing that all things and all parts of knowledge belong to it and under it” (p. 51). Walker also makes reference to the notion of ‘roots’ which in Sijistani’s work refers to tracing something back to its origin as was presented in Chapter Two. Ta’wil, Esmail explains, is involved with the “dualism of the outer and the inner, which is a hallmark of Ismaili thought” (p. 51). The significance of this dualism is that text can hold various levels of meaning. And the exact meaning one uncovers is less important than the recognition of the interpretative nature of the text. In other words, what is of importance is not the specific meaning (which may be understood temporally, culturally or historically) but the continual creation of meaning. As Esmail expresses in his poetic voice, “It is a continuous creativity, where one form supersedes another in march with life’s onward-bound journey, personal as well as collective” (p. 53).

Sijistani’s conception of religious ideas, as part of a larger horizon and their origin in ‘roots’ that lie deeper, can therefore not be captured through creed. Instead, Esmail suggests they form a framework for understanding the human condition and thus, there can be no substitute for a personal endeavour or individual search. Texts are essential but are there to be surpassed, to offer meaning of what lies beyond. The intellect cannot be separated or seen as one object amongst others, it is the “focus of existential striving. It is the focus of self-interpretation: the pole star guiding the course of human life” (p. 61). Continual human quest to create a sense rather than an explanation of the world is a central idea in Ismaili thought and practice and is rooted in “the theme of an incomplete existence, aspiring towards an ideal fulfilment . . . for where there is aspiration, there is movement” (p. 62).

⁴³ See Paul Walker (1996), Abu Ya’qub al-Sijistani: Intellectual Missionary, for a discussion on Sijistani’s thinking and works.
Research Methodology

A case has been presented and argued that hermeneutic inquiry and ongoing interpretation of the world and of self is a central tenet of the Shia Ismaili Muslim faith. It is this inquiry and interpretation (cumulative interaction) which gives ongoing expression to the creative vision of the living tradition arising out of the group commitment. In this research study, I have sought to better understand the lived experiences and lived meanings of the curricular inquiry as it is taking place in this space and time amongst the teachers. In particular, I have sought to understand how the teachers are making meaning: of their own being in this role of a community educator of living tradition; of the IIS Secondary Curriculum and its intentionality; of how they give life to this intentionality with their students and amongst themselves in their learning communities; and of how they are in conversation with the various texts of their experience.

The study situates itself within the qualitative interpretive research paradigm, and uses hermeneutical phenomenology as applied in the field of curriculum inquiry and curriculum theory as its core methodological and theoretical framework. The study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to investigate the teachers’ experiences as to how they are making meaning of the IIS Secondary Curriculum and how these interpretations translate into their lived practice. Hermeneutical phenomenology suggests that interpretation deepens through paying attention to experience and our experience becomes more thoughtful when meaning is sought from it. This paradigm looks at lived experience, how we interpret our lived experiences, and how these interpretations shape the lived meanings we bring to subsequent experiences.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is the theory of the unique rather than of the general. The approach seeks to understand phenomena in its individual particular way against the backdrop of the larger communal horizon. Contrary to more positivist paradigms of natural sciences, this human science paradigm looks closely at daily lived experiences and attempts to provide insight as to the meaning structures these experiences hold. The core principle of hermeneutic phenomenology is to have the researcher and participants take a pedagogic stance, that is, the researcher and
participants hold a strong orientation to what is good for children which forms the basis for the research.

Max van Manen (1990) articulates a hermeneutic phenomenological point of view on research.

To do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. . . In doing research we question the world's very secrets and intimacies which are constitutive of the world, and which bring the world as world into being for us and in us. Then research is a caring act: we want to know that which is most essential to being. (p. 5)

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the study focuses on the lived experience of a sample group of seven teachers and how the interpretation (or interpreting) of their lived experiences shapes their understanding of curriculum and pedagogy and their actions as community educators. The methodology of the study entails a gathering of what van Manen (1990) refers to as lived-experience materials. Since the character of hermeneutical inquiry is more conversational (Gadamer, 1960/1989) and meaning is arrived at referentially and relationally (Smith, 1991), the study created conditions for ongoing written and hermeneutical conversations between the teachers and myself as the researcher. Data was collected, analyzed and represented through four primary sources:

1. **Protocol Writing or Lived Experience Descriptions**
   Individual teachers developed a lived experience description of two to three pages on each of the essential themes as indicated in Table 3: Research Schedule. These lived experience descriptions articulated teacher understanding of the theme and also represented a related lived experience situation. After I had engaged in several readings of the written protocol, with each successive reading revealing layers of meanings, a hermeneutic conversation was scheduled with the teacher.

2. **Hermeneutic Conversations**
   The individual teacher and I met to further probe and interpret the written protocol. If the teacher felt other documents were useful for the conversation, e.g. curriculum design developed by teacher, those documents were used as additional references. Each hermeneutic conversation lasted between 60-90 minutes. Through successive readings of the written protocol, I had identified areas that seemed to have a surplus of meaning. These areas provided a framing for the
conversation but were not always followed to completion if the conversation itself revealed other areas of potency to explore. Attention was paid to language, how it was used to describe experience and particular phrases were probed for further interpretation. As per the principle of hermeneutic conversations, these interpretive interactions aimed to have the researcher and participant develop a shared understanding of the phenomenon in a spirit of openness and hospitality.

3. **Researcher Hermeneutic Interpretation**
   Following each hermeneutic conversation, and after the data was transcribed, I developed a researcher interpretation arising out of the hermeneutic conversation to share back with the teacher. In this writing of two to three pages, my intent was to reflect my emerging understanding from the interaction since in this research tradition, the researcher is a co-participant in the inquiry and should be open to self-conversion rather than being a detached collector of participant responses.

4. **Autobiographical Data**
   Reflections from my own experiences as the Academic Director drawn from field notes or a reflection journal have been presented when relevant and appropriate.

Data sources were analyzed and interpreted through the process of hermeneutic exchanges as well as at the conclusion of the field work. The three part hermeneutic process for each theme allowed engagement with the data which then informed each successive exchange. In that way, the data was not collected and left until the conclusion of the field work for analysis. Each theme invoked several interpretive processes: the writing of the written protocol; the readings of the written protocol; the preparation for the hermeneutic conversation; the hermeneutic conversation; the transcribing of the hermeneutic conversation; the development of the researcher interpretation; and the engagement with the researcher interpretation. The process was deeply hermeneutical not only in striving to understand the teachers’ experiences, but also in the manner the data collection method was designed and implemented.
The methodological structure of the research design is outlined below.44

1. *Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world*
   Developing a research proposal on why curriculum inquiry in the Ismaili religious education context enables us as educators to increase our competency and care in working with children within a faith tradition

2. *Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it*
   Developing a research design that enabled teachers to reflect upon, represent and further probe their experiences in engaging curriculum to affect their practice

3. *Reflection on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon*
   Articulation of the essential themes that impact the lived experiences of the teachers (see Table 3 Research Schedule):
   a. Understanding of the teacher role within this community of living tradition
   b. Understanding of curricular intentionality
   c. Understanding of interpretive influences in designing educational experiences for adolescents
   d. Understanding the interactions and the pedagogic stance the teachers take with students
   e. Understanding the community and various life-worlds within which the teachers are present
   f. Understanding the hermeneutic circle of the teachers’ experiences as educators of a faith tradition

4. *Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting*
   Teachers developed lived experience descriptions or protocol writing on each of the essential themes outlined above.

5. *Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon*
   Teachers were asked to always include a lived experience description in the written protocol. The teacher and researcher engaged in hermeneutic conversations to interpret the lived experience description. The researcher interpretation provided additional frames

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for curricular and pedagogical understanding and interpretation. In addition, teachers maintained reflective journals through the research process to capture their thoughts as these emerged.

6. *Balancing the research context by considering the whole and the parts*

Following each hermeneutic conversation, the researcher developed a generative, recursive and evolving interpretation of the hermeneutic conversation to share with the teacher. This process brought the researcher into the interpretive space with the teacher as a co-participant and ensured the larger phenomenon being investigated is always kept in sight. The three-part process of teacher written protocols, hermeneutic conversations, and researcher written interpretations continued and spiraled through each of the six themes listed above over the ten months of data collection.

**Sampling Method**

Invitation to participate in this study was extended to all thirty-four Canadian STEP teachers through a formal written communication which included a brief overview of the study. Those teachers interested in learning more about the study were invited to participate in an orientation meeting where I presented the main facets of the study including the purpose, context, research methodology and methods, timelines, essential themes being explored and the importance of the study to the researcher. Teachers who attended the meeting were sent a detailed study description prior to the meeting. Attendees at this orientation meeting were requested to express their interest to participate through a written confirmation and to submit their consent forms following the meeting. Approximately twenty teachers in total attended the two orientation meetings and fourteen teachers expressed their interest in serving as study participants. From this group, I selected seven teachers using the following criteria which had been shared openly with the teachers prior to selection: representation from all cohorts one to four; representation from all Canadian regions; intention to continue service to ITREB Canada for the following academic year in case the research required more time for completion; availability and commitment to fulfill research obligations; timeliness of submission of interest. All teachers who were not selected were placed on a waiting list and were
spoken to individually as to the reasons for non-selection. The final participant selection comprised of seven teachers\textsuperscript{45}. Although these factors were not part of the selection criteria, there is a balanced gender distribution as well as three participants who were secular teachers in their former profession before joining ITREB Canada.

**Participant Preparation for Research**

A research preparation process was designed for the study participants to prepare them for the research methods they would be experiencing. Participants were provided readings on hermeneutic phenomenology to familiarize themselves with the philosophical and methodological approach of this paradigm. Each participant was asked to participate in an individual preparatory conversation which was recorded and transcribed. This ‘beginning conversation’ sought to develop the research relationship between myself as the researcher and the participant by asking the participants to share why they were interested in participating in this study, what their hopes were, what their uncertainties were, and what questions they had on the methodology or on the study. In addition, participants were provided with a written participant guide developed by myself to prepare them for the written protocol on the first theme. The participant guide suggested an approach to the writing of the written protocol using phenomenological principles of writing and revising as well as capturing lived experience descriptions. Through the early stages of the research process, participant guides were developed for each theme to increase the teachers’ orientation to and comfort with the hermeneutical phenomenological approach and methods.

**Research Process**

After the ‘beginning conversations’ had been completed with each of the seven study participants, participants were invited to begin the process of constructing their written protocol for Theme One (see Table 3 Research Schedule). Each theme had two

\textsuperscript{45} Prior to confirming participant selection, there was a consultative process with my supervisory committee to ensure integrity of the process and suitability of selection for the study.
to three questions which study participants used as prompts for their writing. In addition to writing on the guiding questions, participants were also invited to share a lived experience description as part of the written protocol which related to the questions of the theme.

When the participant felt satisfied with their writing, rewriting and revising process, they would send the written protocol to me. I would read and reread the written protocol several times, each time identifying ideas, themes, phrases or provocative questions emerging from the writing. The two of us would then meet and would discuss some of the articulations arising from the written protocol. This hermeneutic conversation would be guided by myself but mostly held by the participant. I would gently probe the participant’s words and the participant’s thinking and inquire into what they meant by a particular phrase, or what their thoughts were on a particular issue they had raised, or how they could elaborate on tensions or observations they had noted.

The hermeneutic conversations flowed quite organically. Some of the conversation emerged from the written protocol, some of the conversation emerged from what the participant was speaking about over the course of the hermeneutic conversation, some of the conversation emerged from questions or thoughts raised in the previous researcher hermeneutical interpretation. All conversations probed, deepened, delved, inquired, explored, sometimes challenged or opened, sometimes mirrored or clarified.

Each hermeneutic conversation concluded with me soliciting feedback from the participant as to how they had experienced the hermeneutic conversation and how they were experiencing the research process. It was important to me that study participants saw themselves as exactly that, participants and partners.

The hermeneutic conversation was transcribed and then read and reread by myself multiple times. Here again, the process of interpretation occurred as I engaged

46 Transcribing the hermeneutic conversations myself within a week’s time, although time consuming, was critical to the hermeneutic process as this allowed me to ‘hear’ the conversation again and to pay close attention to the interpretive interactions between myself and the participant.
with highlighting pre-understandings and assumptions, identifying relationships between ideas, and noting dissonances raised by the participant. After several interpretive readings, I then developed a written hermeneutic interpretation which was sent to the participant upon completion. The researcher hermeneutic interpretation opened up a deeper, new layer to the hermeneutic exchange, based first on the written protocol, and then the hermeneutic conversation. Several questions were raised for the participant to consider as part of their own inquiry either for the theme being discussed or for subsequent themes. This cyclical process was followed with each participant for each of the six themes. Throughout, participants shared their insights and experiences of the research process following each hermeneutic conversation.

Shakeel: I like the dialogical ethos of this research, makes me feel like a co-participant not a subject. There is a sense of inquiry and openness, a spirit of inquiry where you are being invited to go into the questions you raised.

Yasmine: What is fascinating to me is that I can actually hear myself; these are new ways of articulating ideas and this is helping me understand my approach and my thinking. It is interesting to hear myself articulating my thinking, because it is new, it is hearing myself speak differently.

Raziq: These questions have all been deeply reflective and eye opening. I hadn’t reflected about this idea before and it was very timely given what was happening in my class at the time. We dug deep to find out what this really meant in the classroom, from the students’ perspective to my own. Having gone through these conversations, my being naturally shifted in the classroom in the sense that I had to think through those moments which were happening in class and what they could have meant.

Participants were also sent optional readings on the theme they had completed to broaden their frame of reference as they prepared for the next theme. The intention in sending the readings after the theme was completed was two-fold: first, it allowed for the teacher to write their protocol and participate in the hermeneutic conversation from their own experience and pre-understanding rather than from those of the scholars they would be reading; and second, once the theme was completed, the readings served as

\[47\] The idea being referred to was the presence of the sacred in the classroom space.
another horizon to open up further thinking and understanding. All participants were aware that the themes were incremental, in that they built on each other, and were spiralling. Each theme was seen to deepen and broaden understanding rather than being a series of compartmentalized ideas with a finite start and end.

Before concluding this section, it would be important to present my own fore-understanding and my social location as the researcher. My professional role as the Academic Director of this program means I am in a senior leadership and supervisory role with the teachers. I was concerned about the influence and impact this structural relationship may have on the teachers and mostly concerned with how open and honest the study participants would be given my capacity in the organization. As a response to these circumstances, I was mindful of being open and forthright in acknowledging I was holding both positions of the Academic Director and the researcher. And it is, in fact, precisely my work in this institution that has brought me to this inquiry as I believe this inquiry to be crucial for how we wish to evolve, shape, and participate in this educational endeavor. Additionally, I was asked to undergo a rigorous ethics approval process with ITREB Canada, and an ethics review process with Simon Fraser University. I also sought and received permission from the Director of the IIS for this research. Upon completion of required approvals, holding an open forum for all teachers to discuss the study was important to avoid teachers feeling that certain individuals were privileged over others. To verify and ensure the selection process had integrity, I had also reviewed the process for selection of participants with my supervisory committee prior to confirmation.

Lastly, I was surprised and encouraged at how open and candid most of the study participants were right from the first theme. I hope this level of authenticity will be apparent from the data excerpts shown in subsequent chapters. One or two teachers were somewhat guarded in the first few themes uncertain of how open they could be and sometimes submitted written protocols which were more academic in nature. The hermeneutic conversations provided a space for us to interpret the thinking and experiences underlying the words resulting in increasing openness with subsequent themes. All participants expressed multiple times the need and benefits for such spaces of curriculum inquiry to constitute an essential part of their ongoing professional
development. Some excerpts of their thoughts during the research process are presented below.

Aidan: By participating in this research I have gained valuable insights into my own practice, my own understandings of ‘beingness’ in the world, and thus can provide more concrete examples when speaking to others. Imperative to my growth were the frank, honest, caring hermeneutical conversations I had.

Khaliya: This journey since its inception has been incredibly rich. I have seen my understanding of teaching and learning literally transform... It was all of those conversations, and the infusion of new ideas that I contemplated upon deeply; as well as the revelation of new understandings about my own teaching practice and how I had come to understand my teacher identity and what was occurring in the classroom. The question however, is that upon the completion of this research, how might I continue to stay within the hermeneutic circle?

Aryana: I think the foremost of influences [of this research] is my evolving understanding of the rootedness of our tradition and its relevance in our contemporary world. This evolving understanding, as grasped through written protocols, researcher interpretations and hermeneutic conversations, has largely influenced the manner in which I read the curriculum, the manner in which I pull concepts that I feel might engage the students, and the manner in which it can then, be rooted in, sustained by and oriented towards the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition.

When at times, I felt that the teacher was ‘plateauing’ at a particular place and somewhat resistant to move beyond or to increase their span of visibility, I would attempt to probe the issue first through the hermeneutic conversation and then through the researcher interpretation. Most times, we would ‘break through’ although at times it took several conversations to get to that place of willingness to see or discuss the pre-conception.

Zakir: The process was also a frustrating one. To live in the hermeneutic circle as a curricularist, pedagogue, community educator and person of faith, over the last several months meant that I had to

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48 By plateauing I mean that the teacher’s understanding seem to be fixed on a particular perspective which meant we needed to pause and probe this understanding, how the interpretation was being formed, and explore possibilities for alternate perspectives to be considered.
think about areas that I would normally not . . . Normally, if there are occasions to reflect in my learning community, they tend to focus on classroom pedagogy or from time to time some aspect of the content in the curriculum. . . The frustration came in having to move beyond my clichéd responses to several of these areas, during our conversations when you pushed me to think deeper. It was difficult to do this because it challenged my own assumptions . . . reflecting on my thoughts and feelings, interrogating them to dig to the root of an issue, allowed me to push my thinking beyond where it had found itself settled.

I was also intentional in ensuring I continually asked participants to challenge my responses and to reveal to me what was not in my field of visualization or within my horizon. I know this happened sometimes; I cannot say for certain if it happened all the time or if participants sometimes chose to hold back because of our professional relationship. What I can say is that the feel of the conversations took on a pedagogical thoughtfulness much more quickly than I would have anticipated. Here, I am defining this influenced by Aoki’s and van Manen’s work, in saying that the conversations were about the experiences and the meanings attributed to both the struggles and joys of the curricular and pedagogical inquiries; the conversations were not defined by the teachers needing to postulate their abilities. For months, we were living in the hermeneutic circle together as researcher and participants. We reflected on our experiences, wrote about parts of our experiences, examined and dialogued about these experiences in light of the whole of the curriculum and the living tradition. We interpreted and created meaning about the whole and then went back to the parts to see how our understanding would translate into application. Atkins (1988) reminds us that understanding occurs in a mediation of horizons of the participants in a hermeneutic conversation. She relies on Gadamer’s thinking (1979) to posit that it is the dialogue and the encounter in which both self-examination and the endeavour to access the horizon of the other are closely and reciprocally intertwined. As I shared at the end of Chapter Three, this process was more than a hermeneutical process designed for data collection. It was a process of hermeneutical curricular inquiry that could well serve as a model for continuing teacher education and development for teachers who wish to increase their curricular wisdom (Henderson & Gornik, 2007), their pedagogical thoughtfulness (van Manen, 1990), their sense of ‘moreness’ and of ‘going beyond’ who they currently are (Huebner, 1985b) and their creativity in aspiring towards an ideal fulfillment (Esmail, 1998). The richness of the hermeneutic interactions with the teachers have inspired in me a hope and optimism of
the potentiality we all hold in giving creative and enduring expression to our living tradition, amongst ourselves, our students and the larger community. As one of the teachers expressed,

It is about ethics, I don’t even know if I would call it ethics, there are Qur’anic injunctions around the way God asks us to engage with the world around us, to be present in the world around us, to know oneself and to know others, and I think hermeneutics asks us to bring a certain mindfulness, thoughtfulness, and awareness and to build up a certain type of consciousness, and if we can learn to do that, it doesn’t only help the individual, it can help the collective.

Hermeneutical Phenomenological Themes for Curricular Inquiry

Themes for the curricular inquiry were designed to facilitate an engagement which would allow participants the interplay between the whole, that is, their larger understandings, and the parts, that is, their lived experiences. This concept of the hermeneutic circle, as explained earlier, is a process of understanding and interpretation and according to Gadamer, application as well. The hermeneutic process began with an examination of the self and the role of the teacher within the living tradition. It then moved to the understanding of curriculum and how this curriculum was a response to the continuing expression of our living tradition. Teachers were subsequently asked to consider their own value frameworks in mediating the text of the curriculum and in translating the textual content into curriculum designs for their students. Thereafter, the emphasis was on how this mediation took place and came alive in the classroom and how as Huebner (1974a) says, the content is made present to the students. This fourth theme took longer than anticipated as there seemed to be more horizons beckoning exploration after the theme was completed. Hence, we continued on with Theme Four and the pedagogical experience of the classroom for another full cycle which became Theme Four A and Four B. For one participant, we even extended the cycle to a third time upon her request. Theme Five asked teachers to consider how curricular inquiry takes place within their teacher learning communities. Finally, the last theme was a concluding piece where teachers were guided to revisit all their lived experience materials and hermeneutic conversations and engage in a final interpretation of their curricular inquiry as it took place within the various contexts of their practice.
Theme One was entitled *Curriculum as Intentionality: Our Horizon of a Living Tradition*. Before moving to the IIS curriculum and their engagement with it, I felt it was important for us to uncover and articulate the teachers’ pre-understanding of our living tradition and what it meant for them to be an educator within the Shia Ismaili Muslim context. STEP is a pivotal historical movement for this community. For the first time in the community’s history, formal religious education at the secondary level has been institutionalized; first, through the IIS with the development of a global curriculum and the global pre-service program called STEP; and second, through the full time employment of these teachers for the educational delivery of the curriculum. I would suggest this initiative is akin to a tertiary level of the kind of creative vision Hodgson (1974) has spoken about, which in itself has inspired group commitment, and is seeking expression through the cumulative interaction of the teachers and faculty. Therefore, in my view, it was crucial to gain insight as to how the teachers perceive and experience their role through understanding: What is it to be a teacher of religious education for the Shia Ismaili Muslim community; and how do I understand the idea of a living tradition?

The second theme entitled *Curriculum as Consciousness: Integrating the Immanent and Transcendent* inquired into the construct of curriculum and how this idea was understood. Teachers were asked to articulate the intentionality of the IIS curriculum and how the curriculum aims to situate the faith tradition in a way that is resonant with the contemporary environment. The idea of uncovering the consciousness the teachers brought to their inquiry was also significant. The third theme, *Curriculum as Valued Activity: Responsibility and Response-ability*, prompted teachers to consider the kinds of values they were guided by in the interpretive process of making the content present to the students. At this point, teachers became aware of the spiralling nature of the themes. Specifically, they began to see their experiences and interpretations as being influenced by a myriad of understandings. Some of these included how they experienced their role, what they believed about the curricular intentionality, how they made decisions regarding curriculum design, what they were drawn to, and what their students were drawn to.

*Curriculum as Phenomenology: Attending to the Fullness of the Present* was the fourth theme which engaged teachers in dialogue about how the curricular intentions and their own value frameworks gave rise to experiences in the classroom. Teachers
disclosed their classroom experiences with their students, the tensions, the struggles, the confusions, the hopefulness, and the possibilities of accessing the transcendent. This was the theme that resulted in the additional cycle as teachers felt they needed to speak more about the classroom space and to further articulate their interpretations and understandings of what was happening with their students during the classes. Theme Five, *Curriculum as Community: A Fusion of Horizons*, brought teachers to reflect upon their relationships with students in creating classroom communities, and on their experiences with curriculum inquiry working alongside colleagues. The teachers described how community was indispensable to meaningful curriculum inquiry and yet, also had its constraints or limitations. The final theme, *Curriculum as Inquiry: Creating Moments of Vision*, invited teachers to create meaning from the understanding and interpretation through the hermeneutic processes they had undertaken. In the Huebnerian spirit, there was a sense of possibility in the questions of projecting the potentiality of the teachers, the curriculum, the students and the community into the future.

Questions provided to the teachers for each theme served more as a springboard or entry point for the hermeneutic process rather than an interview guide. In his essay, “Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes”, Taylor (2011) shows how an understanding of texts or events is construed through ‘speech partners’ where contrary to our conceptions of scientific knowledge, complete intellectual control is not attainable in human affairs. True understanding requires an intentional disposition to be open to conversion.

This will happen when we allow ourselves to be challenged, interpellated by what is different in their lives, and this challenge will bring about two connected changes: we will see our peculiarity for the first time, as a formulated fact about us and not simply a taken-for-granted feature of the human condition as such; and at the same time, we will perceive the corresponding feature of their life-form undistorted. These two changes are indissolubly linked; you cannot have one without the other. (p. 29)

Our hermeneutic conversations in person, through text and with ourselves became this sort of venture; a venture to open ourselves up to the horizons of the other. Sometimes the other was the teacher or the researcher. Other times, the other was the experience of the community or the text or a lived moment with a student or an internal
conversation with the self. Each time we came together as researcher and participant, our horizons had shifted, enlarged, and sometimes fused. I am not claiming we have reached any sort of exalted hermeneutic status. Rather, I am saying that we were deeply committed to the hermeneutic process of deepening understanding, uncovering layers of meaning in our interpretations and being conscious as to what extent of enlightenment we were carrying forth into our application. Once the study was completed, each research participant had an opportunity to review a draft of the study and to indicate whether they had been represented with integrity. All seven teachers responded affirmatively and remarked how they were both awed and humbled by seeing new layers of meaning in their experiences and in the lived experiences of their colleagues.

The process was involved, intense, time consuming and brought out vulnerabilities for us all. Through the process, I think we discovered what Smith (1991) has articulated, “a need for a language of ‘understanding’ that could take up ‘difference’ not as a problem to be solved but as an invitation to consider the boundaries and limits of one’s own understanding” (p. 203). This need is poignant within ourselves as educational faculty and with our students in our classrooms, but it is also a reality for the community and the institution of which we are a part. Living in the hermeneutic circle through this research process has clearly revealed that curriculum inquiry is more than making textbook content relevant to the students. It is, as Smith aspires, using the hermeneutic imagination

To provoke new ways of seeing and thinking within a deep sense of tradition, bringing about new forms of engagement and dialogue about the world we face together . . . to affirm that there is an integrity to the world that somehow must be preserved even at the same time as we inquire into how best to alleviate our pains while living in it. (p. 202)
**Table 3: Themes for Curricular Inquiry**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Schedule: Curricular Inquiry Guide for Lived Experience Descriptions and Hermeneutical Conversations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1: Curriculum as Intentionality: Our Horizon of a Living Tradition</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• What is it to be a teacher of religious education for the Shia Ismaili Muslim community?</td>
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<td>• How do I understand the idea of a living tradition?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 2: Curriculum as Consciousness: Integrating the Immanent and the Transcendent</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• What is my understanding of the concept of curriculum and how has my understanding evolved over time?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What is the intentionality of the IIS Secondary Curriculum?</td>
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<td>• What is the curricular consciousness I bring to my practice?</td>
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<td><strong>Theme 3: Curriculum as Valued Activity: Responsibility and Response-ability</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• How are my decisions guided as I design curricular experiences for my students?</td>
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<td>• What are the value frameworks that influence my curricular design?</td>
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<td><strong>Theme 4: Curriculum as Phenomenology: Attending to the Fullness of the Present</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• How am I present with my students?</td>
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<td>• What do I bracket out?</td>
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<td>• How do I “inspirit” the lessons?</td>
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<td>• What are tensions between ‘living’ and ‘tradition’?</td>
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<td><strong>Theme 5: Curriculum as Community: A Fusion of Horizons</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• What is the relationship between curriculum, religious education and community?</td>
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<td>• What are the horizons or life-worlds seeking fusion?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 6: Curriculum as Inquiry: Creating Moments of Vision</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• What is it to live in the hermeneutic circle as a curricularist? As a teacher? As a community educator? As a person of faith?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do I understand the idea of a living tradition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What are moments of vision I want to create for myself? For my students? For my community?</td>
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Chapter 5:

Curriculum as Consciousness: The Quest towards a Unity of Being

The Search for A King

The world's birds gathered for their conference
And said: “Our constitution makes no sense.
All nations in the world require a king;
How is it we alone have no such thing?
Only a kingdom can be justly run;
We need a king and must inquire for one.”

They argued how to set about their quest.
The hoopoe fluttered forward; on his breast
There shone the symbol of the Spirit’s Way
And on his head Truth’s crown, a feathered spray…

“I know our king – but how can I alone
Endure the journey to His distant throne?
Join me, and when we at last end our quest
Our king will greet you as His honoured guest…

“We have a king; beyond Kaf’s mountain peak
The Simurgh lives, the sovereign whom you seek,
And He is always near to us, though we
Live far from His transcendent majesty.
A hundred thousand veils of dark and light
Withdraw His presence from our mortal sight,
And in both worlds no being shares the throne
That marks the Simurgh’s power and His alone…

“Do not imagine the way is short;
Vast seas and deserts lie before His court.
Consider carefully before you start;
The journey asks of you a lion’s heart.
The road is long, the sea is deep – one flies
First buffeted by joy and then by sighs;
If you desire this quest, give up your soul
And make our sovereign’s court your only goal.

“It was in China, late one moonless night,
The Simurgh first appeared to mortal sight—
He let a feather float down through the air,
And rumours of its fame spread everywhere...

“It is a sign of Him, and in each heart
There lies this feather’s hidden counterpart.
But since no words suffice, what use are mine
To represent or to describe this sign?
Whoever wishes to explore the Way,
Let him set out — what more is there to say?”

The hoopoe finished, and at once the birds
Effusively responded to his words.
All praised the splendour of their distant king;
All rose impatient to be on the wing;
Each would renounce the Self and be the friend
Of his companions till the journey’s end.

(Extracts from Conference of the Birds, On the Wings of Words, Student Reader, IIS, 2009, pp.100-101)

The concept of personal search is beautifully represented in the well known story, Conference of the Birds, by Farid al-Din Attar, a Persian poet and mystic who wrote several works on the theme of spiritual quest. The Conference of the Birds is an allegoric tale of a group of birds gathered together in search of their king, the Simurgh. With the help of a guide, known as Hoopoe the bird of wisdom, the birds set off on a journey to find their king. Through their journey, they traverse through seven valleys: the Valley of Quest; the Valley of Love; the Valley of Understanding; the Valley of Separation; the Valley of Unity; the Valley of Astonishment; and the Valley of Poverty and Nothingness. With each valley, the birds learn about themselves through trials and tribulations. The journey makes them aware of their inner weaknesses and how to overcome these through drawing on sources of strength. In the introduction to this study, I presented the beginning of a journey; a journey being undertaken by our community, our institutions and our educators in search of a revitalization and new expressions of our living tradition. We too are in search of a Simurgh, a Simurgh that enables us to understand and actualize curricular phenomena which moves us towards community realization. Our journey requires us to traverse through a multitude of valleys where we experience love, understanding, astonishment, separation, unity, poverty,
nothingness, angst, aspiration, hope, despair, fear, courage, confusion, and belief. What are we learning through our trials and tribulations? How are we increasing awareness of our inner weaknesses and drawing on sources of strength? What is the nature of this quest? How are we in the process of self-understanding, as individuals and as community, through this quest?

**Interpreting the Lived Meanings of the Teachers**

In the following three chapters, I will present the lived experiences and lived meanings of the teachers organized by hermeneutic inquiries of curriculum, classroom and community. Chapter Five describes the curricular consciousness, that is, how are the teachers understanding and interpreting the intentionality of the IIS Secondary Curriculum and, how are they taking forth this intentionality in their interpretive processes with the curricular texts. Chapter Six reveals the experiences of pedagogical encounters with their students as the teachers strive to translate their curricular understandings to lived moments in the classroom. The discussion will highlight some of the complexities of this effort as well as how the teachers are conceiving and constructing responses drawn from a variety of epistemologies. Chapter Seven speaks of the experience of community and focuses on the classroom community as well as on the teacher learning community and its potential and limitations for curriculum inquiry. The teachers’ voices present the tensions and possibilities inherent in the community context within the horizon of community realization. Chapter Eight concludes the study through offering interpretations of the hermeneutic circle and the awareness this quest has raised for curricular, pedagogical and community inquiry. The frame used for this chapter is that of attunement to beauty and infinitude as a way of continually engaging the interpretive quest and giving expression to the creative vision of the living tradition. Through these next four chapters, selections from Muslim literature drawn from the IIS Secondary Curriculum are interwoven with the text. These selections speak to the themes being discussed and represent ways of thinking about such themes that are grounded in the tradition.

True to the spirit of hermeneutical phenomenology, the data presented in the subsequent chapters is not intended to generalize the teachers’ experiences and
present findings and recommendations for implementation. Rather, the data is a representation of human experience where you as the reader are invited to catch glimpses of yourself and hopefully, see glimmers of your experience (van Manen, 1990), and also develop the capacity to understand the experiences of others more deeply. The data and its interpretive discussions raise questions and ideas for consideration in the educational quest, primarily for the context of Muslim education, but also for broader education. Most importantly, as educators, we increase our practical wisdom (Chambers, 2003) in our ability to understand, interpret and act more thoughtfully not only by ourselves, but as a community of practice. We do this by inquiring into curriculum as a temporal notion (Huebner, 1967), one which pulls forth enduring values of tradition (Gadamer, 1960/1989), which draws from us a ‘wide-awareness’ (Greene, 1971) to the present moment and which inspires genuine, creative responses (Esmail, 1998, 2001, 2004) and projects our potentiality into the future (Huebner, 1966a, 1967, 1975b, 1985b).

The data can be seen as continuous interpretive representations. The teachers engaged in hermeneutic efforts with each of the six themes interpreting and re-interpreting, through written protocols, hermeneutic conversations, and researcher interpretations. All three data representations will be drawn from as well as personal interpretations from myself as the researcher and the Academic Director. I will indicate the interpretations of the teachers using pseudonyms in participant quotes. Some of these have been extracted from the written protocols (WP) and lived experience descriptions, and others have been drawn from the hermeneutic conversations (HC). I will also share excerpts of the researcher interpretations (RI) to show some of my interpretive responses to the teachers. Data selections are quite lengthy. These were necessary to reveal the nature of the interpretive quest of the teachers and to honor the integrity of their voices and their deep engagement with this research process.

Due to the sustained nature of the process with the research participants, interpretations and understandings-- both mine and theirs--evolved over time. The research method was designed to broaden their horizons and create a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1960/1989) as we spiralled through the themes. The method was also designed as a potential teacher education process which may well serve as one model for teachers who wish to engage deeply in curricular inquiry. It required rigorous efforts
from the participants and each participant put forth their time, intellectual and personal investment towards what I now recognize as being an intensely demanding process. The evolving understandings can also be attributed, in large part, to the participants’ motivation level in pursuing this research involvement for their own learning and growth. Palmer (1969) in studying Friedrich Ast’s hermeneutics for understanding presents three levels of understanding. The hermeneutic of the letter is an understanding of the text, of what is written or said. The hermeneutic of the sense involves an understanding of the context in which the text appears. And the hermeneutic of spirit seeks out the view of life within which the idea stands. The spirit of the work reveals both the general spirit of the age and the spirit of the individual which interact and mutually illuminate each other. It is hoped the interpretations that follow invite interactions from the reader and bring illuminations to both our general and individual spirit.

Curricular Consciousness: Interpreting the Intentionality of the IIS Secondary Curriculum

In Chapter One, I discussed prevalent societal challenges within the Western context influencing the practice and views of faith and religion of Ismaili Muslim adolescents. The discussion suggested that conditions of secularization were resulting in an immanent frame of reference (Taylor, 2007) where individual flourishing may be valued above community flourishing and where religiosity may be seen to be incompatible with modernity. There are also shifts as to what constitutes transcendent frames of reference in an individual’s lived experiences. These views are further exacerbated by misperceptions of Muslims as created and perpetuated by the sensationalism of media and the lack of education about Islam as a civilization. Chapter Two highlighted the interpretive quest of the Ismaili Muslim tradition and how historically, interpretive efforts have been integral to understanding the values of the living tradition. Chapter Three situates inquiry and interpretation within the field of curriculum theory. And Chapter Four theorizes an interpretive framework through the paradigm of hermeneutic phenomenology. Through the first four chapters, I have developed a theoretical backdrop to an interpretive approach of curriculum inquiry grounded in hermeneutic phenomenological principles and in principles of the living tradition. Chapter Five now begins to integrate the complex lenses of the Shia Ismaili Muslim
tradition, the context in which the curriculum is being implemented, as well as the
teachers’ hermeneutical engagements with the texts of curriculum, the tradition and their
students. What is the type of consciousness or awareness this curriculum is
engendering according to the teachers and how does this curricular consciousness
respond to the students’ contexts to enable a unity of being? First, I will look at how the
teachers are seeing their students’ faith perceptions within the societal environment in
the section on secular forces and faith. I will then look at how the teachers interpret the
intentionality of the IIS Secondary Curriculum as a response to the challenges of the
contemporary world and, as an opportunity to create alternate paradigms and
worldviews for themselves and their students. Finally, I will present how the teachers
are engaging in hermeneutic processes with the text of the curriculum as they strive to
embody and actualize the curricular consciousness of the living tradition.

What is the IIS Secondary Curriculum responding to?

On Secular Forces and Faith

Shakeel: (WP)49 Numerous times I have had this reoccurring dream which seems like a metaphorical reminder of who I am, or perhaps who I am supposed to become. . . After a long restful night, I am ready to greet the morning by taking a long walk. I prepare myself and my footsteps move towards an extended meadow which meets the shores of an ocean. As I walk, I discover that I am not alone. I notice that there are innocent children in the field wandering aimlessly. I am puzzled, because I have always seen these children, but I never felt that I had it in me to guide them. But this time, it feels different. I feel inclined to invite them to walk with me. And this inclination is stronger than ever. With a sense of deep passion, I speak to the children, “Come with me, I will take you to the ocean.” But the children continue to wander, not paying attention to a single word of my invitation. The day is elapsing, while we remain halted in this field. I worry that these children will become prisoners here without ever experiencing that sublime journey towards the ocean. A sense of helplessness overcomes my heart yet hope has not entirely left my being. I pause, step back and question the ways in which I am communicating

49 WP – Written Protocol
with these children. Perhaps there are alternative ways to speak to them?

Zakir: (HC) Part of it has to do with the role faith plays in a person’s daily life today, like in our parents’ generation and our grandparents’ generation; faith was a very very important part of their life. . . For a lot of these kids, there is a big disconnect between the idea of faith and their material lives and the kids are growing up in a Western culture. I mean I grew up in a Western culture and I struggled very much with my concept of faith and you can see that with the kids, there is a struggle there. They are of a material culture; the faith element is not strong and that may be an over-generalization, like I cannot understand the kind of faith that my mom, aunt or even my older cousin have.

Growing up in the Western context, they don’t see their everyday life as their spiritual life. I get a lot of that. There is my normal everyday life and there is their faith life (congregational prayers) and the two are seen as separate. When the students are speaking about their religious life and secular life, they speak in dichotomies.

Yasmine: (WP) One of the greatest learnings I have had over the course of my experience in teaching RE is that students do not fully understand how our faith is integrated into everything they do. . . The IIS curriculum did not create a handbook on how to be a “good” Ismaili or rules and regulations that need to be followed. Instead a curriculum was created to show students how our faith can be intertwined with everything that we do.

(HC) The curriculum talks about everyday things, people living together, coming together, but underlying all of that is the ethics and values that people use to guide them. And that is what I want the students to take away in their everyday actions and in the history that they are creating, that they can be material and spiritual in every dimension of their life.

The teachers offer glimpses into how they are seeing their students within societal contexts with regard to faith. There seems to be a sense of “aimless wandering” without being anchored to firm roots or a rooting in the values of the faith. The idea of

50 HC – Hermeneutic Conversation
separation or dichotomy is also indicated through struggles students have in reconciling faith and the “material culture” they are embedded in. This struggle shows itself as a division of spiritual life as being relegated to congregational spaces and secular life as pervasive of all other spaces. Yasmine suggests that the IIS Secondary Curriculum may be putting forth an alternate discourse through a framework of ethics and values aspiring to bridge and integrate these dichotomies. When speaking to all teachers, I clearly see a yearning to want to be a guide for the students, to awaken a consciousness that enables a more liberated and emancipatory way of being in the world. Shakeel suggests there may be alternative ways to speak to the students. This is an important statement as it indicates there is still knowledge to be discovered or created on how to reach or guide the students. The teachers are expressing they wish to strive towards a more integrated conception of faith and world where students experience a unity of being. However, the extent to which the students experience this integration or interpret their identities as being encompassing of their faith is uncertain and what is being seen is more of a ‘dis-unity of being.’ Part of the issue may lie in the struggle to understand the diversity of identities and interpretations constituting the Muslim community, ummah, and how to situate themselves within that pluralistic landscape.

**On Identity(ies)**

Shakeel: (HC) Part of the intention of the curriculum is trying to illuminate awareness of the Muslim identity within a broader set of identities that make up the Muslim Ummah. It is really trying to paint a picture of the Muslim identity or Muslimness from a position of there is no mainstream identity but rather there is a host of identities that are legitimate because they have their own interpretations. . . All the diverse interpretations of Muslims are valid and legitimate and in fact plurality is a blessing from Allah, rather than saying there is one right interpretation and the others are not. This is relevant to the students, because a lot of the questions the students have, the subtext is exactly that. Who am I within this larger tapestry of Muslims and how do I fit into it? Or do I even fit in?

There are many dilemmas that are related to the issue of identity and they become part of an outlook. A major one is prescribing to an outlook of relativism; you have your truth and I have mine and there is no sense of grounding or rootedness where you stand for something where I can say this is not a position that I believe in. I am not seeing a sense of moral stance, not in a prescriptive way, but one of confidence, the discourse is more of relativism.
Zakir: (HC) Our parents grew up in a less pluralistic world, where it was already understood what it meant to be Ismaili, where the need to define yourself may not have been so prevalent. Kids get placed in a position where they have to articulate who they are. How do I articulate who I am in a world where they are not immersed in their religion? How do you explain yourself without that foundation that holds up that understanding? I think that is what our students are facing today and then it becomes easier to hold up those walls and separate your worlds.

Aidan: (HC) One of my students said to me, “I believe in this but sometimes I find it hard because I am in between two worlds.” They are trying to understand how they can be Muslim and Canadian. How they fit into the world and how being Muslim is in fact acceptable to fit into the world? How can I be Ismaili Muslim and Canadian? How can these identities exist together, even though they may be tensions? That is the essential question.

The struggle of the quest towards a unity of being is exemplified well in some of the teachers’ lived experiences. They recognize and use as a guiding beacon the aspiration of integrating immanent and transcendent frames for their students. One of the challenges being articulated is grasping the immense diversity within the Muslim community and the various schools or thoughts of interpretation. First, the teachers are working towards awareness and understanding of this diversity. Understanding is developed through examining historical periods and events as to how the various communities of interpretation have emerged and formed over history within social, political and religious contexts. Second, the teachers are endeavouring to help students situate themselves within this diversity and within their specific community of interpretation. The outlook being developed is a unified manifestation of plurality whilst being rooted in a specific faith tradition that is evolving with time. Developing the students’ confidence and ability to articulate their position vis-a-vis other positions in a manner that is grounded in history and the values of the faith becomes the interpretive quest for teachers and students. When students are not knowledgeable or confident enough to represent their identities as Shia Ismaili Muslims, this is when according to the teachers, they construct walls around the different aspects of their lives as it is easier to do that than to enter into the complexity of interplay between tradition and modernity. The concept of a living tradition as bringing out a consciousness towards the quest for a
unified life narrative or unity of being was explored in one of the initial themes in light of how the teachers were interpreting what the IIS Secondary Curriculum is responding to.

**On Living Tradition**

Khaliya: (WP) As an individual, with a sense of my own personal belief system, I have never concerned myself with the life and wellbeing of the belief systems of the community. On the contrary, I operated under the assumption that the essence of the faith would persist, as it has for centuries. I never worried about forces of materialism or secularism, encroaching on the world of faith and tradition, nor did I ever imagine my children, or my children’s children, living without a belief in God, or a place of prayer and devotion, or a community of believers. It wasn’t until I became an RE Teacher, that I was forced to assume a stance of inquiry into what it means to be part of a living tradition, and it was only from within this discourse, that I realized that faith communities are in fact, not at all absolute or permanent, but rather, like any other cultural community, are shaped, destructed, and reconstructed by forces around it... It is strange how deeply meaning and understanding is embedded in language, and yet, many of us, can get by using jargon to convey a sense of meaning to others, while we ourselves, do not fully understood the significance of those terms in our own lives.

Aryana: (HC) To me, this idea of a living tradition suggests that it is constantly attaching new dimensions of meaning to older symbols... A teacher can be considered the life art of tradition. If we are teaching a tradition or traditions, how is it that we are attaching new dimensions of meaning to this tradition or traditions that have been a part of our faith historically?

Raziq: (WP) Simply put, a living tradition is one which seeks to ground itself in history and continues to understand its values in the present. This process inevitably shapes the future of this living tradition to one that upholds and maintains those core values as a community. A living tradition is also one that engages with the challenges of its present context and constantly seeks to negotiate its values with its lived experience.

The term living tradition implies that it is not static. It is not static because individuals within the faith tradition continue to see the importance of their values in a modern context. But individuals within the faith tradition have to be taught to do so and presumably through an intellectual engagement, though not exclusively.

Zakir: (WP) To me the idea of tradition has to do with rooting (but not limiting) oneself within their past and their community.
Traditions are about values and the meanings we give them. Because each new generation must find their own meaning within a tradition it can never be static as it is always changing. The term itself is interesting because it implies a fluid rigidity which may seem like an oxymoron until one realizes that our present and future are shaped by our past, which is where we ground our traditions.

Yasmine: (HC) When I think about tradition, I think about the past, things I have carried on, not necessarily personal. And then when you think about living, your own experience of the day to day activities, how does one incorporate their past traditions in your daily lives, what does that mean and I’ve never really thought about it and what that means to me. I would come back to faith; it comes back to faith. Does tradition mean faith? That is what I would associate it with automatically. For me, that then means how do I live out my faith in the everyday. . . If faith is part of our daily life, how is it in our consciousness or is it in our consciousness every day? So as a teacher, as a RE teacher, how am I encouraging students to think about it that way as well?

Tasnim: (RI) I am hoping you have had the opportunity to reflect and inquire further into the rich questions raised during our conversation, particularly this notion of a living tradition. You seem to be making sense of it using three ideas: the past which you related to tradition; thinking of faith in one’s everyday life; and being a good person or a good Shia Ismaili Muslim (that last piece itself needs to be further interrogated). You then went on to refer to a consciousness that we bring with us in our everyday lives, in our everyday actions and our role in encouraging students to think in this way. The reference you used about integration versus compartmentalization is an interesting one and it is here that I want to pause and ask the following question. What enables our students to be able to integrate the various components of their lives so that they see faith as a thread weaving through the tapestry of their existence instead of being limited to a part of the fabric? I wonder if it is helpful to take a step back and ask the same question of ourselves. We spoke about this quite a bit during our conversation and the difficulty or struggle of being faith conscious all the time. I am asking because if we are aware of what enables this integration for us, in other words, if I know what raises my consciousness of ensuring my faith is present for me in

51 RI – Researcher Interpretation
my everyday experiences, it may give me insights as to what might enable this same integration for our students.

The idea of a living tradition gave the teachers reason to pause and think about how they are conceiving of such an idea in relation to themselves and their work. Their understandings acknowledge the dynamism of a living tradition in that there is continual interpretation and re-interpretation. The living tradition is conceived of as a relational entity which requires a spirit to keep it vital through the “life art of a teacher” who can inspire intellectual engagement about what is constant and what changes. This engagement entails a process of creation; a process of attaching symbols and meanings and narratives to the tradition to render it vital and meaningful and “spirit-ful” for ourselves and our students. The dynamism and relationality is of a temporal nature; one which brings forth the values and symbols of the past, and one which engages with the present to create expressions of the tradition for the future. Through the interpretations presented thus far, there is an understanding of the IIS Secondary Curriculum as being a response to the sustenance and vitality of a living tradition in a context where students are immersed in environments that may put into question the relevance of faith, the perceptions of their Muslim identities, and the possibility of faith being an integral part of lived experience. The teachers are describing this response as one which seeks a rooting of a faith tradition in values, in knowledge of the Shia Ismaili Muslim faith interpretation, and in an intellectual engagement to enable a conception of faith as dynamic and timeless. They also refer to a particular consciousness of faith they wish to awaken in our students, a consciousness that enables the integration of various spheres of the students’ lives: being Muslim and Canadian; being Ismaili and Muslim; and being a person of faith within the modern world. How then is the IIS curriculum situating its response? How is it enabling the integration of faith and world and nurturing a faith consciousness for our students? How is the curricular intentionality striving to create a unity of being within the living tradition?
How is the IIS Secondary Curriculum conveying the living tradition to Ismaili students?

_Qur’anic Ayat\(^52\): Reflecting on the Signs Around Us_

One of His signs is that He created you from dust
And—lo and behold!—you became human and scattered far and wide.
Another of His signs is that he created spouses from among yourselves
for you to live with in tranquillity:
He ordained love and kindness between you.
There truly are signs in this for those who reflect.
Another of His signs is that He created the heavens and earth,
The diversity of your languages and colours.
There truly are signs in this for those who know.
Among His signs are your sleep, by night and by day,
And your seeking His bounty.
There truly are signs in this for those who can hear.
Among His signs, too, are that He shows you the lightening that terrifies and inspires hope;
That He sends water down from the sky to restore the earth to life after death.
There truly are signs in this for those who use their reason.
Among His signs, too is the fact that the heavens
And the earth stand firm by His command.
In the end, you will all emerge when He calls you from the earth.
Everyone in the heavens and earth belongs to Him
And all are obedient to Him.
He is the One who originates creation and will do it again –
This is even easier for Him.
He is above all comparison in the heavens and earth.
He is the Almighty, the All Wise.

(Qur’an, 30: 20-2)

These verses of the Qur’an remind the believer that signs are all around us in our world. We are encouraged to reflect on these signs and to think about the layers of meaning these signs offer for our knowledge of self, world and the Divine. Being an esoteric tradition, the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition calls upon believers to continually be ‘wide-awake’ (Greene, 1971) to the signs of our experience and to continually engage in interpretation on the plenitude of meanings (Esmail, 1998) these signs hold. The IIS

\(^52\) The Arabic word _ayat_ means signs. It is the same word used for verses of the Qur’an.
Secondary Curriculum invites teachers and students to recognize signs through providing a multiplicity of frames or perspectives through which a religious world view can be developed that, in keeping with the Shia Ismaili Muslim value system, embraces a robust engagement with both faith and world. The curriculum attends to this integrated approach through presenting Islam as both a faith and a culture or pluralistic cultures using the frames of civilization, humanism and also normative beliefs. As such, students are invited to engage in a discourse and exploration of faith as being present in the world around them and to be awakened to these signs. In this section, I will look at how the teachers are interpreting the intentionality of the curriculum in nurturing this unity of being between faith and world. I will first consider how the teachers’ pre-understanding of the idea of curriculum continues to evolve. I will then present how the teachers are interpreting the larger narrative or consciousness of the IIS curriculum. And finally, I will provide a nuanced sense of the kinds of interpretive processes teachers engage to take forth this curricular intentionality through their hermeneutical work with the curriculum texts.

**On Curriculum**

**Raziaq:** (HC) I have grown to see the curriculum in a multitude of ways over the last three years, from my understanding of the curriculum, the text itself and how it is brought out in the classroom space, how we understand the curriculum, how it is a lived experience in the work we do, within the institution, within the community, an ever growing understanding, not finite. You can’t come to a place where you can say, okay now I fully understand what this curriculum is really about. I think it’s always a negotiation and there’s always a back and forth with it.

**Aryana:** (WP) More than mere objectives, the curriculum we teach holds immense potential to be alive, to be breathing, to be ‘living.’ Kind of like how they say God breathed His spirit into man, so it should be with our curriculum. I, as an active agent, must breathe life into the curriculum so that my students can see or at least feel that it is very much alive, that it is connected to their very being and that it has everything to do with the lives they lead. The idea that it is merely a book or a topic or a theme or a subject that we teach for 2 hours once a week needs to change, if it hasn’t begun to already [emphases in original].

**Shakeel:** (WP) I remember learning that ‘curriculum’ stems from the idea of a route one travels, a progression towards something over time . . . the route is a wellspring of
meaning, an opportunity for those who reflect to see the horizon anew. The travelers on the route are continuously becoming, consciously seeing anew the relationships between themselves, their traditions, and their contemporary world.

The route that is curriculum cultivates and integrates self-knowledge, knowledge of the world, and knowledge of one’s history and traditions. It cultivates both comfort and distress, confusion and clarity, belief and unbelief, content and discontent. By no means is curriculum a neat experience. The experiences are paradoxical with complex challenges which offer hopes of unity or wholeness.

The teachers’ understanding of the construct of curriculum has developed significantly over their time in this role where curriculum is not viewed as an inert body of information to be transmitted, but as a larger symbolic representation of the living tradition. As one teacher put it, it is an “artifact of our living tradition” that needs to be given life through the teacher. This breathing of spirit is similar to Aoki’s (1990) conception of the inspired curriculum where the idea of curriculum extends beyond the subject to include the teachers, the students, and in this case, I would add the community. Metaphors of breathing life into the text, journeying on a route towards meaningful horizons (Huebner, 1966a), cultivating lenses or fields of visualization (Gough, 2002) raise the necessity of an active engagement with curriculum, a “back-and-forthness”, both for teachers and students to enable a ‘going beyond or a moreness’ (Huebner, 1993). This going beyond is articulated as cultivating different perspectives to seeing the world and an individual’s relationship with the world. However, in any relationship, there are experiences of dis-unity that need to be understood and worked through which may indeed be the nature of the interpretive quest. The potential of curriculum as destiny rather than destination (Huebner, 1966a) is a horizontal idea the teachers draw upon in their interpretive processes with the curriculum. How do the teachers specifically interpret the IIS curriculum as inviting the creation of destiny within the framework of the living tradition? What is this larger curricular consciousness or horizon they are drawn to?

**On the Larger Consciousness of the IIS Curriculum**

**Shakeel:** (WP) The intentions of the IIS Secondary Curriculum are about creating new routes for the global Ismaili community. . . The intentions are to not only articulate our traditional identity within modern contexts, but to enact the tradition,
part of which is to resolve the plagues of modernity for the service of humankind.

Zakir: (HC) At the end of the day, a lot of this is about the human condition and the impact that that has, no matter what kind of medium is representing that whether it be through poetry, painting, architecture, literature, or something else. Ultimately, it is all about the human condition which comes out; the core fundamental human ideals and emotions, wanting to be accepted, wanting to be loved, sadness, kindness, . . . all of these different things, we have in our past, in our present and they are going to be in our future. And if we can better understand ourselves by exploring this rich past that we have, it will get us to think in other ways. . . . They are not just learning about Muslim societies and civilizations, they are learning about themselves.

Aryana: (WP) And because I see it as more than just a book of knowledge, of content, of history, of stories from the past, I want my students to also become aware of this. I want them to see that this curriculum is, at its very core, telling the story of humankind and their struggles for peace, for joy, for justice, for love over the centuries, albeit in specific contexts. These struggles are what make us human. I want my students to be able to encounter these understandings, which are embedded in the curriculum, and at the same time, find themselves in and through these encounters as well. In this way then, students should feel, or at least, begin to see that the curriculum is alive and connected to their being, to the lives they lead, and to the lives they lead with others [emphases in original].

Aidan: (WP) To make an ambitious yet true statement, if the curriculum is embedded in the ethos of the Qur’an, then the curriculum itself becomes a way of life; it in fact becomes a means by which to see the Qur’an. . . . perhaps even being an interpretation of the Qur’an through the eyes of a secondary student. I believe this to be its intentionality, a way to engage secondary students with the ethos and values of the Qur’an . . . . The content itself becomes the ‘case studies’ by which to investigate the larger Qur’anic ethos.

Raziq: (HC) We are influenced by many factors in our lives every day; different beliefs, ideas, the way we relate to people and experiences, our thoughts, all of those will have an impact on who you are becoming. . . . For example, looking at Nasir-i Khusraw helps us understand how people related their world to their faith. The contexts will be different of course, experience shapes that, but the core value remains the same that Khusraw saw divinity in what he saw, which is capturing the essence of the object and not just the observation of the object itself. And what that says is your
relation to the world changes when you see a human being as being a creation of God rather than an object for your own benefit, for your advantage, someone you can have control over, it changes the way you relate to the world. It becomes a lens for how you see the world.

Yasmine: (WP) This notion of a ‘living tradition’ is what I feel our curriculum is trying to encourage our students to see. . . to engage students in a process of learning that embeds the importance of critical thinking, personal reflection and search for meaning. . . the emphasis is placed on students being active members on their search for understanding.

(HC) Our students are creating their own history and if someone was going to write about them, how would they be written about in a RE classroom, in a soccer field, in a secular classroom, in their homes (ruthless on the soccer field, didn’t pick up your lunch garbage at school, etc, will it be confusing for people, how do you want to be represented). What kinds of messages can we learn from the past and how do they make sense today and how does it help us for our future?

Khaliya: (WP) I also think the curriculum is about grounding students in the notion of something beyond themselves: a spirit/entity/possibility/realm that is deeper, and more profound than their worldly realities. I think it is about assuring them that their tradition has and always will provide believers with guidance, wisdom and insight, emanating from a place of deep love and care. I think the curriculum intends to open up the horizon for our students, and show them that their world and life can be broader and deeper than they might have ever imagined, that their impact can be great, and that their capacity to love and understand is limitless.

The teachers’ voices affirm that the curriculum is a motive force for understanding, interpretation and application (Gadamer, 1960/1989, 1981) of experiences in one’s everyday world. There is an effort to render the curriculum vital to modernity through creating new “routes” and enacting tradition in the service of humankind so as not to erode the values of the tradition and also to ameliorate community and society. The curriculum places the concept of faith within the human narrative and endeavors to reveal faith not as an additional dimension of human existence, but as being integral to the experience of the human condition. One teacher spoke about how he wanted his students to “slowly unearth and discover the tradition within them” and that is when their interest would be sparked. An active search for understanding is required to develop lenses or paradigms within which to interpret the
world, paradigms rooted in the values of the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition and in the Qur’an. This quest towards the horizon is a temporal quest, one which reaches into the past to pull forth enduring values of the tradition, gives meaningful expressions to these values in modern times and projects the potentiality of the individual into the future (Huebner, 1967). In this way, the transcendent is awakened in the individual, the awareness of reaching beyond oneself but also as is articulated above, “grounding students in something beyond themselves.” The hope is to equip students with the capacities to interpret and enact their living tradition in a way that enhances their lives and the lives of others around them.

As teachers gain more experience with inquiring into the curriculum, they are developing an understanding of how the approaches termed by the IIS as civilizational, humanistic and normative facilitate a unity of being for the individual. Although the depth and range of understandings vary, there was a clear sense the teachers see the interconnectedness of these approaches. They see that the intention of these approaches is to have students realize how faith is not only about having beliefs, but also about how these beliefs can inform our interactions with our world within our human narratives and within the larger societal narrative. One of the teachers expresses this interconnectedness eloquently during our hermeneutic conversation sharing an insight gleaned from his process of curricular inquiry which he was able to place within the larger curricular intentionality.

When I was teaching Unit 1 of the Muslim Societies and Civilizations Module, there was a reference to other empires existing alongside Arabia. When I looked at it, I thought, “I don’t know anything about the Sasanid and Byzantine empires and I have all these other things I need to take care of.” It was a point of frustration for me as I did not see the relevance of this content. It was only when I came to it when I had the mental space that I realized that we are trying to cultivate a humanistic lens to the study of Islam and if you don’t do that, how can you expect students to think in humanistic terms? It is trying to cultivate a larger discourse to the world. A lot of the issues that arise in the contemporary world, these are humanistic issues and often times, they are packaged as religious issues. And also there are values represented e.g. openness towards other people, relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. All these things began to make sense to me. There is a sub-text here. It is not just about the Sasanid Empire. It is about openness and how are we being open to other people around us.
When we speak about social justice for instance, other communities also have to grapple with that because at the end of the day, we are human beings and have this in common. So it comes together, I think it is trying to do all of these. It is looking at our commitment to our faith, it is looking at our societal environment, and it is looking at the unity that helps us come together.

There is a resonance with Maclntyre’s (2007) conception of a unified life narrative as he speaks of the historicity, the social locations and the quest for good. The historicity of the individual can be aligned to the humanistic approach since it speaks to our life experience and how the past has formed our present. As a few of the teachers expressed, it raises the question of, “What does it mean to be human?” The social roles we are placed in help us to understand how our humanistic efforts contribute to or deter communities from flourishing through our actions and decisions. And our quest for good is the ongoing interpretation of our place within our world and how our beliefs and values shape the responses to that inquiry. The experience of faith or religiosity is placed within the realm of our experience instead of an entity detached from it.

The teachers were asked for their thoughts on how the curriculum facilitates the integration of the immanent and transcendent or whether if in fact it did. Most teachers struggled with articulating their thoughts on this query. What came forth was a clear acknowledgement that the curriculum should be a source of transcendent knowledge which offers “some sort of mystery or connection to life, something that inspires us to create, to transform, to live differently in this world, a connection to the greater good.” However, most agreed that it was through the interpretive acts of the teacher that the transcendent knowledge would be lifted from the texts as “they are the ones who carry this consciousness, the interpretive consciousness of the horizon, kind of like the taqwa, the God-consciousness. Everything that you do is tied to a meaning system, beyond materiality and everyday life. But it really does depend on the players involved and how they make that connection come alive for the students.”

Tasnim: (RI) We have been speaking about God consciousness and you have said in both our conversations that the kind of consciousness you feel we are striving for with our students is to have them understand that their faith is a part of everything they do in life, that faith and world are not separate entities requiring balance but rather are interconnected in all action and thought. Is this
understanding then the curricular consciousness that will now guide your planning of meaningful experiences for the students? The reason I ask this question is in your written protocol you have spoken about how the IIS curriculum places emphasis on the student’s active search for meaning. This active search for meaning is a central tenet of our faith and our living tradition. The critical question now for you to consider is how do you facilitate this search for meaning so the students are actively constructing their own understandings. . . I am asking you to think about this as you have spoken about grappling with tensions where you know you want to move to creating a learning space anew and I am saying, as you encounter challenges in your practice and in your thinking, reframe those challenges and interpret those anew. Your response then will become increasingly guided by the consciousness you wish to nurture in your students rather than the history of practice that may be exciting for the moment but may actually deter from the kind of atmosphere you wish to enliven. In other words, if students are seeking new ways of being and knowing, we as teachers first, have to find new ways of being and knowing with our students. It is almost as if we are on a parallel journey of discovery together.

This interpretive consciousness of the horizon is an acute awareness amongst the teachers. They see themselves as interpreters of the curriculum and as stated earlier, those individuals who are entrusted to ‘breathe life’ into the curriculum thereby releasing the spirit of the tradition for the youth. It is already a hermeneutical inquiry for the teachers by the virtue of being in the role of a religious education teacher whose task is to make accessible and invite engagement with the living tradition through the curriculum for their students.

Aryana: (WP) When I am in the classroom with my students, I am aware that I am imparting more than just historical facts about how Islam began as a religion, or how the struggle for leadership unfolded. With every lesson I teach, I am expressing to them - through my words, actions, and behavior - the values I live by, my motives, my interests and my perspectives of what I believe the curriculum considers important. . . At times, I am fearful of this very fact, but at the same time, it invites me, but most of the time, reminds me, that I must, at all times, be mindful and critically aware of the decisions I make concerning curricular practice, and the way I live ‘the curriculum,’ especially if I want to awaken my students, or arouse them to discover, what it would mean to ‘live the curriculum’ or, articulated differently, to ‘live with purpose’ [emphases in original].

189
Khaliya: (WP) My students are often concerned about their futures, their careers, university, grades, success, fitting-in, achieving a sense of social status, having a stable home environment, Saturday night’s party, the Ismaili youth event that they are helping organize, etc... These concerns are not blatantly visible in the curricular narrative, and yet, these concerns are being responded to, through learning about Prophet Muhammad and his trials and tribulations, and learning about our Imams and their struggle for justice, truth and meaning; the Qur’an and the way it inspired people to admire and create beauty, and to create knowledge and avenues for learning, and to create places for peace and contemplation. I wonder, when I weave in discussions that address their concerns explicitly, are the curricular links clear to them? Do I communicate these links clearly in words, visuals, lesson design, etc...? Do I give them adequate avenues and support so that they can find/create these links on their own?

The teachers are seeking understanding of the curricular intentionality, first for themselves, before they can enliven the curriculum for their students. They clearly understand the importance of their role in enlivening the curriculum for their students through revealing the human narrative and its requisite struggles and joys. The exploration becomes one of how faith provides luminosity, questions, comfort, confusion, inspiration and self-awareness in the human experience, historically and within their own lives. In their interpretive quest, the teachers engage in ongoing curricular processes inquiring into their own faith beliefs, into the content of the curriculum and the layers of meaning it holds, into their students’ interests and lives, and into how they believe they should be enacting their role as religious educators. How do the teachers enliven and inspirit the curricular intentionality they so passionately have articulated? What are the interpretive processes that guide their curricular inquiry?
How are the teachers taking forth the curricular intentionality in their interpretive work with the curriculum?

Qadi al-Nu‘man: The Fountain Pen

When a secretary (scribe) takes up the pen and writes with it, he is able to write in the most elegant script that could possibly be desired; then, when he lifts the pen off the sheet of writing material, it holds in the ink.

I observed that it was a wonderful piece of work, the like of which I had never imagined I would ever see. There became apparent to me in it a fine moral example, in that the pen does not release its contents except when specifically requested to do so and for some useful purpose which is part of the original reason for asking it to write.

It only bestows benefit on a person really desiring it, and it does not let its ink flow except for a person really desiring it, and it does not let its ink flow except for a person who has a right to summon it forth because the pen approves of him.

Nothing harmful comes from it, in that it should stain the hand of the person holding it, or his garment, or anything else which happens to be in contact with it. It is pure advantage and involves nothing deleterious.

(C.E. Bosworth, “A Mediaeval Islamic Prototype of the Fountain Pen”, On the Wings of Words, Student Reader, IIS, 2009, pp. 53-54)

Qadi al-Nu‘man writes about the fountain pen being symbolic of the pursuit of knowledge as an act of morality for those who desire and seek it. The pursuit of knowledge is symbolically described as being intentional, purposeful and enriching for those who merit it. When knowledge is sought for moral purposes, it opens up the beauty, grace and possibilities of this world. The inquiry being pursued by the teachers can be thought of in a similar way as a quest for knowledge. Their interpretive processes endeavour to uncover knowledge that will allow them to internalize the curricular intentionality and to find ways to translate this intentionality in a life enhancing manner for their students. Their hermeneutical processes with the curriculum seek to interrogate the curriculum content for their own personal faith consciousness. They strive to establish a relationship with the text where they feel inspired and moved by the enduring ideas of the tradition. Their processes also raise questions about the students’ concerns and dilemmas and the relationship of these to the ideas of the curriculum.

On the Teachers’ Curricular Consciousness

Khaliya: (WP) This curriculum for me today is about powerful ideas that are anchoring me firmly in God’s message to humanity, the Prophets’ stories and legacies, my Imams’ examples
and contributions, and the great achievements of the many people living and inspired by Muslim beliefs and values. From here, I can feel a sense of dignity and assuredness growing, which in turn offers me not only a new vantage point, but also a voice that I can use to advocate for development and social change. It is the knowledge that I have gained about what it means to be an Ismaili Muslim, and that transformation that has occurred in my life, that urges me, compels me to provide my students with a similar impetus.

Yasmine: (HC) The idea about god consciousness and god consciousness of the teacher really stood out for me last time we spoke. I want this for my students. As a teacher do I emulate the same thing for them that I want to see? Am I a role model in being God conscious in how I plan and how I approach the students? I try to be God conscious for the most part. But when you are in the classroom and trying to deal with the everyday administration of the classroom and delivering of curriculum, sometimes it gets lost. . . There is this value and this care that comes along with this vocation. As I develop relationships with students, this awareness of approaching students with care and understanding develops over time. Instead of reacting, I step back and remind myself that they are still young and also under a lot of pressures, so how can I respond differently?

Aryana: (WP) These may be attempts of the IIS curriculum to bring students into an ‘ethical existence,’ but if as Maxine Greene suggests\(^53\), teachers, themselves, have not – or to be more specific – if I have not yet attended to my own life and its requirements, if I have not personally reflected, if I have been unable to break with my mechanical ways of living or uplift myself from the depths of my habits, then how can I expect this of my students? It is a powerful message, a wake-up call, an alarm bell ringing through my head, my heart and my soul, that I must elevate my life, and that I must discover – on my own terms – what it would mean to ‘live with purpose’ – to ‘live deliberately’ – or to ‘live the

\(^{53}\) “If teachers today are to initiate young people into an ethical existence, they themselves must attend more fully than they normally have to their own lives and its requirements; they have to break with the mechanical life, to overcome their own submergence in the habitual” (Greene, 1973, p.46).
curriculum,’ as articulated above. If I do not do this for myself, how can I expect this of my students? [emphases in original]

Aidan: (HC) This is what makes this vocation both beautiful and horrible. It is sort of your mother has an expectation that you try so hard to live up to as a child and it is so hard. Now the curriculum is like a mother that has a very high expectation you need to live up to. Embodying the curriculum is all the moments where you are attempting to live up to it. Innately, it is making me a better person, and for sure I am not doing it completely right but, I am growing with it and that is the honesty that is always between me and my students so I don’t think they are unforgiving if something doesn’t seem like the perfect model to them.

Raziq: (WP) I feel that if an RE teacher does not believe in what he or she is teaching it becomes difficult to ignite that passion in the students. In other words, the curriculum must emanate from the teacher. If it emanates from the teacher it allows him to engage with students on multiple levels than simply on an intellectual or transactional level. This is where the emotive or affective elements can come through the curriculum because the teacher believes in what he or she is teaching.

(HC) So I said to myself, I am reading these words and I have to teach these words. How do I make meaning of this for myself? How am I internalizing and living it . . . In a way, the curriculum begs the teacher to be a hermeneutist, to engage in that interpretive space. It’s like you have to be a hermeneutist to be able to relate to the curriculum.

In taking forth the curricular intentionality, the teachers are developing their own sense of curricular consciousness. They are creating what one of the teachers referred to earlier as an “interpretive consciousness of the horizon” so they too remain ‘wide-awake’ to the signs of this intentionality. This new curriculum developed by the IIS is invoking and furthering the teachers’ personal faith journeys similar to what it is intended to do for our students. The curricular intentionality as they understand it is providing groundedness and a reference point for their identities as believers. There is an emerging understanding of the transcendent nature of this work; it is being referred to as god-consciousness. There is also growing awareness of the self-transformation required for the teacher; it is described as an embodiment, an internalization of what the curriculum symbolizes and developing a passion for and commitment to those ideas.
This awareness is not a gentle awareness; it seems to have a pressure or an expectation as is evident in the metaphor used of curriculum as mother.

Tasnim:  (RI) Your metaphor of the curriculum as a mother fascinates me. I am interested in knowing more. What are these expectations that the curriculum places on us? How does it do so, in other words, how do you see these expectations and sense them coming through the curriculum? In what way has the curriculum enabled you, if in fact it has? Do you see this metaphor extending to other qualities of a mother? For example, does the curriculum also care for you, nurture you, protect you, puzzle you, sometimes suffocate or limit you? Why I am asking these questions is because of how you have been describing the curriculum and the relationship you have discovered with the curriculum which you have spoken about as one of alignment. I am probing the nature of this alignment, the experience of this alignment, and the tensions of this alignment.

The words internalization and transformation populated the discourse with the teachers as they strove to articulate their hermeneutical processes. They are continually inquiring into the layers of meaning the curriculum holds literally and symbolically and then applying these understandings to their own lives. There is a sense of expectation for what was spoken of in Chapter Two as “ascension to an exalted destiny” (Nanji, 1987) and a responsibility of self-awareness towards transformation or elevation of the self. Hermeneutic processes are being applied to further self-understanding as teachers, as believers, and as human beings. It is a reminder of the hermeneutic of spirit (Palmer, 1969) where the teachers are seeking out the view of life within which these curricular ideas stand through continual interpretation. The next section gives a sense of how the teachers are furthering their interpretive processes through establishing a relationship with the curricular text.

**On Relationality with the Curricular Text**

Zakir:  (HC) Making the content in the curriculum dynamic through conversations with other teachers, background readings, and through my own teaching is giving me a wider picture and more complexity of understanding. For example, in Unit 2, you wonder why there was so much turmoil in Hazrat Ali’s Caliphate. Hazrat Ali had to work within structures that were developed by other Caliphs and yet still tried to lead in an ethical way. Trying to instill that in the kids is very
different than you need to know Abu Bakr did this and Uthman did that. It’s very flat if you only teach content. Why is it that this happened? How has it influenced history and our present day? What does that mean for us as Ismailis to understand Hazrat Ali in a historical context?

Raziq: (HC) I think there has to be a level of openness on the part of the teacher to be transformed. You have to be open to that possibility. If you let the curriculum speak to you, then absolutely, it can impact the way you think and the way you see the world. It doesn’t mean that there are no tensions, but you have to make the effort to understand and work through those tensions. What I’m talking about is an internalization process; there are different entry points to this internalization. If the teacher’s goal is to have the curriculum be transformative for the students, then they too have to engage in the process.

Aryana: (HC) And I ask myself this all this time, for every lesson. What does this mean for the world our students live in today? So when I read the curriculum, I will always comment in the margins, what questions does this raise for me today? What questions does it raise for our youth living in the world today surrounded by what they are surrounded by? I am not part of the adolescent world anymore. I try and take note of their interests and the comments they make in class (I research them) to incorporate into future lessons. I try to see if those things can parallel with the tradition or the symbols or the stories we tell in the textbook. I believe that by engaging with the text this way, the energies in my soul are also participating.

Shakeel: (HC) There is that relationship between you and the text because I come at it with my subjectivity, with my passions, with my interests to further discover what I see as “my heritage”. I think wow, let me discover, let me unpack, let me ask questions. Why are we teaching about this, what is the significance? Even when I come to parts that are seemingly uninteresting, when I look at these and relook, I ask that question and see something that I didn’t see before. . . It is the ethos that this is one manifestation of and this ethos is what the tradition talks about and what I grew up with; the book is a symbol and that is why it excites me. And it’s not like it is the [emphasis added] symbol for me. I see discrepancies in there, there is a very interesting relationship; it is also a critical relationship. It is by no means a perfect symbol for me. It’s a dynamic one and that is where I find my source of joy.

Yasmine: (HC) I strive to follow the curriculum – the text as closely as I can to ensure the information I deliver is accurate and that I follow the integrity with which the curriculum was designed but am I breathing the life into the curriculum that
I know it needs? Am I considering the needs of the students and their own personal inquiries into religious education . . . Instead of trying to cover everything, I am asking how I am going to achieve the learning outcomes in a way that I am considering my students. Starting off with understanding of who they are and what they bring to the classroom, maybe that means not covering every single detail in the curriculum but being more judicious in selecting what to focus on and keeping the students in focus.

Aidan: (HC) One of the things is my own curriculum search, as a Shia Ismaili Muslim, the curriculum is also facilitating my own personal search, that conversation between me and curriculum, it is a different me (an improved me or a more aware me) that is reading the curriculum. For example, I am personally struggling with the conflict in Syria and how can this be happening. So I will read the curriculum searching for answers, I don’t only look for students’ answers, I look for mine too . . . To internalize the curriculum, the content becomes part of you because you have internalized it. Then I am looking into the world for these pieces in my experience.

Khaliya: (WP) Over the past three years, I have come to a place, where I am much more confident in my abilities to teach the content, but I know that I am still not meeting the larger curricular aims that form the foundation of the curriculum.

This is really interesting, because I am realizing that even as I unit plan and lesson plan, my philosophical principles and curricular aims are nowhere in sight. I often operate under the assumption that they are in the back of mind, and that by inhabiting this space, they are automatically accounted for. Of course, what actually happens is that they are factored in far less, than any visible material, which is usually the student reader, the teacher’s guide, background reading, and contemporary media items. Even re-reading these curricular aims, is making me wonder about how differently I might plan, if these were visibly at the fore-front of my planning and consciousness?

These questions are making me question what I have prioritized in my interpretation of the curriculum. Have I prioritized the facts, the events, the historical narrative, over the larger aims, which ask each teacher to give each child a uniquely meaningful experience of the RE programme? It feels like I haven’t chewed on the foundational curricular ideas enough, and as such, I still see them on the surface. I haven’t understood what they look like on the inside, when I have tried and tested them in relation to my own practice.
The teachers’ hermeneutic engagement with the IIS curriculum is deeply personal. They are not engaging with a curricular text as such; they are engaging with their living tradition and finding themselves anew within this tradition. They seek to establish relationality with the text in a multiplicity of ways, in depth and breadth. By breadth, I mean the numerous variables they take into consideration in the interpretation of the curriculum such as the content being presented, the knowledge of the discipline, the students’ questions and interests, their own understanding of the living tradition, what is happening in the contemporary environments around them and other such factors. We explore this daunting breadth further through one of my researcher interpretations.

Tasnim: (RI) You are able to see the curriculum or the curricular ethos in your world. The question then becomes how can we, as teachers, facilitate a process of internalization for our students in the short time we see them each week? And how would this process of internalization help them to see the curricular ethos in their world? Oftentimes, as teachers we speak about making the connection of the curricular content to the lives of the students. I think that is very important, however, I do think it is more than that. I ask myself, when I look at the curriculum, am I drawn by a connection I see to my life or am I drawn by a powerful idea that resonates with my aspirations or my struggles? From our discussion, you have indicated that perhaps it is both. You used the example of the narratives of Hazrat Ali and Prophet Muhammad and the compelling idea of justice and how students spoke about the application to their lives. It raises the question for me of how do teachers negotiate and balance all of these aspects. We want to explore powerful ideas about humanity that are grounded in the Qur’anic vision and that can have relevance to the lives of children. We want to address the dilemmas and questions our students have but also open up other windows for them through the study of the curricular content to broaden their knowledge, thinking and frames of reference. We want to find an alignment between the students’ lifeworlds and the curriculum and make contemporary meaning of the curricular ideas. We want students to learn about their identity as Shia Ismaili Muslims whilst integrating the multiple identities they are struggling with. What guides teacher decision making about all of the above and more when we as teachers are always confronted by so many layers, so many horizons? How do we place value on what is negotiable and what is non-negotiable? How do we see those aspects of our living tradition that are timeless and
understand those that are time bound? How do we enable this wide-awareness for our students?

And by depth, I mean recognition of the layers of meaning held in the curriculum text which require active search and interpretation through both the literal and the symbolic to understand the significance of these layers. The teachers are learning to inquire into why this content has been chosen for the education of our youth, how it develops their identities as young Shia Ismaili Muslims, and why students would find any of this relevant or meaningful to their lived experiences. There is a growing attentiveness to the humanistic narrative within the larger societal or civilizational narrative and the influence of faith on shaping these narratives in diverse contexts. I ask one of the teachers what is providing them the grounding for their inquiry.

Tasnim: (RI) There are these experiences as you expressed of spirit and of world. Education and Islamics; the RE teacher and the living tradition; who I am outside as my public self and who I am inside as my private self; me as an individual and me as part of a community; my students as learners and my students as human beings; the curriculum as text and the curriculum as consciousness. We seem to be in the struggle or in pursuit of learning what it means to integrate what may seem like binaries. We are asking ourselves about that space of in-between-ness that we can create which honor both spirit and world, both the immanent and the transcendent. We are also negotiating, or even before negotiating, understanding our response (or reactions) to tensions we feel when pulled too strongly to one side or the other. I come back to the question I asked earlier about the constants, anchors, or foundations we draw from to enable this integration. Reflecting on this question may yield some interesting insights as you inquire into how your understanding of curriculum has evolved over time and how this evolution has shaped your curricular consciousness or the constants you bring to your practice.

The teachers’ personal connection to the text seems to be of paramount importance as it is experienced as a connection to the living tradition. This is exemplified in Aidan’s comment about how the curricular endeavour facilitates his personal search and provides him with interpretive lenses to see his world. There is an intentional quest to deeply internalize the curricular ideas and to be in conversation with the curricular text through an attunement to the “inner ear” (Gadamer, 1960/1989) of the text. The dialogue with the text is established sensorially, intellectually and emotionally
and further develops the embodiment discussed in the previous section. The teachers are not idolizing the curricular text nor holding it in reverence as a scriptural text. However, there is a respect and honoring of the curricular text as a source of knowledge and a symbol of the living tradition inviting “cumulative interaction” (Hodgson, 1974). There is a sense of the hermeneutic of the letter, the hermeneutic of the sense and the hermeneutic of the spirit (Palmer, 1969) interplaying within these interpretive processes. This is not to say that all teachers undertake the same curricular inquiry processes with the text; they do not. Within the diversity of approaches, however, there is a search for the meaning of the living tradition, how this meaning can be understood and embodied by the teacher, and how it can be interpreted for their students.

As the teachers access their pre-understandings they bring to the interpretive processes, their experience begins to put into question the resonance between what the curriculum is saying and what the students are asking. The teachers’ hermeneutic relation with the text is a safe one. And even though it is sometimes frustrating to make sense of the curriculum content, of what is present and what is absent and why, the teachers are able to derive meaning from being in conversation with the text; meaning that is inspiring and fulfilling for them. However, when it comes to further interpreting these meanings for the students, questions, doubts and uncertainties are raised. The teachers interpret the living tradition through the text. And they also have to interpret the tradition through the text and through themselves for their students. The curricular text speaks to the teachers but does it speak to the students? I do not get the sense it does yet. For the students, the teachers become the interpretive texts, not a vehicle of delivery for the curriculum text, but a symbol of the curricular consciousness and of our living tradition. Therefore, the curricular inquiry process with the text for the teachers is becoming a deeply self-reflexive process where they are increasingly asking questions to assess their own effectiveness in inviting their students to engage with the living tradition and uncovering insights previously unseen to them.
Living within the Hermeneutic Circle: Towards a Unity of Being

The inquiry thus far has revealed the teachers’ quest as being one of giving new creative expression to the interpretation of the Shia Ismaili Muslim living tradition. These expressions are reflective of a central principle of the faith which is the engagement with and integration of *din*, faith, and *dunya*, world thereby creating a unity of being for the individual. For some of the students, there are questions of fragmentation of experiences, exclusive secular world views, confusion about identities, relationship with faith, and of their place and role in community and society. The IIS Secondary Curriculum, as a representation of the living tradition, aims to present a paradigm for Muslim education and for the living tradition that enables the emergence of new creative expressions. In a context where human flourishing is increasingly attributed to the prowess of human reason and scientific progress, the IIS curriculum is proposing a paradigm that situates human flourishing within a transcendence that attributes human flourishing to the efforts of human intellect *and* to the grace of the Divine.

The question here is not whether the living tradition will sustain itself over time or not. Huebner (1966c) reminds us that meaning is created by humans and is a reflection of what we are or what we aspire to be. What is to be considered is how we create meaning of the living tradition and how this engagement will determine what parts of the living tradition will endure. In other words, what we engage through our interpretive quests will remain vital. And thus, how we engage determines whether faith becomes a partial experience in selective moments or an immersed experience in all our lived moments. Huebner (1987b) conceives of the call of traditions as “communal recollections and hopes which give structure, meaning, and value to individual and collective life” (p. 381). Traditions are carried and embodied in people and communities and engross us in struggles of value and meaning. It is our participation in these struggles and working through areas of *dis-unity* that help us to maintain and to give birth to the life-enhancing qualities of tradition—sources of beauty, truth and freedom. The IIS curricular intentionality invites our participation in the search for meaning, for beauty, for truth and for freedom towards our own flourishing and equally important, the capacity to contribute to the flourishing of others.
Hence, if we are seeking a unity of being of faith and world, our participation should be a joyful participation that commits us to our world and allows us to see our faith as enriching our world so we can know and be in our world in a different way. Huebner (1961) asks an unusual question of educators, what will children love when they leave your classrooms? He acknowledges that the concept of love is not frequently associated with education as it is seen as 'soft' and more suitable for personal spaces. Nevertheless, he persists in arguing that this is a fundamental question for educators to ask.

If love is tying one’s self to the rest of the world—caring enough about it, interested enough in it, curious enough about it—to establish permanent bonds with it . . . the content of our curriculum should be the vehicle by which we help the child establish ties to the rest of the world. (pp. 12-13)

Huebner explains that a curriculum which focuses solely on the child's interests fosters egocentricity and selfishness. But, a curriculum which focuses only on skills and concepts fosters estrangement from the world. He argues that children find themselves and their place in the world through a curriculum that encourages exploration of their worlds, invites discovery of its wonders and tragedies, arouses curiosity, and awakens joy and concern about the world. He refers to the words of Scottish philosopher, Macmurray, who said, "All significant knowledge is for the sake of action, and all significant action, for the sake of friendship" (p. 13). From the teachers' inquiry, we understand that the IIS curricular intentionality and approach encourages an exploration of our world through humanistic endeavours, through civilizational and societal developments, and through the values and belief systems of the living tradition. The intention is to develop a responsible and caring relationship with the world guided by the values of the Shia Ismaili Muslim faith. The knowledge offered by the curriculum, when interpreted through the framework of the living tradition, calls on individuals to act significantly for the betterment of the world and to be in kinship with community. This view has been referred to by the teachers as embodying and giving expression to the Qur'anic vision.
However, such interpretive knowledge is not readily apparent; it needs to “be desired and to be summoned forth”\(^{54}\) by the teachers for their students. What is being revealed in the inquiry is that there are different kinds of knowledge forms required to facilitate this unity of being. There is relational knowledge which was discussed above as establishing relationality to the world, a relationality of joy, concern, wonder and responsibility. There is temporal knowledge which was discussed as the values of the living tradition that endure over time; the durational, temporal aspects of existence (Huebner, 1962a). And there is hermeneutical knowledge which entails a summoning forth of the various parts of our experience and an intellectual engagement to interpret these parts in relation to the whole of our understanding. In this chapter, the reader has been privy to some parts of the teachers’ experiences in their hermeneutical inquiry of: the societal contexts and dilemmas of their students; the teachers’ understanding of our living tradition; the curriculum as a representative symbol of this tradition; their own evolving curricular consciousness; and their interpretive processes with the curricular texts.

This pursuit is a complex undertaking and raises the question of interpretive processes, we as educators, can bring to our curricular inquiry? For the response to this, we can turn to the guidance of our living tradition which asks us to be ‘wide-awake’ to the signs of knowledge around us—“There truly are signs in this for those who reflect.”\(^{55}\) We are encouraged to seek knowledge from a plurality of sources—self, others, disciplines, experiences, traditions—“There truly are signs in this for those who know.” We are urged to uncover meaning in what we receive—“There truly are signs in this for those who can hear.” We are responsible for engaging our reason to create possibilities for our students’ worlds—“There truly are signs in this for those who use their reason.” The pursuit of knowledge and the hermeneutical inquiry is guided by the living tradition in reflecting, learning, listening, and creating meaning and new expressions from the parts of our experience. We do this within the whole, the horizon of the living tradition, as we develop curriculum as

\(^{54}\) Reference to The Fountain Pen
\(^{55}\) Reference to Qur’anic ayat on signs
consciousness towards a unity of being in the hermeneutic circle. And finally, we are reminded that the inquiry is never foreclosed and to assume a posture of humility in this quest and be open to grace and the possibilities that lie before us as, “He is the Almighty, the All Wise”.
Chapter 6:

The Pedagogical Encounter: 
A Search for Epistemological Humility

The Valley of the Quest

“When you begin the Valley of the Quest
Misfortunes will deprive you of all rest,
Each moment some new trouble terrifies,
And parrots there are panic-stricken flies.
There years must vanish while you strive and grieve;
There is the heart of all you will achieve –
Renounce the world, your power and all you own,
And in your heart’s blood journey on alone.
When once your hands are empty, then your heart
Must purify itself and move apart
From everything that is – when this is done
The Lord’s light blazes brighter than the sun,
Your heart is bathed in splendour and the quest
Expands a thousand fold within your breast”

(Extract from Conference of the Birds, On the Wings of Words, Student Reader, IIS, 2009, p. 109)

Curriculum inquiry and its requisite interpretive quest are not limited to interactions with the curricular text and the content. It flows through to the curricular design, planning, implementation and reflection processes in the classroom where the pedagogical encounter takes place. The quest of curriculum inquiry has been one of understanding and articulating the intentionality of the IIS Secondary Curriculum as a representation of the living tradition and, of cultivating a curricular consciousness where this intentionality is internalized and embodied by the teachers. The teachers are on a pursuit to give new expression to the creative vision of our living tradition through reconceptualizing a paradigm of religious education, a paradigm that enables a unity of being between faith and world for themselves and for our students. They are continually renewing their group commitment through their understanding and interpretation of the
IIS curricular intentionality and the living tradition. This chapter will open up aspects of the teachers’ cumulative interaction in further interpreting the curriculum for their students. The curriculum and what it symbolizes draws the teachers to the living tradition. What will draw the students? How will this curriculum matter to the students? Will it? How are the teachers engaging in curricular inquiry to interpret the creative vision of the living tradition for their students?

Raziq: (WP) I’ve had the experience of coming to terms with the key messages, dissecting the curriculum and understandings and all that, but I come to a full realization as I am teaching it. Let’s say for instance we are talking about Ikhwan al-Safa and it is talking about human responsibility. I’ll understand it in terms of the theoretical aspects of it and in terms of the importance of this theme in the curriculum. But when I am teaching it, I am co-constructing it with my students. It’s almost like I’m convinced even more about this idea of human responsibility.

(HC) That’s part and parcel of the internalization process, you have to teach it. You can read it like a novel, but you’re not going to achieve the same level of depth as when you teach it to someone else. The students’ voices will come in, their questions will come in and if you already have that level of understanding, the grounding in it, then you are raising that level of dialogue in the classroom and inevitably shifting their perspectives or thinking around certain areas.

I begin this chapter by discussing what the teachers are bringing to their interpretive processes in preparation for the pedagogical encounter. In looking at the experience of the teacher role, I share a sense of the kinds of aspirations held by the teachers for this work and for their students; and also what the realities are at this moment in history, of the teachers’ experience of their role. Next, I move to the complexity of the pedagogical encounter and the kinds of struggles teachers are experiencing in their design and implementation of the curriculum. And finally, I present

56 This reference is regarding an allegoric fable about human responsibility that is believed to be written in the 10th century by an anonymous group of Muslim writers known as the Ikhwan al-Safa.’
narratives on how the teachers are recognizing and drawing from various knowledge sources to construct alternative responses in redefining the pedagogical encounter. In this process of curriculum inquiry, the teachers are realizing that they must take on a stance of epistemological humility and actively seek out a plurality of knowledge sources, particularly about the students’ lifeworlds. The teachers are fully immersed in this quest of revitalizing the living tradition; their students, however, are showing a selective, partial and sometimes disinterested participation. And the questions forefront on our minds are why aren’t the students moved by this creative vision and what can we bring forth to them that will stir their love, or at least curiosity, for our tradition? As noted in Chapter Four, the study participants and I agreed unequivocally, we needed to spend an additional cycle on this theme in order to deepen our understanding and interpretation of the complex pedagogical encounter. Although the creative vision is uplifting for the teachers, the experience of their encounters with students can weigh down on them. And it is within these counter forces, that space of in-betweenness, that we seek luminal spaces of familiarity and strangeness (Kerdeman, 1998), risking our stances and what we know in search of what is yet to be known as illustrated in the Conference of the Birds excerpt on quest.

The Lived Experience of the Teacher Role in the Pedagogical Encounter

*Life as a Precious Opportunity*

> And spend something of the substance which We have provided you, before death comes to one of you and he says, ‘O my Lord! Why did You not give me respite for a little while? I would then have given (largely) in sadaqa, and I would have been one of the doers of good.’

(Qur’an, 63:10)

The Qur’anic verse above speaks to how our life on earth is a precious opportunity to bring out the goodness inherent in each human being and urges us to be
aware of and to act on this opportunity. Very early on in our hermeneutic conversations, the devotion and commitment of the teachers to this work was striking and deeply touching. They are seeking to be agents of change and have consciously chosen to use their lives to shape human institutions (Huebner, 1966b) and specifically, our educational institution for the youth of our community. However, with these aspirations, there exists a heavy responsibility that weighs on them as well as ambiguity concerning what this role is and what it should be.

**On Teacher Aspirations**

Raziq: (WP) For me, being a teacher of religious education for the Shia Ismaili Muslim community is to lead the youth within the community to understand our faith tradition through a historical and contemporary lens. Above all, it is to help students acquire and develop a personal worldview that is consonant with the values of our faith which will materialize throughout their lives. To be a teacher of religious education is not about having students memorize facts or simply learning the do’s and don’ts of Islamic practices; something which many students and parents perceive to be the purpose of religious education. Within the paradigm of developing one’s worldview, students are taught to think, search, reflect and act. In other words, the paradigm itself is representative of the value system of Shia Ismaili Muslims as the role of the intellect plays a pivotal role in modern times just as it did throughout our history.

Aryana: (WP) I can’t help but think how incredible it would be if I could arouse my students to become alert, to become aware and to be curious of the curriculum that is being taught to them, that is all around them and potentially, inside them, just waiting to be unveiled or unleashed. I also think this word, furious is key; I think it’s wonderful that she adds this word alongside the others, because to me, it suggests that the individual be full of energy, of intensity, even. I would love to do this with my students next year [emphases in original].

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57 Reference to Maxine Greene (1973), "Without the ability to think about yourself, to reflect on your life, there’s really no awareness, no consciousness. Consciousness doesn’t come automatically; it comes through being alive, awake, curious, and often furious."
Khaliya: (WP) My biggest desire in taking on this calling, this new vocation was to work with youth, to inspire belief in youth, and to learn more about what is it that motivates youth to succeed, to see life bigger, to paint bigger horizons, to develop meaning and purpose in life... How do you craft a sense of hope, a sense of belief and a sense of motivation in young people through the art of education?

(HC) I have found new meaning in terms of my own life, I feel blessed that I have stumbled across something that feels so purposeful to me. I don't like calling it a job because it is not a job; it has added purpose and meaning and value to my life each and every day. Each day I wake up thinking that I am doing something so meaningful and purposeful with my life. I feel like I have woven myself into this fabric of community based education, of being a religious educator in the Ismaili Muslim community.

Yasmine: (WP) Being a Religious Education (RE) teacher is tough. Over the years my experiences being a RE teacher have piled up leaving me feeling many conflicting emotions. I love what I do or at least the idea of what I do. For me being a religious educator is to be someone whom students can look up to and feel a sense of comfort with when grappling with ideas of who they are and what it means to be a Shia Ismaili Muslim. I feel as though I never had a relationship with an adult when I was young who I could speak to about my confusions or questions about my religious identity and maybe that would've helped me as I grew into adulthood.

The role of the teacher in this community is understood by the teacher participants as one of being influential agents of change. Amidst the performance driven, achievement oriented ways of life that can characterize the students' contexts, the teachers are seeking to infuse inspiration derived from the Ismaili Muslim faith into the lives of the adolescents. The teachers are inspired by this creative vision and they have made a group commitment through deciding to pursue this work as their vocation. Their commitment is to bring about new ways of thinking, critical ways of engaging, value oriented modes of being, and an intellectual engagement to their classrooms. Their aspirations for the youth encompass the development of a worldview through active participation, thinking, reflecting, searching, and acting. They strive to awaken an energy or as Huebner refers to it, the human spirit, which may be latent and reveal the possibility of new horizons. In experiencing the transformative potential of the tradition, the teachers yearn to share and create transformative moments for their students under
their care and guidance. However, the teachers’ aspirations, though reflective of inspiration for the living tradition and of care for the students, are laden with strife in their lived experiences with the students.

**On the Weightiness of the Role**

Yasmine: (WP) At the beginning of each new school year I think “ok this is going to be the year where things are different, students will care and I will feel useful to them” but I have yet to feel a sense of accomplishment . . . I know that students need to see themselves in what they are learning to be able to relate to the material and find it interesting but this takes magic.

My experience as a RE teacher has been fraught with more moments of disheartenment and less with the highs I so look forward to at the beginning of each year. It is a task that is not getting easier but simply has become a sad reality. I want so much for RE to take a more present and dedicated space in students and parents’ lives and really get them to understand that the learning that can happen in this space can affect students’ in all other aspects of their lives.

Zakir: (WP) At the beginning of the academic year, parents were asked to share what they hoped or expected from the program. Several parents wrote that they wanted their children to learn what it means to be a “good Ismaili.” This places a great responsibility on the shoulders of the RE teacher, a weight which can be crushing . . . This is partially because we tend to look at numbers as statistics of attendance and access and whatnot, but the part that weighs on my soul is when a student doesn’t come to class and I think to myself, “Is it because of me? Did I just turn this student off of their religious education?” I couldn’t care less about the numbers and stats; these are the questions that keep me up at night.

(HC) My attendance rate is about 60% . . . and you take that very personally, you feel like you’re failing because if they don’t come to class, you feel did you turn them off and you feel really horrible about that. The students tend to be brutally honest, e.g. “class is so boring” . . . When you have a class of 15 and you have 4 kids show up, it is very cutting, it hurts me very much. Am I seeing Farouq58 in

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58 Pseudonym for student name
class and if he isn’t coming, why not, and if he is not coming, is it my fault?

Aryana: (WP) I am becoming more and more aware of the fact that this ‘work’ isn’t your typical kind of ‘work,’ it is a different kind of work, I feel. This work is fierce, it is intense, it is passionate, and it is very, very real. It is not work that you leave ‘at work.’ You take it everywhere you go. It lives inside you, it lives outside you, it lives in your students, the community, the world, the universe, etc. This work also has the potential to cut deep, deep, down into parts of our selves, parts that we, if we choose, may ignore; parts that may resist the ‘cutting,’ and parts we may never have known even existed.

Khaliya: (HC) We do this work with all our hearts. It becomes one of our greatest aspirations to see the success of this program, to see our students walking out of the classroom feeling happy and joyful and feeling inspired. Because we hold it so dear in our hearts and because it is so integrated into my very being, it is very hard when things don’t go the way you intended them to go. It feels like you are fighting against the current, you get frustrated and tired and angry. In this space, there are things that touch me so deeply; you can’t divorce those emotions from the way you make meaning of your experiences.

Raziq: (HC) It was funny, this happened to me last year. I had just finished teaching a class and we had talked about generosity and ethics and how do we help others and so on. And at the end of class, I am leaving the building of the school and I had to go down three flights of stairs and I am holding all my bags and supplies. I see one of my students standing by the door downstairs and she can see me coming down. I reached to the front of the door and at no point did she think about holding the door open for me. At that point, I thought to myself, “What did I do wrong? What did I miss here? What’s going on here? Is it not sinking in?” And it’s not just because I’m her teacher and she should open the door for me, it wasn’t about that. It was more about the genuine act of wanting to help someone that I didn’t see. It was very frustrating, it made me blame myself, like what did I do wrong? You feel a sense of responsibility as you teach this stuff because it is about how one should live one’s life.

Shakeel: (HC) Let’s say 3 students come to class out of 15, that’s a small victory . . . they say you have made a significant difference even if you impact one child out of a hundred. To some extent I don’t like that philosophy because I don’t want to impact one child; I want to impact more children because the one child is not enough. I see the impact of that philosophy because you begin to see that there is
something you can build on, so it is significant because it is not zero. I’m oscillating between the two, it’s an internal contradiction. On the one hand, I want my steps to be bigger but on the other hand, I have to realize the steps that I am taking are indeed steps towards the horizon and maybe I am not recognizing them as such. But for some reason, I always find myself thinking, we could have done better, this could have been a bigger step.

Aidan: (HC) In the secular field of education, the buy-in is there. There is no reaction from the students if you say, today we are going to do fractions. You just do it because we all know we need to know math. There is societal buy-in in one place but the other space, the RE world, is a completely different space . . . In the RE world, you are focusing on skills that are very hard to evaluate, they are not tangible. I’m only with you for a very short period of time. Kids can put on a great show about being kind, caring and ethical for two hours, but how would I know otherwise?

In other professional roles I have undertaken, I can turn off, I can completely turn off. As a RE teacher, it doesn’t turn off for me, when I hurt in this space, it carries forward to all other aspects of my life. I can’t turn it off or compartmentalize it because it is so deeply intrinsic to who I am. It comes from the small things, they are so little but they make you hurt e.g. a parent writing a note saying that my son/daughter can’t come to class today because the y are working on a history project. It is hurtful because they think that is an appropriate thing to say, that this particular thing holds a higher value or that is saying that there is not as much value here. Or they don’t have a ride to come to class and it seems that is okay as an impediment.

The voices of the teachers begin to give a sense of the counter forces referred to earlier. Their aspirations are grand to affect large scale, transformational change in the community. The realities, however, weigh down those aspirations through experiencing progress that is slow, sometimes demoralizing and inconsistent. The teachers feel a tremendous sense of responsibility towards this commitment and as a result, experience personal pressure weighing on them when they feel they have not been successful with students. All teachers acknowledge that there are successes in students who are co-journeymers (Huebner, 1993) with them. These “small victories”, however, are less frequent than desired. In addition, Zakir’s perception illustrates that parents may hold an unrealistic and perhaps, somewhat uninformed view of the teacher role as “being one of the infallible few to make my child a good Ismaili.” This ambiguity of role carries forth into the classroom in the pedagogical encounter and leaves teachers
wondering how to define this ‘teacher role’ that seems to have elements of big brother/sister, pastor/minister, performer and friend fused within it.

**On the Ambiguity of the Teacher Role**

Aidan: (WP) I asked my students to write down any questions that they had about their faith and life in general. . . Most questions centered on what is right and wrong in social interactions. One question that all students asked was around the permissibility of alcohol in Islam. As a class we engaged in an exploration of guidance in the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad’s hadiths and the Imam’s guidance. I believe that this exploration satisfied an intellectual curiosity and understanding of this ethic in Islam. However at the end of this session the students then asked, “Ok so now tell us, do you drink? Should we drink? What if we want to try?” This is where I then became the ‘big brother’ to speak about why I myself do not drink and the things I have seen around me. Now students can take both pieces of information as they make their decision.

Although we hold the belief that an implicit part of the teacher role in this context is pastoral care, Aidan questions whether we, in fact, really do impart pastoral care. He is uncertain whether students feel comfortable asking about certain things and he thinks they *should* be asking the teachers about their social dilemmas. And when they do ask, “why do they keep asking the same questions over and over again. Evidently, the responses are not satisfying” to the youth. In our hermeneutic conversation, we discuss how teachers need to hold both pieces in their interactions with students. One, they need to expose the students to authentic sources from the tradition related to the question being posed. Second, and equally importantly, teachers also need to provide what Aidan referred to as the “realism” piece. He elaborates below:

Aidan: (HC) You can provide them with information but if they ask you, do you [the teacher] drink, you do have to make it real for them even if you don’t want to give them your own personal take on it. You can’t say it is none of your business. It has to be real for them. How can you be with your friends, not drink and still be cool? They need to know this part so they can actually live it. If you say it’s none of your business, they’ll never know how you can still be cool and not drink.
The teachers are acutely aware of the grave responsibility they carry which exerts a high level of pressure on them. This pressure is experienced differently by each teacher as is illustrated in the excerpts below. For some, it is the pressure of not leading the students astray from the values of the tradition and being able to respond to questions in a manner that will resonate with the students whilst maintaining the teachers’ own sense of integrity.

Raziq: (HC) We are being faced with these big questions from kids on the spot, like what is the point of living if we are all going to die? It takes a lot of patience; it takes a lot of reflection on the spot when you are responding to the student because you don’t want to say something that will throw them off. It’s treading carefully in this kind of situation. They open up to you with all sorts of things; it is such a huge responsibility.

For others, it is the pressure of having to be a performer and to impress and entertain the students to motivate them to return to class the following week.

Yasmine: (WP) Magic and being a performer have slowly become part of my role as a RE teacher. I am expected to come to class having created lessons that are filled with “wows” and “ohmys” to keep and grab attention. Students often say they want class to be “fun”. Understanding and defining the word fun has been a complicated task. . . I can incorporate students’ ideas of fun but that would interfere with my idea of what it means to learn and so I am stuck with a dilemma – have fun to keep students excited or structure the fun so that I ensure students are learning.

And then, there was indication of an intensely personal kind of pressure experienced by some teachers which is their grappling with their own faith journey whilst guiding the journey of their students.

Zakir: (WP) I still feel a great deal of discomfort in trying to address my students’ faith based needs while I myself am still grappling with my own understanding (or lack thereof) of faith. It makes for a great deal of internal struggle as a teacher of religious education, teaching within a religious community in the hope of uplifting the students so they feel more secure in their identity as Ismaili Muslims. Often times I feel like a bit of a fraud. . . The students challenging, and questioning and sharing their doubts, either privately or with the class lets me know that this
struggle is not something I experience alone. Perhaps, I can even see this weakness as a strength as the students and I both share an insecurity in finding our place with God and within this community.

Huebner (1987b) puts forth his thesis of teaching being a vocation, a call or summons. He offers, “Within a religious context, “vocation” is often interpreted as a call from God” (p. 397). If circumstances are appropriate, teaching can be transforming, life-forming and renewing as students and teachers engage in the activity of meaning making together. Huebner characterizes a vocation as living intentionally, which he defines as being open and always in search of new integrating meanings and values. Being prepared to accept newness and pain, surprise and happiness, makes us re-assess who we are and how we are in this world. As the world changes, meanings and values forged in the past must be transformed once again. He emphasizes that as teachers we are not being called forth by some mysterious force or to be something other than who we are; we are being called by children and traditions we serve and which serve us. Teaching then becomes a response to the call of young people and to the call of traditions.

The teachers have responded to the calling of the creative vision of the curriculum as a representation of their living tradition. They are seeking to affect substantive long term change, both for the community and for their students. They have earnest desires to nurture life-enhancing qualities with their students and to engage them in inquiries of values and meanings of humanity and their role within society. Each teacher participant expressed some sort of a calling to serve and to enable their community in the present and in preparation for the future. They also expressed the struggle of their students relating to faith in their everyday lives and the desire to ignite some sort of spark in each child. The teachers are responding to the call of young people and are putting forth great personal investment in their work. Many spoke of the inextricability of their personal and professional lives and the profound emotions associated with their successes and more so, experiences they perceive to be less successful. Their understanding of what it means to be a teacher in a community of living tradition is continually challenged by their experiences in the classroom.
Huebner (1987b) reminds us of our inherent vulnerability as teachers as we are continually in the process of shaping and reshaping ourselves, our values, our beliefs and our stories in our quest to remain open to the world and to our students. Each time we start a new class, there is a sense of fragility and insecurity. And although, these fallibilities can be concealed through knowledge, the teacher’s authority, or any other image of teaching we have conceived, “our competence as teachers is continuously brought into question by the newness of the young people who call us farther into our journey of selfhood” (p. 384). In the case of the teacher participants, they respond and interact with their students as teachers would. Sometimes their interactions characterize teaching personas and behaviours from their own experiences as students. Other times, the teachers endeavour to be responsive to what they feel the students expect or the curriculum expects, or what they feel to be authentic to their own teacher identity and philosophy. Still other times, they feel called to incorporate or redefine this role called ‘teacher’ based on what they perceive their students need. And yet, each one of the teacher participants, whether they have been teaching for four years or one year felt that they are not, in many cases, igniting that spark in some students. These emotions, these burdens, and these insecurities are carried with the teachers as they strive to understand and re-assess their role in light of such experiences. Many questions arise from the sharing of their experiences and were discussed further. What is it about this endeavour that teachers (and their organizational leaders) expect to see as short term results or progress? How does a teacher continue to retain love for their students and community if the love does not feel reciprocated? Are we attentive enough to the students who are present, who are showing the small gains, who are engaging in meaningful ways? And do we understand what is working there with these students? Does the deeply personal nature of this vocation indeed become life-forming and renewing for these teachers and their students?

What became increasingly clear is that knowledge of the curriculum and its intentionality is not sufficient by itself to bring to the pedagogical encounter. There needs to be a continual quest for a plurality of knowledge sources and interpreting these knowledge sources to fulfill the teacher aspiration of, “It’s just a constant wanting for your students to understand something that you have found to be so true or so meaningful.” The teachers began to inquire into what the classes were offering students. Is it truly
ways of seeing the world anew or is it more of the same as the students are habituated to in other educational settings? One teacher participant asked if there were perhaps alternate ways to speak to the students and when probed about this, he responded:

I am asking the question. Asking the question is important enough because I have consciousness about that question. Sometimes you don’t know what you don’t know, so I don’t know what those alternatives are, I am embarking on a search to discover them. I am aware that there has to be because the current way does not work all the time, there has to be alternative ways, because we are embarking on a search for the best education for our children.

In addition, the teachers began to question the traditional conception of the role of a teacher and what parts of this role are constant and what parts require change or new expressions. In their lived experience descriptions, teacher participants shared stories about the pastoral nature of their role. The students often stay behind after class speaking to the teacher about issues and dilemmas they as adolescents are grappling with. These issues could be faith based, but are not always. The teachers feel the weightiness of this pastoral, or what could be described as a “big brother/sister” role as they do not wish to misguide the students in any way. Teachers also struggle with the boundaries of such a role and how to negotiate the blurring of the lines between the personal and professional when clearly, these lines are not distinct in any other aspect of their role. The plurality of knowledge sources includes not only book knowledge, but knowledge of experience and knowledge of being which most teachers were not prepared for. In the excerpt below, one of the teachers reflects that to truly ignite that spark in the students, a teacher needs to teach faith not only from the curriculum but also from their own sense of piety and inspiration.

When you’re starting out as a teacher, you want to be a professional and say, here are all my cool amazing pedagogies, and you learn all this great stuff but you don’t know what to do with it because I’m not also serving another role to show you what my students can do with it. What are you going to do with this awesome tradition if you don’t see anyone do anything with it? How can I inspire love for the Divine without showing you my love for the Divine?

In inquiring into their understanding of and experience in their role as religious education teachers in the Ismaili Muslim community, the teachers have revealed the complexity of this role: that this role is still in its formative stage and is being shaped by
the experiences of the teachers and the community; that there are grand aspirations and yet very small steps towards achieving those aspirations; that the experience of being a faith based community educator is a deeply personal one which is integrated into each teacher’s being and brings with it an immense sense of responsibility that is sometimes arduous to bear. But through these trials and tribulations, each teacher held steadfast to the belief that although we are continually called into question, we can also continue the pursuit of responding afresh to problems through seeking out a plurality of knowledge sources through our interpretive efforts and opening ourselves to epistemological humility. Huebner (1987b) says, “We are inherently vulnerable, not because we are teachers but because teaching is a way of living” and it is this vulnerability that creates “an openness to the other-ness and newness in the world” (p. 384).

**Curricular Intentionality and Student Lifeworlds**

*Extract of a Poem on the Journey*

*If a tree might move by foot and wing,*  
*It would not suffer the pain of the saw or the blows of the axe.*  
*And if the sun did not fare by wing and foot every night,*  
*How would the world be illuminated at morning-tide?*  
*And if the salt water did not go up from the sea to the sky,*  
*Whence would the garden be quickened by river and rain?*  
*When the drop departed from its native home and returned,*  
*It found a shell and became a pearl.*


The extract of the poem above speaks to the necessity of the journey in order to find oneself within the self. Although the poem reveals esoteric themes of separation and union with the Divine through spiritual journey, the inclusion of this piece is to remind us that the quest for epistemological humility is also a journey. It is a journey of moving from trials and misfortunes to spaces of hope and enlightenment. It is journey of opening ourselves up to the disunities in our experiences in order to aspire towards a unity of being. The parallel is being drawn with how our struggles can incite voyages of the heart, mind and action. In this section, I will look at some of the struggles being
experienced in the pedagogical encounter as the teachers strive to bring the curricular intentionality to the students and their lifeworlds. In the subsequent section, I will then examine how the teachers are journeying towards responses in their pursuit of interpretive knowledge; interpretations that they are seeking to create which enable a bridging between the curriculum and the lifeworlds of their students.

**What are the struggles of the pedagogical encounter?**

Yasmine: (WP) I had prepared what I thought was a great interactive lesson that focused on how the design of Baghdad reflected the values of the Caliphs and how the Abbasid Caliphs wanted to claim religious authority. For me, that was simple and would help me create a foundation for the rest of the unit. Before getting to the “fun” part of the lesson I engaged in a review which took a little longer than I had expected and was not the most interesting – I know that. But when a student blurted out “this is boring, can we do stuff in a fun way?” I felt my own personal walls go up, took a deep breath and said that I understood and to be a little patient because the “fun” was coming. I started to slip into that comfort zone of wanting to proceed as planned because that’s what is most comfortable, I got a little stern and tried to proceed as planned but the students had made up their mind – they were not interested anymore. At this point, I knew something had to change, the needs of these students were not being met and I had to make some changes fast. So after the break I introduced them to their historical characters [drama activity] and thought things would change . . . Changing the flow of my lesson plan was seemingly easy but by moving away from my original plan I sacrificed what my intended curriculum was. Although the students seemed happier by the end of class I left unhappy and unfulfilled. There was something that didn’t sit right with how class went.

Yasmine and I discussed this unsettling lived experience working through the layers of thinking and interpretation Yasmine brought to the lesson. We discussed the concept of enduring ideas in the curriculum which in this case was the centrality of leadership and authority in Shia Islam. Yasmine explained that the importance of this idea to her as a teacher was the continuity of guidance within the living tradition on living our values according to the time. I asked Yasmine how she was creating spaces for her students to engage in the same kind of interpretive processes that she as a teacher engaged with to
make meaning of the curriculum content. We discussed this during our hermeneutic conversation and I wrote about it in my subsequent researcher interpretation to her.

Tasnim: (RI) How are the students making meaning in a similar way? As part of your curricular inquiry, you are engaging with the curricular ideas and constructing enduring understandings that are meaningful for you as a teacher of faith and perhaps even as a believer. In what ways are your lessons providing the same interpretive spaces for your students? As the students are looking at and learning about leadership for instance, what matters to them that would facilitate the transition from ideas on a page to ideas that can be played with, spoken about, challenged and lived in their everyday lives?

Another teacher, Aidan, spoke about his firm belief in being a part of his students’ lifeworlds but also being taken aback by how the students can articulate one thing in class but behave quite differently in their daily lived experiences.

Aidan: (HC) I feel like I’m putting in the time because I am everywhere, at the recitals, at the hockey games, etc. of my students. But when the world or society beats me and structures the mind of the child in a different way and I can’t affect change, it’s really scary. An example of this was when some of my students who I had been teaching for three years were working on a mosaic activity. I had come by and sat with their group. They were using interesting, derogatory terms about women in the conversation. It took me aback. Don’t you know that I am here, why are those words appropriate, am I blurring the lines here so you think those words are appropriate? That becomes my tension. How can you make that statement when you have had three years of this curriculum, and you can still use that word to describe your girlfriend?

In the researcher interpretation that followed the hermeneutic conversation above, I encouraged Aidan to look a little more closely at how he was interpreting this lived experience. Part of him felt the students’ foundations were still developing and were not solid yet. Another part of him felt the ethos in the classroom did not always translate to the ethos the students created in their daily experiences. The concept of being “wide-awake” and carrying a curricular consciousness or the consciousness of a living tradition becomes challenging because as human beings, we tend to slip into habituated ways of
being. What are the factors or variables that can shift or increase our self-awareness or as has been referred to earlier, god-consciousness?

Tasnim: (RI) I think what I am trying to ask here is if this is about mindfulness of the student or is it about a lack of understanding or perhaps a growing understanding that is still evolving. I think the above is a dilemma for educators as well as for parents. When we see certain actions or hear certain things that shock us, the question arises, “Do they not get it” or is it a matter of slipping into a habituated way of being?

Khaliya shares a similar lived experience of an anecdote her student shared which brought her a sense of despair.

Khaliya: (HC) These concepts of spirituality and God, they are constants in my life. Faith is a part of your life, you can’t go through life without God-consciousness. I don’t see that in many of my students. Some of my students tell me they don’t believe in God. We were talking about theological questioning and the kinds of theological questions people used to ask. One of my students told me when he was younger, they used to shoot cats, but he doesn’t believe in God, because if there was a God, he would have done something to punish him and he hasn’t been punished, so he doesn’t think that God really exists. These are things that I am realizing that faith communities are not protected from these other forces at play.

All three teachers have made reference to their students being influenced by external forces that bring forth a certain sort of behaviour; behaviour that the teachers are describing as undesirable. The forces are being described as overpowering and perhaps, ones that a two-hour weekly interaction time cannot influence or redirect. As the teachers and I continue our interpretive work together, I ask them to consider a reframing of this tension. Instead of thinking of forces needing to be combated, what if we thought about offering alternative ways of interpreting the world to our students? I ask Khaliya to think further about her conception of this idea of God-consciousness and how it appears in the lifeworlds of her students.

Tasnim: (RI) Isn’t the fact that he actually questioned whether there was a God or not and if God existed wouldn’t he have been punished for this act, itself a sign of “god-consciousness?” It may not be the sort of “god-consciousness” you are
looking for in terms of dignity and care for all creation, but I would suggest that there is an inquiry, a questioning of some sort that this child is engaging in. And here is where I think about our role and the opportunities that present themselves to us. What do we do in the moment? How do we respond to a child who shares what is seemingly shocking to us but what also says, I am testing something here, I want to know more? What kind of a response might offer a reframing of thinking for this child?

Even as I wrote the researcher interpretation, I knew this reframing is not easy to do, particularly with adolescents. As educators in this living tradition, we have had the time, opportunity and support to interpret the curriculum and its relationship to the living tradition. We have chosen to pursue this curricular quest as a professional and a personal aspiration in our lives. How do we now understand the lifeworlds of our students and offer a reframing within their hermeneutic circle, not ours? Aryana’s lived experience description shows the unpredictable and troublesome nature of this challenge.

Aryana: (WP) In one of my recent classes, we examined the change that the Abbasids brought to society in the 7th century, when they took it upon themselves to lead an open rebellion against the Umayyads due to the discontent that several members of society had been feeling at that time. I started off the class by asking them, if they had an opportunity to change something in the world that did not sit well with them, what change would that be and why. All students offered interesting global and societal changes, with the exception of one student. This student said he wouldn’t change anything about the world. I was taken aback. I thought to myself, is he serious or does he just not know what to say? Or, does he not yet feel comfortable enough to speak openly about his thoughts, concerns, feelings, etc.? Or, perhaps he does not care? I expressed interest, as did the other students, and so I asked him to share his thoughts on why. He responded by saying, the world is fine the way it is. I again asked him to elaborate, but he declined, so I made the decision to move on.

As appealing as the curricular intentionality may be for the teachers, it is sometimes challenging to see that resonance with the students. The teachers reflected and engaged extensively in their meaning making over the course of several themes through the written protocols, hermeneutic conversations and researcher interpretations. The excerpts presented above are illustrative not comprehensive of the struggles
experienced by the teachers in their quest to bridge the curricular values of the living tradition with the lifeworlds of their students. Teachers interpreted and inquired as to how they could teach one or two enduring ideas in a lesson rather than a plethora of historical facts\(^{59}\) and what in fact makes an idea enduring for students. They inquired into constructs used such as “relevance” and worked to reconceptualise or reframe these ideas. One teacher shared that she used to feel making content relevant was about making a contemporary connection to the world. Now, she realizes it is about what is meaningful to the students in a way that invites curiosity and exploration about something personal to them in the world. The teachers inquired into what the dilemmas of their students are and how this curriculum and its content could speak to some of those dilemmas. Through these inquiries and their search for knowledge, they began to see that although as teachers, they were engaging hermeneutically with the curriculum, those same interpretive spaces and processes were not available to their students in the pedagogical encounter intentionally and consistently.

Huebner (1974a) claims that as educators we need to bring into focal attention that which is the present behaviour and offerings of the adult community to the child. In this way, “Content can be identified as that which we make present to the educatee, not that which happens to the educatee as a consequence of our offerings” (p. 200). He asks us to think about what educative content we make present for our students which enables them to reclaim their pasts and make possible the projection of their futures. One way to understand a reclaiming of the past can be the process of revitalizing the enduring values of a living tradition. What does it mean to make possible this projection into the future that has been referenced repeatedly in this study? Huebner (1985b) explains that education is only possible because a human being can transcend itself. The spirit gives vitality and life to more than life forms; it indicates that life is more than the current forms being lived. “Spirit refers to the possible and the unimagined—to the

\(^{59}\) At the time of the data collection, six out of seven study participants were teaching the Muslim Societies and Civilizations curriculum which is a history based curriculum module. However, even though examples used are historical, the learnings and experiences can be applied to other curriculum modules as was evident in the resonance with the one teacher who was teaching a different module.
possibility of new ways, new knowledge, new expressions, new awareness . . . the spiritual is of this world, not of another world; of this life, not of another life" (p. 344).

Huebner’s conception of the spirit and spiritual is not limited to religious traditions. He is resolute in his stance that everyone experiences the ‘going-beyond’ or the transcending of life in its present form to finding life that is more than presently known or lived. The condition for experiencing transcendence is openness and receptivity. “It is an awareness that what we are and what we know can never completely contain what we might be or what we might know” (p. 345). It is this sort of epistemological humility we see in the teacher participants as their curricular inquiry develops into how to open up hermeneutical spaces in the pedagogical encounter for students to access this moreness of life, this spirit, and this transcendence.

**Curricular Inquiry and the Pedagogical Encounter**

As the teachers experience struggles with their students in bringing life to the curricular intentionality, they seek hermeneutic responses, hermeneutically. The responses are *hermeneutic* as they endeavour to create spaces of inquiry and interpretation for the students. The quest of the teachers is happening *hermeneutically* as they strive to access and interpret epistemologies, some of which are unfamiliar to them such as knowledge of the students’ lifeworlds, how to nurture intellectual inquiry, and what it means to bring an awareness of the transcendent into the classrooms. In this section, I will look at each of the seven teachers and engage with a part of their experience through narratives. These lived experience descriptions and their ensuing discussions by no means characterize the totality of the teachers’ experiences. The intention is to probe the experiences teachers are living in understanding, interpreting and then applying responses to the classroom. In their endeavour to now engage the curricular inquiry with their students, I will describe how the teachers are opening up spaces of interpretation and meaning making. The effort is to make the content present to the educatee (Huebner, 1974a) and to work alongside students where the learning experience is destiny not destination and where students can create moments of vision for themselves and for their worlds (Huebner, 1966a, 1966b, 1967).


Yasmine: Spaces of In-Betweenness

Yasmine is unearthing an assumption she has held which is what matters to her as a teacher about curriculum and its aspirations may not necessarily hold the same “magic” for her students. She responded, initially, by searching out activities that were fun and interactive and had all the “bells and whistles” she felt her students expected.

(WP) As I continue to develop as a RE teacher, I need to find a way to balance my interest and respect for the material that we are teaching with those of the students.

(HC) They may not care about a building that was created in Jerusalem but I think oh my gosh, this is amazing architecture and we have architecture all around us. Why wouldn’t it mean something to you when we look out the window and see different buildings being created all the time? So I think the magic is that somehow I have to create lessons that make them feel totally amazed about something. It has to have bells and whistles, or it has to have a video clip, there has to be something exciting about it for them to take note.

Through ongoing inquiry into her experience, Yasmine’s understanding and focus evolved from teaching the information of the curriculum to implementing fun activities for her students to now finding spaces of in-betweenness where she is working towards a consciousness of holding the larger ideas of the curriculum as well as what matters to her students.

(HC) Before, I was really conscious of delivering the information but there’s more to it than just is written in the text. Now, it is becoming clearer to me that it is not easy to get to the bigger picture, and there has to be more reflection and more understanding of what I want students to get out of the class . . . Even the language is important, that is another learning for me, language. I don’t want students walking away saying, “I have to know this because it is part of my history.” I want them to feel and say, that they want to know because it helps them to situate who they are or how things came to be. Representing information for the sake of it does not demonstrate the type of learning I am looking for but I want them to be able to see the connection between who they are and what they are learning.

However, these spaces of in-betweenness of the curricular intentionality and the students’ lifeworlds are not always easy to define. Yasmine shared an experience where she asked her students about their identities and their struggles with faith and received neutral or passive responses from the class.
In the past class, I asked them about the challenges with articulating their faith, and they said they were fine with saying, “I’m Ismaili and that’s okay.” And I asked about their questions, they had nothing. I was surprised, I thought really? I wanted them so badly to ask provocative questions. What is it you want to know about your faith? What are you thinking about? Even after reading the Ismaili Constitution, they had no questions; they were okay with the ideas and the concepts. Maybe it is because they don’t know enough about the concepts to ask questions, but they didn’t even want to know. This happened in two of the classes and I was shocked. At their age, I was asking lots of questions.

This presented quite a dilemma for Yasmine as how do we as educators craft spaces of in-betweenness where we are honoring both the curricular knowledge and students’ lifeworlds if only one of those elements is accessible to us? In her tenacious quest for knowing and understanding, Yasmine opened her own hermeneutical inquiries with her students and began to listen more intently to what was underlying their comments of wanting to have more fun. She discovered that she needed to find her own space of in-betweenness; a space that would allow her to guide the inquiry but also that gives the students the responsibility for co-creating the inquiry. She referred to an idea in a former researcher interpretation, “If students are seeking new ways of being and knowing, we as teachers first, have to find new ways of being and knowing with our students,” and became more aware of the spaces where students showed vitality and cumulative interaction. Yasmine shares:

I am in the process, as every teacher is, of understanding the motivations and reality of our students’ relationship with Religious Education. When reading student reflections it was abundantly clear what students remembered and what they found the most interesting and enjoyed. Most students talked about really liking it when we took a topic that is potentially debatable and engaged in a conversation about understanding the perspectives. They enjoyed it because there was no real structure and they could participate fully. The example that students continued to bring up was the debate on the title the Caliph had of “Shadow of God on Earth.” This provoked students because they could not for any reason understand how a man could claim to be God on Earth and/or able to be as perfect as God.

As we interpreted this lived experience, Yasmine reflected, “I am not sure I am creating enough opportunities for the students to make meaning in their own way.” Her ensuing quest for knowledge is how to design and facilitate such opportunities for meaning making. And as she acknowledged, the act of moving from intentionality to
practice is not easy and requires a continual openness of being called to question by the
students and by ourselves.

(WP) I created a unit plan that was very much in line with how I have
planned in the past; I resorted to what was comfortable and
unintentionally left out all of the new insights and notes I had made
during my inquiry process. Clearly there is a gap between what I am
thinking and reflecting about and how to translate those thoughts into
a new way of engaging with my curriculum design. . . I have not
addressed how students will make meaning and find a personal
connection. I haven’t addressed how I will integrate the notion of a
living tradition or the students’ relationship to a larger community? I
created a unit plan filled with content heavy classes and that forgets
the student at the heart of it.

As I begin to think about what went wrong or why I resorted back to a
comfortable way of approaching curricular design, I realize how
difficult this process really is. It is difficult to create a plan that does
everything I want it to do because that would mean I know how to
connect the content seamlessly to the students’ lives and that I have
all the answers to why students come to RE class and participate at
varying degrees. It would mean that I am an expert at being God
conscious and my actions and thoughts are always in line with our
faith. But none of these are true. Like our students, I am on a
journey in understanding who I am as a RE teacher and discovering
what thought processes and values I use to design only becomes
apparent given the time and energy put into reflection. This process
of inquiry now begs me to revisit my curriculum design with a more
informed and thoughtful eye to ensure that I am integrating all of my
learnings related to what I value and what I hope students will gain
out of RE.

The struggle of translating our beliefs to our practice is a struggle many of the
teacher participants spoke about. In a way, it is the essence of the struggle in living a
faith tradition in that, we accept the moral vision of a tradition and we also often agree
that we need to live more faithfully. Those intentions, however, do not always translate
into experience and hence the need for our continual inquiry and our personal quest. I
am reminded of MacIntyre’s (2007) proposition that the quest itself reveals the nature of
the good. I respond to Yasmine with the hope to encourage the continued pursuit of her
inquiry sharing with her the content of an article I read a few years back. The thesis of
the article was that we all have particular beliefs that form our intentions of the kind of teacher we would like to be
d although, many times, our actions and actual practice are indicative of different beliefs. And as Yasmine and I converse together, we realize this is true of life as well. We all want to be good people, kind people, ethical people. And yet, our actions sometimes depart from these beliefs. I explore a deeper layer of our conversation in my researcher interpretation to her:

(RI) I think you are pausing at the right places in asking and inquiring into the dissonance between what you believe you wish to do and what you may actually do. I wonder how you are beginning to gain insights as to the translation of your newly formed curricular intentions into practice. What are the moments in the classroom when you feel the translation? What are the moments in the classroom when you feel yourself slipping back into your comfort zone? What are you noticing about the students during both of these moments? What are you noticing about yourself? The metaphor of this struggle is that of metamorphosis, in that, there is always struggle for the emergence of evolution. For human beings, I wonder if how we make sense of and respond to our struggles determines what eventually emerges.

Aidan: Spaces of Self-Reflexivity

Aidan’s curriculum inquiry is centred on bringing an alignment between the intentionality of the curriculum, his intentionality and aspirations as a teacher, and the students’ life worlds and their realities. His belief is that the curricular intentionality, which he interprets to be the ethos of the Qur’anic message, will have power if it is seen not only within the classroom, but more importantly outside the classroom. As was illustrated in a former lived experience description, Aidan is deeply impacted when he feels his students do not understand our faith as a way of life and when they chose to view their faith selectively as “a lens” rather than “the lens” for their conduct in their daily experiences. He is convinced that the curriculum can be made tangible for the students and can be seen by them in a way that opens up possibilities for their lives if he can create spaces for students to be self-reflexive about their lived moments. He articulates:

One can be educated, influential, ‘cool,’ and modern, all within the realm of the Qur’anic message. For me, students can really only see this out of the classroom as there is a misconception that one behaves a certain way in class and then another way out of class . . . that being Muslim is a mask that one can put on and take off. . . This way of thinking has shifted the way in which I see the classroom and the curriculum as something that needs to be actualized, lived, and explored in very real and tangible ways i.e. experiential. I aim to make my classroom part of that space, one of experiential exploration with your own biases, thoughts, ideas---to unpack them---to test them---to always see new ways of being.

Aidan admits the students are distanced from the curriculum in that they may not see themselves in the curriculum, or as part of the Qur’anic vision. This places the task of enlivening the curriculum on the teacher as it is through the humanistic dimensions and the narratives of the tradition that students can discover that alignment and connect it to their lives.

The language, the non-narrative approach of the curriculum, distances the kids from it. I always find that it actually misses the story. It will tell me that the Prophet did this, but it won’t tell me why. It is missing the narrative that draws kids in. It is too much of a factual narrative. For instance, why should I care about the Umayyad mosques? It is normal versus exceptional, all civilizations do that. There are no connections between me and this. This makes the teacher’s role a very lofty responsibility as they need to be the evocative storyteller of these pieces and find the human narrative within this factual narrative. . . The students are looking for a place to belong, looking for a sense of who am I, looking for a sense of pride, to be able to go out into the world with this, and they are looking for a way to be. Most questions that come to me are about ways of being e.g. when can I have sex, etc. How can I be who I am, and Canadian and Muslim, how can these join together? That’s another really big question, how can you really be Muslim all the time? I know they are struggling with that, they are struggling with multiple identities.

Aidan’s interpretive quest is how to make the classroom space a self-reflexive space for the students. For him, empathy is integral to a religious world view and hence, he searches out the values underlying the content pieces of the curriculum in an attempt to have the students reflect upon their lives and how they are living the values of the tradition.

Because that to me is the crux of being Muslim, it begins with the plight of Muhammad and then carries forth from there . . . It is the privilege of helping others with what you have been given, to leave the
world in a better place. . . It is very hard and you can only really push to a certain extent as that class still has to remain interactive and fun and easy too. The class can’t just be an intense place, of hey, I need to change myself and be a better person. There has to be an easier way of learning about those values and that is what leads to joy. And maybe that joy then leads to changes in their lives. This is what makes it so difficult. . . Sometimes the overall messages of religious education tend to become very clichéd. We should be kind, we should be caring, we should be pluralistic and I kept approaching it that way through general morality.

The struggle as Aidan described it was that when the ideas become too “macro”, the students can regurgitate them but do not embody them outside of the classroom. He began to search for how he could open up spaces for self-reflexivity and shared a lived experience description of mirroring back to students behaviours he had witnessed out of class, which he found contradictory to the values being spoken about in class.

(WP) They first looked at one another. Then you could literally see an internal reflection. . . Students spoke openly about the pressures of being Muslim and being ethical and the world around them. There were sentiments that ‘ethical’ people were uncool, and using certain language made oneself ‘cool.’ They spoke openly about their pressures to be successful in school, how their parents see grades as a means of success, and their own plight to fit in. It was a powerful space in which I could feel they were really speaking to one another. . . It was honestly the first time this year that some students were feeling this type of a connection to their faith. They were able to articulate how what they are learning is difficult to implement. There was a pivotal change here that Islam was being seen as something to lean on, something to look to for help.

When thinking about what students come to class with, this is really it...they come to class to look for a space in which to exhale, belong, and grow with their peers. They are looking to figure out how does this religion influence my life, can it? Will it? What can I see now? What do I still need to see? Is all of this just a hoax? I think this becomes the ‘crux’ of the curriculum for students...this IS the RELEVANCE piece, not a connection between content topics and their world, but a connection between the entire curriculum and their world seen through the content [emphases in original].

The quest for Aidan continues to be how to use the students’ lifeworlds and their struggles as an entry point for the lessons and then work “upwards rather than downwards” from there towards the larger ideas of the curriculum. He expressed that he was also learning about the importance of each lesson needing to be embedded within the larger horizon and not a series of isolated lessons as the self-reflexive process for
students was a continuous one and one that takes time. In addition, creating such spaces necessitates the willingness of the teacher to also be openly self-reflexive with their students not only because teachers are seen as role models, but also because the process of being self-reflexive and interpreting faith is one that needs to be taught and modelled. Aidan is uncovering knowledge on how to situate the curriculum content to help students understand who they are and who they can be through efforts to have students engage in their own curricular inquiry. As shown in the excerpt of the researcher interpretation below, we spoke about how the curricular journeys of students were different from those of the teachers and how these needed to be personal and meaningful for the students.

(RI) I think you were saying that these journeys are different because although the nature of the dilemmas or struggles of the teacher and students may be the same, their worlds are different. Hence, if a teacher focuses on designing the curricular journey based on their own personal internalization or what they find meaningful about the curriculum, it may not always resonate with the kids. The students almost have to embark on their own curricular inquiry and it is our role as teachers to structure or design this curricular inquiry using the students’ worlds as an initial springboard and then gradually adding on layers of knowledge and ways of knowing that can open up possibilities for their worlds through the values of the tradition.

Shakeel: Spaces of the Questions behind the Questions

Shakeel’s interpretive quest is one he describes as progressive, contradictory, and dynamic. “It is not linear by any means, it is back and forth, it is circular, you have your highs and lows and you have your successes and failures.” Like the other teachers, Shakeel also struggles with how we can reach such lofty aims within a two hour weekly contact time, how we consider the broad diversity of students in our classes, and how we can attend to the different factors that motivate our youth. I ask for his thoughts on what is it that makes the students’ hearts dance and how do we articulate and foster this ‘it.’ He responds:

(HC) It is very important to pay attention to, and we have such a diversity of students. For one student it could be the confidence that he feels when he learns something new, oh I know more about my history and my identity and that is a source of joy. For another, it could be a social connection where someone acknowledges you or you feel like you are a part of a community, feeling a sense of belonging. It is all encompassing, this “it”, and it doesn't mean we should
separate the two but we should also be asking those students who are leaning towards social belonging, how can we cultivate that love for learning or inquiry and how can they be more interested in the content of the curriculum. It is also observing and paying careful attention and really noticing what really speaks to them and what really moves them and not in a superficial way; you know, what strategy works and how to make it interesting to them, but really, really being empathetic to their spirit, being empathetic to their soul, to their being. Sometimes that is hard to do. . . How do you make this curriculum speak to the kid?

Shakeel’s curriculum inquiry seeks to learn more about the discourses and dilemmas of the students and about how to design spaces of intellectual inquiry around their questions. He is striving to create interpretive spaces about the question behind the questions of the students. He expresses, “Before I can locate anything, I need to really understand and pay attention to what students are saying and not literally what they are saying but what is behind what they are saying.” Shakeel shares a lived experience description where he designed an activity to have students dialogue amongst themselves about how they understand the concept of the Divine instead of the comfortable and familiar practice of a teacher led discussion.

(HC) It gave me access to their meaning making in such a way that I wouldn’t have had access to had I taken my usual way of standing in front of the class and discussing expectations. Here, my design was reflecting that I was really honoring the voices and thinking of the students which I think is what the horizon is asking us to do. Philosophically, I have always believed this, but because of various pressures, I fall back into the way I was educated even though I don’t believe in that. It is very hard for me to unlearn that as a human being. But the more I pay attention to it, the more I inquire and reflect on it, I can move away from that and I am seeing shifts in me as a teacher.

Through learning from the voices of the students, Shakeel is looking to develop the capacity to locate the students’ dilemmas within the curricular content. He aspires, furthermore, to teach the students how to think through their questions using what he refers to as a process of moral reasoning to reframe their questions. His observation is that the nature of student dilemmas or questions is quite revealing of their thinking processes and shares the following examples of questions students will often ask. “Is it appropriate to have romantic relationships with non-Ismailis? Why can we not consume pork? Why do some women wear the hijab and others don’t? Shakeel elaborates:
I realize that these questions arise in the context I am teaching where my students encounter other Muslim students who have recently immigrated from parts of the Muslim world and belong to households that emphasize their legalistic interpretations of Islam. This situation is probably specific to the region I am teaching in, and it makes me think about how I am enabling my students to think as sociologists, anthropologists and historians so that they can themselves unpack their own questions. For example, how can I guide students to make the shift themselves from “Why women do or do not wear hijab” to questions such as “What is the significance of hijab for some Muslim women? Was the hijab a symbol for religious meaning historically? Is there a connection between the hijab and the expression of Muslim identity in the modern times? What do I know about the modern history of the Ismailis to better understand why Ismailis engage or do not engage in certain expressions of faith?

For Shakeel, the students do have a cognitive understanding that our faith plays a part in our worldly experiences, particularly when it comes to ethics. What he is less sure about, however, is their ability to problematize existing norms, unpack their questions, and use ethical lenses to interrogate their questions. Accordingly, Shakeel is striving to design learning experiences that cultivate a spirit of inquiry. As intellectual inquiry is an essential facet of faith, his query is how to engage his students in furthering the intellectual tradition no matter where they are on their spectrum of beliefs. He expresses that there is definitely a desire from the students to search. They are motivated and eager to talk about their dilemmas if they see the significance of the dilemmas to their world. We delve further into the spectrum of beliefs emanating from the diversity of his students and how they are expressing their relationship with faith.

There are kids that have admitted they have regular conversations with God. They have an inner relationship where they see the world is not reduced to a material reality, there is a spiritual reality, in that sense, there is that connection. There are kids who are passionately seeking what is Islam and what it means to be Muslim as they are regularly challenged by their peers. In that sense, there is a connection to faith because there is an attempt to really search for what is my faith because all these people have different ways of connecting to the faith so what is my connection then? And there are others who are immersed in the regular ritualistic practice of faith and they are participants in that so yeah, I do think faith is something they think about at various levels. In a different demographic where I teach, it is very different; there are questions about the necessity of faith, is faith even necessary, there are students who articulate, I don’t see God so I don’t believe in God.
The non-linear progression, the back and forthness and the highs and lows are apparent in the conversations with Shakeel and with the other teachers. Shakeel is seeking to create spaces where first he, and then eventually the students, are able to see the priority of the question (Gadamer, 1960/1989), what these questions are intended to reveal and how we use the authority of tradition and our reason to understand ourselves through the questions. Again, the concepts of relationality and time are of consequence in creating such spaces, particularly if the students need to speak of personal dilemmas.

(HC) As the relationship with the students becomes more solidified with me, they are increasingly becoming more open as the students feel more comfortable. The trust has to be there and it does take a while to establish that with some students. One barrier is the short amount of contact time which then impedes their time with me or if I am speaking to one student. There needs to be that one on one conversation to bring those dilemmas out. I can’t provide that space for each individual student. The lesson design has a lot to do with it; sometimes it comes up in small group conversation but it won’t always come out there. We need that individual time to bring these dilemmas out, I know it is inside them, but it is not always coming out.

And although the time constraints are real, sometimes the feeling of the space created for students or the relationship with the teacher becomes one of subjective time rather than objective time. I share this thought with Shakeel in a researcher interpretation hoping he will see that intellectual inquiry within conditions that are fostered relationally can have a transcendent quality which touches more than the human mind.

(RI) Your statement suggests that the relation between the child and the teacher is of prime importance, perhaps even above all else. How would you describe your relationship to your students, Shakeel? Think back to one of your classes and go through each student in your mind. What would you be able to say about their spirit and their way of being? In what way do you feel you have been able to touch each one of these children through being empathetic to their soul? I remember being in your classroom a couple of months ago and when a child responded to a question (erroneously), you turned towards him very kindly and led him through an expanded way of thinking all the while legitimating the being of the child. I remember making a note of how the curriculum at that moment was being enacted. I am wondering about the place of relationality in the process of inquiry.
**Aryana: Spaces of Knowledge Relationships**

Aryana believes the essence of the curricular message for us as teachers and students is about a common humanity. She sees the question of being Shia Ismaili Muslim encompassed within the larger question of what it means to be human. The scope of what the curriculum asks of the teacher is vast and she observes that this diversity comes through in what she calls a plurality of humanities. The interpretive quest for Aryana is to help her students find interconnectedness between various knowledge forms in a way that is meaningful to them. She explains:

\[(HC) \text{ We have to be mindful of the philosophical aims of the curriculum. How do we get our students to be consciously reflective, care for others around them, be responsible for their actions? Otherwise, we are just teaching the content. I try to ask myself, “What good is it for the child to know this happened?” And not what it meant then in the past, but what it might mean for them today. And how might they experience the world now that they know this story?} \]

However, facilitating such connections in the pedagogical encounter requires knowledge of the students, their lifeworlds, their faith aspirations, and their life aspirations. Aryana acknowledges that she needs to pursue such knowledge as we discuss what she knows about the stories of her students. She shares that she has been thinking about how to develop stronger relationships with her students and the challenge of accomplishing this within a two-hour weekly class whilst being charged with the implementation of an intellectually sophisticated curriculum.

\[(HC) \text{ The curriculum is so complex, and there is so much there, how do I connect knowledge to my students in a way that makes them feel worthy and allows me to build a meaningful relationship with them? I’m struggling with that. Sometimes incidents happen in the classroom that make me wonder how I can work with a child in a manner that they know I care about them and that I’m not just there to teach a lesson. . . That’s always something that I am curious about and I find myself reflecting on. It’s tough for me; we see them once a week for two hours at a time.} \]

From her experiences in the classroom, Aryana reflected early on in our conversations that her curricular inquiry needed to situate the curricular ideas from the students’ perspectives rather than her own perspective, and then, gradually work through connections that broaden knowledge for the students. She shared a lived
experience description on a lesson where she wanted students to gain an awareness of the contributions of Muslim scholars to the development of world civilizations and how these contributions were sparked by faith. Aryana had desired this lesson to be a powerful experience for the students and wanted to expose her students to as much breadth as she could as she felt their awareness of Muslim contributions to world civilizations was minimal.

(HC) I had set up my classroom in stations and had done research on people from the Golden Ages who had pursued knowledge. I had set up one table with pictures, one table with artifacts (things that kids are familiar with in their world today) and put blurbs on how these have been inspired by Muslims, and another table with “did you know facts”. I wanted that to appeal to them as well. I designed the scavenger hunt where students had to look for certain individuals who had contributed in specific ways; it seemed that was something they enjoyed. But I didn’t want to leave it at just that, I had personal prompts on the back e.g. what surprised you, fascinated you, etc. I wanted to make parallels with the secular school. I wanted to open it up and for them to know that RE is also a space of learning. I wanted them to ask questions about why the world is unaware of Muslim contributions or even an awareness of why Muslims pursued knowledge and what motivated that and I wanted them to reflect on our responsibilities as Shia Ismaili Muslims (in pursuing knowledge). I wanted students to reflect more deeply about this stuff and move towards action or a conversation around action or at least if they think they should act and how might that look, what does it mean to be ambassadors of Islam? I wanted to whet their appetite too, because we didn’t go into depth into any particular scholar, but they were exposed to a little bit of everything.

I guess I thought it was important for them to see how motivated and to what extent Muslims were actively pursuing knowledge in a specific time in human history, not necessarily how much was done but why it was done. The fact that these individuals were pursuing knowledge because they were motivated by their faith, that is something to be inspired by and to interrogate further. Why did they feel the need to understand God through science or philosophy and to acknowledge the creation of God? I wanted them to see and feel a sense of amazement and awe. Sometimes I feel the wow factor, that amazement, that wonder is not always present perhaps or it’s harder to access with students.

Aryana was clear on the curricular aims and what she wished to accomplish with her students in that class. She wanted to raise awareness of Muslim contributions; she wanted to situate these contributions within the broader history of civilizations; she wanted her students to understand that these discoveries and explorations were incited
by a desire to learn more about the world and about God’s creation; and she wanted her students to be inspired by this knowledge and to act on this knowledge. The students, however, did not respond in the way she anticipated.

(WP) I didn’t realize it then, but, the order in which the questions were posed, the nature of the questions themselves, the slight bias embedded within the questions, and the unintentional emphasis on ‘contributions,’ I would be mulling over and pouring over for days. I am thinking of one of my classes in particular, where I was met mostly, with silence. I could not tell if I was boring students to death or if they were simply uninterested. The looks on their faces, as best as I was able to interpret, seemed to indicate the latter.

I caught one student scrunching his face a little, looking as if he was thinking deeply about something, but could not bring himself to say it. Another student said, ‘nobody really cares about who invented what,’ to which I should have then opened up to the class to respond, but I was too quick to respond myself. I really need to practice self-control especially in the classroom so as to allow for freedom when free thought and personal expression is essential for meaning making. Another reason I think I responded too quickly was because of the heavy silence in the classroom. By the time I had realized this, however, it was too late.

As we interpreted this lived experience description, Aryana offered the following insights: First, she felt she had attempted to create a space for rich, provocative discussion but had not really provided the space for students to make their own meaning of the ideas. Second, the lesson was more focused on Muslim contributions than the enduring value of the tradition of the pursuit of knowledge and its relationship to faith. Third, she felt her curricular design needed to expose students to knowledge that showed connections to their roots (tradition), connections to their world, and connections to their self. Creating the space for students to make connections and relationships between these types of knowledge may have resulted in the kind of powerful meaning making she was seeking. And yet, although these realizations prompted further inquiry and action in her curricular and pedagogical work, there is still a sense of the complexity of this endeavour of teaching and learning about our living tradition hermeneutically.

(HC) I need to open up spaces in the classroom for exploration, in an effort to deepen understandings and align this understanding with our faith, with this vision and the horizons that this curriculum is hoping that we are walking towards. . . I need to expose them to the thinking skills to explore and to create meaning from the content and the ideas. I’m not even sure they have these skills.
What comes to mind is the statement from the curriculum about being broad minded in their outlook whilst being grounded in their Ismaili Muslim tradition. I’m not so sure I know how to teach these skills; I find our time in the classroom very limited. . . Most of these kids when they return the next week don’t even remember what we did the week before. Their lives are so busy, many do not read, do not access the emails we send them. . . Sometimes I get frustrated and I don’t think my ambitions are wrong or are too high or are inappropriate, I just wonder how I can do a better job of what I am doing.

Opening up these spaces for exploration for Aryana means she is learning to ensure that through offering knowledge of tradition and knowledge of the world, the students are establishing relationships with knowledge of themselves. And the teacher is valuing the stories of the students as an essential form of knowledge in the curricular inquiry. Aryana began to see that there are many ways for the life stories of students to emerge in the classroom; this emergence was not limited to individual personal conversations. She began to pay increased attention to the encounters and dialogue amongst students in class, that is, what the students were saying, how they were interacting, and what the nature of their responses were. In that way, she is now learning to weave together the knowledge of the living tradition, the knowledge of her students’ stories and the knowledge of their worlds and, is creating spaces where students can create relationships between these facets through their interpretive journeys. I interpret our conversation to her and offer prompts for further inquiry.

(RI) And yes, since people are always changing, these stories, or students’ lifeworlds, will continue to show themselves in different forms each week. . . You had stated that you wanted your students to gain insight on what it means to be human by looking at Muslim societies of the past. I am asking that in order for them to truly internalize what it means to be human, don’t they also need to look at themselves? And what will be the lens or framework you will be providing them for these analyses? I am wondering how you can design your curricular engagements holding both, the diversity of students’ voices as well as the powerful ideas of the curricular narrative through creating spaces of articulation for your students guided by a particular framework, the framework of our Shia Ismaili Muslim perspective. In this way, you may find that you are able to situate the students’ discourses within the broader curricular discourse of the living tradition.
**Raziq: Spaces of Contemplation and Sacredness**

In his curricular inquiry, Raziq is seeking to create interpretive spaces in his classroom where students feel a similar sense of thirst to know more about faith and also feel passion and inspiration about what they are learning. He draws on an example of inspiration he has derived from the tradition and how he desires students to gain similar understandings to inform and shape their worldviews. Raziq had been teaching about two significant personalities in Muslim history, Nasir-i Khusraw and Nasir-al-din Tusi. Through these historical figures, he had been teaching about the value of knowledge and the search for knowledge.

(WP) These two figures demonstrate a thirst for knowledge which led them to go on a journey to search for answers to their burning questions. More importantly it is to highlight that they themselves saw their quest for knowledge as a spiritual endeavor and intimately tied to their identity as Shia Ismaili Muslims. These individuals developed entire cosmologies which demonstrate how they understood their faith and their place within it. To some extent, Nasir-i Khusraw could even be considered an existential phenomenologist which can be seen through his works like the *Safarnama*61 where his experience of the physical world is also a spiritual reality.

When exploring these historical characters in the classroom, my role as a teacher is to guide the students to come to their own understanding of how Khusraw and Tusi related their experience of being Ismaili with that of their being in the physical world and, as just mentioned, that both are inextricably linked. This can enable students to find relevance in their own lives, urging them to engage in their own search for knowledge with the same rigor as Khusraw and Tusi. Clearly, these individuals asked a lot of questions, had a curiosity in them, and had the will to carry out long journeys to search for answers while being observant of the world around them; all values I seek to develop in my students. But that is easier said than done as they say.

Raziq recounted a story of how he shared with his class his own journey of seeking knowledge through ten years of post-secondary education and how one of his students retorted with, “Wow, you wasted ten years of your life for that!” This incident

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61 *Safarnama* was a travelogue written by Nasir-i Khusraw, a leading Ismaili poet, philosopher, thinker and da’i, about his travels through different Muslim lands. In this work, Khusraw writes about his spiritual awakening and search.
raises questions for the assumptions we make about our students. Khusraw and Tusi pursued their burning questions; what are the burning questions for our students and do we ignite further burning questions worthy of their pursuit? And what will stir our students’ curiosities to awaken their own will to carry out their personal journeys? Raziq expressed his struggle of how we as teachers can help the students find their own way of understanding so they take ownership and feel connected to their learning. “How do you get them to understand such huge ideas and such huge concepts in a way that they will find passion in it and be in wonder and think about it? How do I get my students there?”

Raziq negotiated how to incorporate knowledge of the tradition, knowledge of the contemporary environment, and self-knowledge into his curricular design. His emphasis was on creating a space for critical inquiry but he began to question how students can understand large ideas not just for the sake of understanding them, but also in a way that incites awe, wonder, and a feeling of the transcendent. He questioned what his role and way of being was in creating that space of sacredness. He shared his thinking on a particular class where he felt challenged by the ethos of the space and examined what he could do to create a different, ‘inspired’ ethos.

(WP) There are times when I do not like myself in that classroom and do not feel myself to be practicing the presence of God, especially when I respond to disturbing behavior. I wish at times that I could do it gracefully but I resort to a more stern response. Student behavior, I find, throws me off my game. I sometimes lose my center and my train of thought, if it gets really bad. The intellectual and spiritual journey I wish to take my students on sometimes gets muffled by the physical aesthetics, the ethos, classroom environment, laughs or slurs. What does the practice of teaching in the presence of God mean is still what I am trying to figure out. On a positive note, I am always in the realm of contemplation in my classroom, mindful of my intentions and actions, and quick to adjust myself when necessary, but like any teacher I too can “lose my cool”.

In thinking about how to create spaces that have a sense of sacredness to them, Raziq decided to begin his next class by invoking the name of God through the first line
of the Qur’an and the daily prayer, *bismillah ir-rahman ir-rahim*\(^{62}\), out loud. His intention was to shift the atmosphere in the class and to bring about awareness to his students of being in the presence of God.

(HC) I made it explicit to my students. I said I started the class this way because I want us to think about how we are being in the presence of God. We need to be mindful of this space, it begs of us to be in a certain way and approach learning in a certain way. And I did share with them, I don’t like myself when I have to be stern with you. I think the whole framing of the class was different, just because I prefaces it differently; I was able to handle it differently.

Raziq is seeking ways for his students to access the transcendent. He feels the teacher has to be able to present the curricular ideas in ways that open up the wonderment for the students. He explains that as he is teaching lessons, if he feels that sense of awe is lacking, he attempts to create that sense through his own spirited discourse about the subject.

(HC) I try to bring a sense of wonderment and awe for them to think about things. And then I’ll add more to that so there’s some feeling and emotion in it and hints of spirituality in what I say, it is so hard to describe. It is a feeling that I have grown up with when listening to certain individuals speak, chills that you get on your arms and back when you hear others. It’s more than passion; you can arouse a certain thinking and feeling in individuals. This is different, it is direct and pervasive, it is something that ignites, a certain kind of charisma. I will talk about the wonder of God’s creation in looking at a tree. I feel inspired by the *Nahj al Balagha*; I am inspired by the Peak of Eloquence, by the skilled oration of Imam Ali. And that is what I try to do with my students, expose them to ideas they may not have thought about before or don’t think about on a day to day basis in a way that lends me their ears and their hearts.

Inspired by his study of Tusi, Raziq is forming an understanding of a sacred space to be one of contemplation and action. He feels the space should enable contemplative thinking that would bring about a change in action. We discuss the distinction between critical thinking and contemplative thinking.

\(^{62}\) Translation – In the name of Allah, the most Compassionate, the most Merciful.
All of those things, critical thinking, the intellect, are part of contemplation, they are contemplative in nature. What I would add is the notion of divinity. How do all those ways of contemplating involve the Divine? That is the extra connotation for me when we speak about contemplation. But in my description above, there doesn’t seem to be this idea of divinity coming through until we speak about human rights, that we are all individuals created by God. It doesn’t have to happen at every moment we are discussing, has there been enough grounding being done in the tradition? That is a question for me to consider, if I want to call it contemplation, where is the element of divinity there?

Although the aspiration is there, Raziq does acknowledge that the experience of the pedagogical encounter is much more complicated than infusing the element of divinity in dialogue with students. As a teacher of faith and as someone who adolescents turn to in times of turbulence and confusion, we need to be discerning and empathic in our responses. And sometimes, perhaps the nature and ethos of the response itself can show divinity rather than what is actually said.

It is how you think about the Divine within the living; that in itself is a tremendous act of contemplation. . . So for example, if a student says I want to go drinking with my friends, how do I respond? Is that the best thing for me to say at that moment, oh you shouldn’t because so and so? Is it to highlight the divinity at the moment or is it something else? Sometimes it is not enough to counteract the bad with the intention of the good because it creates a dichotomy in the minds of the student. It creates tension and they feel a sense of guilt, of culpability, that is not a good place to be, it is not a place of divinity.

The complexity Raziq is highlighting is how do these understandings of divinity, sacredness and the transcendent take form or life outside the classroom, if indeed they do. How do we bring an ethos of sacredness and transcendence to our interactions with students and to the way we present ideas to help guide their journeys towards their burning questions? Raziq and I speak about how we can better understand whether it is critical thinking, contemplative thinking or a blend of both that occurs in the classroom. As research partners, we engage in our own critical and contemplative thinking and questioning exemplified in the researcher interpretation below:

As we discussed, we do live in a society which promotes dichotomous thinking: good/bad; individual/community; secular/religious; freedom/restrictions. I wonder in what way, if at all,
our curriculum counteracts this dichotomy and offers considerations of alternate epistemologies, ones that allow for such binaries to be part of a whole. I also wonder how we can teach our students to be open to, and even actively seek multiple perspectives, yet not be relativistic. I wonder if our students think about religion or the presence of God outside of the RE space in their experiences and how that heightened awareness you spoke about can begin to emerge in moments of their everyday life.

For example, the continual search for knowledge is a big idea; it is not necessarily an exclusively religious idea. The secular world prizes lifelong learning as well. What then makes the search for knowledge a religious concept? Is it our obligation as believers to have this practice as a central element in our lives? Is it that knowledge is defined differently in a religious context? What is the relation between the search for knowledge and the practice of our living tradition?

**Zakir: Spaces of Divinity within Humanity**

Zakir is negotiating a struggle of curricular inquiry that is at once personal and professional. He feels uncomfortable with what he perceives to be stereotypical conceptions of spirituality. He expresses that he finds difficulty in sharing his own feelings around faith with his students and because of this discomfort, he endeavours to create classroom spaces where he wants students to see ‘the spirit’ in all spaces of humanity rather than only in spaces of worship.

(WP) For me I have a difficult time connecting in ways that one would typically be seen as feeling “spiritual”. This poses a difficulty when planning lessons in which I hope to embed spirit into my classroom. Because of this I bring it in the way I understand it, by looking at our common human struggle – struggle to be accepted, to learn about ourselves and others, etc., in short, to find God through one another. . . What is needed is a shift away from viewing one’s spiritual world belonging to a particular place to seeing it as belonging to all spaces. What is needed is an epistemological shift to feel the presence of God in our everyday life, in our thinking and being.

Zakir believes that the youth cannot relate to abstract notions of faith because of the environment they live in where conveniences are easily accessible and modern progress has made life comfortable and void of major life struggles. Therefore, youth may not turn to religion as a source of comfort or strength simply because the need is not there and if it is, these needs are fulfilled by other dimensions of their lives. He feels if our students could see that faith is not a distant abstract entity but rather the spiritual
exists in our relationships and in our experiences, they may be better able to establish their connection to the living tradition.

(HC) It took a while for this understanding to sink in even for me. In my first year of teaching, I was teaching Muslim history because I felt that is what we needed to accomplish and I was constantly being asked, where is the RE in this? The RE aspect is how do we get them to understand and grapple with who they are as Ismailis? I didn’t realize that I also needed to teach in a way that they were able to see faith beliefs in what I was teaching. It is hard at this age to wrap your head around these concepts.

Zakir reflects upon the experiences of his parents observing that he has a very different conception of faith than that of his parents. And although, he claims he can appreciate the views and beliefs of his parents, he cannot relate to their belief system which he defines as being one of reverence where everything is connected to a higher being.

(HC) Our experiences shape the way we look at faith and how we understand the world. Our students are second, third and even fourth generation Canadian. They are in a world that is material and fast paced, a society that is fairly stable, where you are keeping up with what others have, where going to the mall is described as a new religion, as being therapeutic. My parents had a deep engrained faith because they had to deal with so many things. They had to migrate from Africa and they drew strength from their faith to help them endure their struggles. These are things me or our kids don’t have to deal with. The struggles that our students have may not cause a need for them to draw from their religion for something to hold on to or grab on to. How do you get someone to look for hope and give thanks and look for strength in their faith in the absence of the larger struggles?

Zakir aligns his struggles with faith as similar to those of his students who like him have grown up in Canada and have been socialized in contexts where rationalism is privileged and individuals are taught to question and seek explanations for their beliefs. Through his experience in this role, Zakir is in the process of redefining his relationship with the living tradition and uses a humanistic framework to understand matters of transcendence. He wants his students to be able to see the Divine within each other as he believes this type of conception may resonate more with youth who are immersed in a highly secularized, rationally driven world view.
(HC) Faith baffles me, I can’t understand it, it is something that I have tried to understand but I have no idea how. And I take a very humanistic viewpoint, in that there is the Divine in everything you do or whoever you meet.

There are human endeavours that happen over time and space and we all share these; this quest of who we are and why we are here and why we matter. Through my own lived experience, I have been able to make connections with people and also experience the opposite where there were barriers. Those encounters are real, those I can understand and through that I can make sense and connections of seeing values enacted, of goodness, of acceptance, of moral frameworks, through that I am able to see the faith.

Zakir shares an example of a lesson he taught where he was striving to show divinity not only within people but between human beings and their environment. Although the students were engaged, his assessment was that they did not quite get there in terms of making the connection that faith is an inspiration to learn about the creation around them. He reflected that he needed to personalize the approach further but did not know how to do that.

(HC) One of my goals for this class was to create a sense of wonder and then to connect the wonder to the relationship of learning and God. We talked about light and I asked them, “Is a rainbow more or less beautiful if you understand how it works?” I wanted to connect the idea that learning about something can make you appreciate it more. I wanted to connect to the idea that God has created all the things around us and there is such complexity and if we appreciate the things around us, we can understand them better. And therefore we can better understand God through his creation which I think I waited too long to bring in as they did not get there. We looked at a Qur’anic ayat about Allah’s signs being all around us. I wanted the students to talk about it and gave them two guiding questions: What are signs and what information do they give us, and also to summarize the quote in their own words. How we can use Allah’s signs to understand the world around us? This was towards the end of class. They were able to pull out the signs but had difficulty understanding how we can look at the signs around us. It felt like they were trying to pull out answers and give them, they weren’t really engaging with it. Then the class ended by me summarizing the ideas.

Through his inquiry, Zakir is seeing that just as he as a teacher needed time, skills and support to undertake the interpretive process to broaden his understanding of and relationship to the living tradition, his students also need similar guided interpretive spaces.
I think the most important part of this is the interpretive part of it rather than the text itself. I need to make meaning of it for myself and when the kids are in the class, they have to make meaning of it for themselves as well. Maybe it will be more difficult to engage the students if they don’t have an interest in what they are looking at. The text provides a foundation but it is the process of interpretation and meaning making that the teachers go through and what we get our students to go through in class that is the crux of this whole thing.

Zakir’s insight is significant; it is the interpretive, meaning making process students engage in that will enable the bridge between the curricular intentionality and the lifeworlds of the students. And in that process, just as the teacher needs to develop their own relationality with the ideas, the students need to do the same. And perhaps that ability to situate themselves within the ideas may open up a sense of the Divine or of God for the students in encounters with the various ‘texts’ of their lives. Zakir and I discuss his lived experience description asking what creates deep engagement for our students with faith. We ask ourselves, if we are seeking divinity within humanity, how do we facilitate the students seeing themselves within that humanity such that they can access the divinity inherent in humanity? I pursue our thinking in my researcher interpretation:

What I am wondering about is how we frame the big ideas for our students in ways that enable them to situate their life experiences within those ideas. For example, we discussed a lesson where you felt the central idea was faith as an inspiration to learn about creation around them. Your assessment of the lesson was that the students could understand that signs of Allah were around them and through learning about these signs, they could appreciate creation. It seems where the struggle was for your students was the absence of the most important part of the idea; that is, discovering creation enables a discovery of yourself which ultimately enables a discovery of the Divine within you. I think we may presenting students with large ideas that are meaningful but they may not see themselves situated within those ideas. So in other words, as an adolescent, how does understanding the creation of God enable me to understand myself? I wonder if these are the places we need to go to in our lessons much more intentionally.

Khaliya: Spaces of Co-Journeying

Tasnim asks in her hermeneutical interpretation, what keeps my students coming back? What pulls them inward? What curricular forces are attracting them into my classroom space, and I worry that it is not the form of the curriculum that I am currently offering them. I think that if given the choice to attend class or not, most of my
students would choose not to return, not because they don’t like me, or they don’t think I can teach them the content, but because they aren’t feeling the meaning of the curriculum. They are not seeing its value. They have not tasted its fruits. I wonder also about my own lack of curricular understanding, beyond the content? How much of those curricular aims, do I actually understand in relation to my practice, my unit planning, lesson planning, reflective processes? When do we as a team of teachers, ever keep these philosophical principles at the fore-front of our meetings, our discussions? We are often so fixated on finding entertaining ways of keeping the students engaged in the content for two hours, that perhaps we have missed the bigger picture. What troubles me? Feeling like I have been teaching for the last three years, and have been missing the point for all this time.

Khaliya is inquiring into her capacity to internalize and present the curriculum content whilst holding the curricular aims (its larger intentionality) present. Immersed in her efforts to develop the craft of teaching, she feels she has let the curricular vision fade from her consciousness and the questions students are asking are awakening this consciousness once again. In our hermeneutic conversation, Khaliya uncovers that she tends to make assumptions about what the students want to know based on some of the questions they are asking e.g. learning about other Abrahamic faiths and diversity of faith practices. Her response then had been to embed these questions within the curriculum content. What she began to realize is that she can situate these questions within larger aims and open up horizons for the students that invite a holistic understanding about faith and life. For example, the discussion on diversity of practices could be situated within the context of understanding spirituality in its different forms. “I think I am making connections but they are quite abstract.” Khaliya questions how she can teach in the most authentic way where students can make meaning of what they are learning in ways that matter to them. “I don’t think the connections are being made for the students or their questions are being answered in ways that students can take into their own lives.” The kind of interpretive quest Khaliya is exploring is how to create spaces for students to internalize the curriculum in the personal way that she herself has and to enable her students to create meaning for themselves.

(HC) I don’t think I give my students enough time and space to do that. Sometimes I get caught up in, “Let me tell you all the glorious things that the Umayyads have built,” but perhaps I don’t give them the time to think about the glorious things that they have built or their parents have built. When I look at the curricular aims, it is some of
these pieces that I would like to pick up on because they speak directly to life. It says, hey you are a part of this and it’s not just because I am making connections that make sense to me as a teacher, e.g. you design an architectural piece based on Islam. Is that really allowing students to make meaning? It’s not about them.

As we advance the discussion, Khaliya continues to examine and question her assumptions about how she is relating the curriculum to the lives of her students. Her approach has been to look at historical stories and make contemporary links with the world today so students can see that certain issues recur through the human experience. However, her students’ responses, or lack of, clearly indicate this approach needs to be reconceptualised.

(HC) I am not angry at myself, I am still learning and growing, but it is still not enough, this is not a meaningful connection for them. We are still at so what, I mean really so what? I am the one who has looked at the media story and engaged with it and asked critical questions. How would Muslim leadership have responded to that? These are the questions I am asking; these are not the questions that my students are asking. How can I give them, my students, the platform to ask the questions they want?

Khaliya has redefined the construct of what it means to find relevance in the curriculum. She is uncovering that relevance does not necessarily mean that this idea is happening in the world around you unless the teacher can make a meaningful connection as to how the idea is connected to the students’ lives. That does not mean she wants to focus exclusively on students’ interests instead of the curricular ideas but is asking how the space in the classroom can be one of co-journeying (Huebner, 1993).

(WP) I realized that this was the paradigm that was missing in my planning and design in earlier years. Sure, I was engaging with backwards design and historical thinking frameworks in order to help plan and deliver the curricular content, but the shape/form it was taking in my head, and in turn in my class was lacking in personal meaning-making. What was in it for my students? For their holistic development as human beings? Where was the human, the deeper life form or soul, that lives and breathes and knows his/her own reality, and thus knows his/her own needs? Where were they in my design?

As part of her curriculum inquiry process, Khaliya began to retrace her engagement with curriculum and how she interpreted curriculum for the pedagogical encounter. She shares that for the initial years of her teaching, her emphasis was on extracting key
ideas from the textbook and finding ways to make those ideas relatable to her students. Realizing that the outcome of this process was not engaging for young people, she began to ask how she could make the content more attractive and intriguing for adolescents and increase the level of excitement in the classroom. In her fourth year of teaching, her curricular inquiry evolved to centering more on the personal dimension of what and who she was teaching and the enduring impact of the curriculum with her students.

(HC) Sometimes, in the moment, the idea can seem sexy or exciting, but now I am asking, what kind of an impact does this leave on the students, on me? Is there real positive change that is happening in the classroom space? Just because something is exciting in the moment, doesn’t mean it is going to have a lasting impact. I am looking for something deeper, something that can have lasting impact on my students. My students are saying to me that they are feeling a void, or wanting very much to talk about intangibles, things that are deeper that evoke feelings of awe, mystery and wonder, the things that make us human. They want to think about their life in a much deeper broader sense. . . After reading Huebner’s piece on shifting your conceptions between being a teacher to a soul journeying with other souls on a bigger journey, the way that you view your role, your partnership with students, and the content shifts as a result of that.

As with other teachers, over the course of our hermeneutic conversations and the lived experience descriptions, we talked about lesson experiences with the students. In some, the students’ eyes glazed over and they groaned over what Khaliya described as a painful and torturous reading of the curriculum text where she had not anticipated their resistance or the gaps in knowledge of what they had already studied in previous classes e.g. “Who are the Umayyads, what did they do, where is the Middle East, what is a dynasty – I forget.” The deeper, affective, exploratory, meaning-making piece was lost from the lesson and Khaliya reflected that she does not know how to co-journey with the students, but is trying to figure out what that means in this space. Another lesson left her with glimmers of hope and newly acquired interpretations of what it means to create such spaces. Instead of moving directly into the curriculum content, Khaliya began the lesson with creating space for students to contemplate and articulate why we begin prayers by invoking the name of the Divine.

(HC) What does it mean when we call the names of the Divine, why would we do this? Students had their different ideas e.g. giving
thanks, gratitude, acknowledging presence. What kind of presence are we talking about?

Khaliya describes the conversation with her students naturally unfolding from that entry point where the class spent extensive time thinking deeply about concepts of Divine presence. Taking her cues from the students allowed the conversation to flow in directions she would not have anticipated. She spoke about how the attentiveness was palpable as students spoke and brought out their questions, their hesitancies, things they were skeptical about, and things that brought them comfort. Some of her students felt comfortable and confident talking about themselves as spiritual beings, others less so. However, all students were willing to participate in and contribute to the conversation actively. The students’ reflections expressed that they found the discussion meaningful; it didn’t just answer questions but brought their questions to the centre of the classroom space.

(HC) The questions are crafted together; the questions get explored together, so we are co-journeymers (a soul being a part of journeying alongside other souls, that is a humbling image). Part of it, our role, is to facilitate a better understanding of curricular content and I am looked at as the expert there. That being said, if I was to look at the spiritual side of life, of God, of the soul, of humanity, I am not an expert in relation to the rest of my students. I will need their assistance to help me understand my role, my being, my own existence. And hopefully we can play that role for each other. That conception flips the classroom on its head. Yes, you are an expert in some capacity and the students are looking to you, but on the other hand, you are letting them know that we are all travelling this journey together and we are all trying to figure out what it means to be as Shia Ismaili Muslims. I think this is really empowering for young people to see that we are all on a bigger search, that we are all trying to figure these pieces out together. The curriculum has not left the classroom; it is now couched in a larger conversation.

Khaliya is still actively engaging in what it means to be co-journeymers in the classroom space. It is difficult to hold and integrate what we discussed as being multiple narratives: the historical narrative of the curriculum; the curricular intentionality and its narrative of the living tradition; the narrative of the students’ lifeworlds and the narrative of the teacher’s lifeworld. It is about redefining the experience and about suffusing the mundane with an awareness of the transcendent. Khaliya brought the experience of the hermeneutic circle to her students in taking a part of their experience and interpreting it
within the horizon of the living tradition. I represent this for her in my researcher interpretation:

(RI) I think what was profound about how you chose to enter that discussion was that you took something that the students are so accustomed to in a mundane way and you brought the presence of God to it. I often see my own children reciting their prayers in a rushed distracted way as if it is something that they need to check off their ‘to-do list.’ I think you were able to reveal for the students that what we take for granted can actually hold meaning for us as believers if we make the effort to be aware. It is not a complicated concept that is reserved for spiritually elevated individuals. It is rather simple; invoking the name of God is an acknowledgement of his presence. And when one is aware of presence, whether it be a human presence, an authoritative presence, or a Divine presence, there is a pull towards establishing a relationship.

This is a simple understanding, one that most of our students probably do not have consciousness of, but a deeply powerful understanding that takes a tradition and brings out the living. And it seems that you witnessed those signs of life in your students.

In relation to the researcher interpretation above, Khaliya shared another lived experience description about a poetry writing session evoking a discussion on mental illness issues, such as depression and anxiety, faced by youth. One student disclosed his personal struggle quite openly with the class. Not wanting to isolate this young student from his peers, Khaliya brought to the discussion how, as human beings, we sometimes ignore the “darker side” of human life. And yet, it is in these dark moments that individuals are compelled to search for deeper meaning. This search is an acknowledgement and a reaching out to the Divine for a greater sense of peace, comfort or upliftment. In offering this understanding, Khaliya was able to create an experience of co-journeying for her students where the plight of one individual became a source of compassionate insight for the classroom community.

(WP) My students thought that this was the most powerful idea they had ever heard. Many said that they had never spoken about mental illness in relation to their faith, and that they had often considered the two to have nothing to do with one another. When I reiterated that this is what we mean when we say that God is everywhere, and in everything, the students again were telling me that they were deeply moved by this understanding, and that while they have always talked about the spiritual and the material, they had never thought about it like this before.
Living Within the Hermeneutic Circle: Spaces of Epistemological Humility

Life is a great and noble calling, not a mean and grovelling thing to be shuffled through
As best we can but a lofty and exalted destiny.


This chapter was an immersive discussion on how the teachers’ curricular inquiry continues in the classroom. The teachers have experienced a calling to this work, a calling to give new expression to the living tradition through their work with the youth of the community. The role of the religious educator in this context is a difficult one; it is heavy, it is weighty and it is ambiguous. In addition to having an extensive grasp of the subject matter knowledge and of the curricular intentionality, the teachers are pursuing a plurality of knowledge sources to respond and to reframe the struggles being experienced in the pedagogical encounter. The curriculum has far reaching aims and the teachers see their students for a two-hour class each week, if the students come consistently. The teachers are inspired by the ideas of the living tradition represented by the IIS curriculum but the students do not always find the same degree of enchantment with the curriculum. Effective teaching practice in this context requires more than pedagogical strategies and strong curricular knowledge. It requires the teachers to be open to knowledge sources that enable the interpretation of the curriculum content in meaningful ways for students; interpretations where students find meaning in their world through the understanding of their faith tradition. It also requires the teachers to create spaces for their students to engage in interpretive processes and to make personal meaning from ideas of the curriculum. Simply conveying knowledge of the living tradition cannot be how teaching is defined in this context. Conveying and creating knowledge of life within the living tradition alongside our students is what may facilitate curricular consciousness for the students in their daily experiences. In this way, the teaching situation can be transforming, life-forming and renewing (Huebner, 1987b) for teachers and students.

These epistemologies take on a different form in the pedagogical encounter than in the encounter with the curriculum text. Relational knowledge with the curriculum text
is the pursuit to establish relationality with the world and develop a joy, a concern and a
responsibility for our participation in our world. The teachers, as seen in the last chapter,
are situating the curricular ideas within their worlds to bring about a unity of being
between faith and world. In the pedagogical encounter, the teachers are seeking
relational knowledge about the lifeworlds of their students. This knowledge is not limited
to the students' interests or activities e.g. what sports team they play on or what they like
to do in their leisure time. Relational knowledge in the pedagogical encounter is the
understanding of the struggles and dilemmas in the lives of the students, how students
experience faith, how they view their relationship to faith, and how they see themselves
as actors and agents of a living tradition.

Huebner (1985a) draws our attention to the metaphors we use to understand
education and how changing our metaphors can shift our perspectives and open up new
sources of meaning and awareness for us. The language of education is already
metaphorical and metaphors of production can sometimes block our ability to recognize
ways of thinking about education that help us live in the world differently. In this
hermeneutic endeavour, he suggests that religious language, in addition to the
languages of other disciplines, can offer powerful ways to think about education. As an
illustration, he references Whitehead’s (1929) concern for education as duty. This duty
is a ‘response-ability’ for the earth and for its inhabitants. Huebner brings forth the first
creation story in Genesis 1 to elucidate his reflections on education as duty:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created
he them, male and female he created them. And God blessed them and
God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue
it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the
heaven, and over the beasts and over all the earth.

This verse of Genesis 1 has resonance with the following verse of the Qur’an:

O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord, Who created you from a
single soul and from it created its mate, and from them twain hath spread
abroad a multitude of men and women. (4:1)

“Thus education is a call from the other that we may reach out beyond ourselves
and enter into life with the life around us. Duty is that dimension of education which
leads to identification, elaboration, and presentation of content” (Huebner, 1985a, p.
462). As educators, we need to understand the lifeworlds of our students, their dilemmas, their joys, their concerns, and their perspectives in order for us to be able to bring interpretations of the curricular intentionality, of the living tradition to them. How can we facilitate the students’ relationality to the world unless we first know the nature of that relationship as it currently exists? Huebner asks us to consider the etymology of education from its root, educare; ducare meaning to lead and the prefix e meaning out. Therefore, education is a leading out, not a leading out the way a horse is led out of a stall, but a leading out towards a going beyond ourselves and becoming that which we are not. Relational knowledge of our students’ lifeworlds gives us the knowledge of where we are leading our students from.

Temporal knowledge can allow us to understand where we are leading our students to and what our possibilities for transcendence are. Here, Huebner makes reference to Whitehead’s proposition of education as reverence; the perception is that the present holds within itself eternity, it is both the past and the future. Durational aspects of existence are the enduring values of the living tradition that are rooted in the past, interpreted in the present and given expression for the future. The previous chapter showed that the teachers are developing temporal knowledge through interpreting and re-interpreting their understanding of the living tradition, and how our living tradition and its values are shaping the IIS curricular intentionality. They are internalizing these values and developing a curricular consciousness which flows into aspects of their personal lives. Now, the interpretive pursuit is to facilitate a similar journey for their students. This chapter highlights the teachers’ endeavours to uncover, with their students, the values grounded in the living tradition, how these values are still a part of the human narrative in their present day experiences, and how these values can inform or shape a continual creating or recreating of the students’ worlds.

Huebner (1962a) discloses the power of knowledge and the awareness it can bring to both teachers and students. Teachers help children discover knowledge and how this knowledge can be used in their lives and within the society that they live. The teaching situation gives students increased power “to explore, to express, to encounter others, to reveal what he and others can become, and to build a world worth life” (p. 40). The process of gaining and making knowledge unlocks doors to the world for the students and releases potential that can enable action. In their pedagogical encounters,
the teachers are seeking ways for students to learn about the living tradition from the past through the exploration of historical narratives as well as exploration of textual foundational sources. Symbols of religious traditions, whether these take the form of stories, poetry, scripture, or practices, are symbols of life being lived differently (Huebner, 1985b). These symbols demonstrate creativity and transcendence in providing new insight, new understanding, and new ways of being that can be brought into the present. The pedagogical approaches suggested by the IIS curriculum are a useful framework for temporal knowledge. Guided enquiry facilitates an exploration of ideas and values of the world around us; reflective articulation facilitates an examination of how these ideas and values are rooted and have been enacted in the living tradition; creative expression facilitates how the spirit, the transcendent in us, can be informed, reformed and transformed. The teachers in their quest to interpret temporal knowledge for their students are learning to place knowledge of the living tradition within the narratives of the humanistic endeavour, within the historical narratives of the tradition, and within the students’ narratives of their own lifeworlds in ways that bring forth the duty and the reverence of participation in the world.

The quest of seeking out a plurality of knowledge sources is an interpretive quest that must happen alongside the students as co-journeymers. Accordingly, the teachers are striving to create hermeneutical spaces in their classrooms, spaces of epistemological humility both for themselves and their students. This redefinition of the classroom space and the pedagogical encounter is not simply about gaining knowledge; it is about cultivating ways of knowing that the students can then carry forth with them into their worlds. It is hermeneutic knowledge whose power and influence can well transcend the two-hour class. Huebner (1985b) distinguishes between knowledge and ways of knowing in explaining that knowledge is the fallout from the knowing process and that knowledge can only be enlivened and given vitality through the human spirit. He makes the claim that there are no spiritual modes of knowing. You can know yourself, you can know others and you can know traditions; and it is through ways of knowing self, others and traditions that we access the spirit and the spiritual.

Ann Chinnery (2010) draws insights from Emmanuel Levinas’ pedagogical practices as a resource to think through our own projects of teaching and teacher education. She sketches three pedagogical postures embodied in his teaching. These
postures resonate with the ways of knowing being discussed: teaching as bearing witness is taking the lessons from the past and bringing them to life for a new generation; teaching as response is the commitment to the unconditional responsibility to and for the Other; and teacher as ‘master of thinking or thought’ is teaching students how to think whilst embodying a posture of humility. The teachers are endeavouring to create interpretive spaces of knowing with their students. They are exploring spaces of in-betweenness, of self-reflexivity, of the question behind the questions. They are striving to create spaces of knowledge relationships, of contemplation and sacredness, of divinity within humanity and of co-journeying. In doing so, they are bringing to the pedagogical encounter the very hermeneutics of the living tradition in opening up for their students: the inextricability of faith and world; the inescapable bond of responsibility towards humanity; the plenitude of meanings in our world inviting interpretation; and our obligation as believers to live in community and to create conditions for realizing our potential and the potential of others. Epistemological humility is more than seeking out and gaining knowledge; it is giving life to that knowledge through modes of knowing that allow human beings to transcend themselves and to live differently in the world.

Huebner (1985b) describes the conditions for transcendent ways of knowing. Every mode of knowing is being open, vulnerable and available to the internal and external world. Present forms of knowing are always incomplete and fallible and there is a better way of being in the world. Our classroom spaces can be spaces where we learn ways of knowing that empower us to act in our worlds and not simply leave knowledge in an intellectualized state. That action can be a shift of perspective, an increased awareness or a change in behaviour grounded in the recognition of a higher presence. Every mode of knowing is also a mode of being in relationship. By caring for a part of the world or for other beings, we come to be informed by it. There is a dialectic relationship between knowing and loving. Search and inquiry requires openness and vulnerability both from the teacher and the students and therefore, the relation of love and care is central to fostering an environment of inquiry. Every mode of knowing is a mode of waiting, of hoping and of expectancy. Creation and expression takes time, it takes contemplation, and it takes interpretation to come to new places of meaning. Beliefs translate to practice when there is heightened awareness in the present moment, in the moment of action. It takes hard work and continual attention to cultivate that
awareness, that consciousness within ourselves. And finally, every mode of knowing is “participation in the continual creation of the universe—of one’s self, of others, of the dwelling places in the world. It is co-creation... Every mode of knowing witnesses to transcending possibilities of which human life is a part” (p. 350). We know in relation to the other, whether the other is a human being or curriculum content. We see what we are in the other and we also see what we are not and what we could be and it is these moments of vision that offer us possibilities to transcend ourselves.

Epistemological humility puts into question what we know as educators, highlights what we do not know, and requires openness and vulnerability for us to continue our interpretive quest. In the pedagogical encounter with our students, we are not seeking certainty, we are seeking hope. We are not seeking completeness, we are seeking growth. We are not seeking power to control, we are seeking power to co-create. The teachers’ interpretive efforts first allowed them to engage in knowing curriculum and our living tradition. Their interpretive efforts in the pedagogical encounter are allowing them to engage in knowing their students’ lifeworlds and modes of knowing which open up the transcendent within the immanence of life. It is through knowing these parts that they are better understanding the whole as they venture within the hermeneutic circle. The horizon of the living tradition is situated within community and it is the cumulative interaction of the community that will determine the present and the future of the community. The next chapter will now turn our gaze to the interpretive efforts within which this quest of co-journeying and co-creation of destiny is lived and actualized, that of community realization.

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63 See Karen Armstrong (2009), *The Case for God: What Religion Really Means*, for her discussion on how evolving the way we think about the concept of religion can open up spaces for transcendence in our lives.
Chapter 7:

Individual Insights into Mysteries of Community Realization

_The Valley of Insight into Mystery_

“The next broad valley which the travellers see
Brings insight into hidden mysteries;
Here every pilgrim takes a different way,
And different spirits different rules obey.
Each soul and body has its level here
And climbs or falls within its proper sphere –
There are so many roads, and each is fit
For that one pilgrim who must follow it.
How could a spider or tiny ant
Tread the same path as some huge elephant?
Each pilgrim’s progress is commensurate
With his specific qualities and state
(No matter how it strives, what gnat could fly
As swiftly as the winds that scour the sky?)
Our pathways differ – no bird ever knows
The secret route by which another goes
Our insight comes to us by different signs;”

(Excerpt of Conference of the Birds, On the Wings of Words, Student Reader, IIS, 2009, p. 108)

The selection above speaks about how each traveller on their quest seeks their own insights into the mysteries of what it means to live in community and carves their paths accordingly. This idea may seem ironic when speaking of community. Why would I be referring to individual journeys in a chapter on community realization? The response to this question would be to highlight the complexity of being in community. Each individual must find their own way of understanding, being in, and contributing to community. This is not to say that there are only individual purposes; it is to say that we find our own relationality to others based on our insights, our interpretations of the world and most importantly, the mysteries of life that draw us closer to the questions we wish
to pursue about being in and knowing community. In the previous chapters, I have looked at the lived experience of curriculum inquiry with the curriculum text and examined the teachers’ interpretive quest of, “What is my way of being and of knowing curriculum?” I also looked at the curriculum inquiry being extended to the pedagogical encounter in the teachers’ interpretive quest of, “What are the students’ ways of being with the curriculum and how am I making the content present to the students?” This chapter will attend to the final dimension of the trinity in representing the teachers’ quest regarding, “What is my way of being with my students and my peers in community?” The first part of the chapter will focus on the teachers’ relationships with students as they are conceiving and enacting them. The second part of the chapter will attend to the lived experiences and lived meanings of the teacher learning communities.

Huebner (1987a) considers individuation an illusion created by our language of economic and cultural systems. We are our relationships; we are a fabric of life outside of which there is no meaning as everything is always in relation to the other. Religious education, therefore, is not a two-hour class set aside for curricular activity. Religious education is a way of practicing being with others in the world and practicing the presence of the Divine in all moments. Elsewhere, Huebner (1972) raises the question of, “Are we in religion in an educational way or are we in education in a religious way” (p. 178)? He is asking us to reconsider our paradigm as educators in raising our consciousness of being with children in religious ways rather than teaching children about religion. For Huebner, being with others in religious ways is to be attentive to the absoluteness of the other and their potential for infinite transcendence. It is continuous reflection about the significance of being together. In their curricular inquiry, the teachers are reflecting upon such insights of what is it to be with their students. They are asking themselves about the classroom space and what kind of a space this should be to enable the meaning making efforts. They are asking about the nature of the teacher/student and student/student relationship which supports the kinds of interpretive processes they wish to bring to life for their students. They are reflecting on who they are as co-journeys seeking to uncover insights and mysteries from which to create pathways towards the larger horizon of the living tradition and community realization.
Community Realization: The Student Community

And thus we have made you a just community
that you will be witnesses over the people
and the Messenger will be a witness over you

(Qur’an, 2:143)

Chapter Six presented how each teacher was striving to reconceptualise the classroom space as a space that invites students on interpretive quests to make meaning of the living tradition within their daily experiences. In this effort, the teachers place priority on continually assessing and nurturing their relationships with students. Relationality is being seen as a necessary condition for curricular inquiry, for both the teachers and the students. The teachers share their pre-understandings as well as their evolving interpretations on what it means to be in relation with the other, within and outside the classroom space.

On the Teacher-Student Relationality

Zakir: (WP) We have an educational relationship, but we also develop a personal relationship built on care and understanding. This is a two way street, I cannot develop a relationship with my students without them equally developing a relationship with me. I try very hard to build personal relationships with each of my students, and though individual students may drive me crazy at times, I can honestly say that I care about all my students deeply.

Zakir goes on to express that he experiences conflicting emotions with the candidness students bring forth in their conversations regarding their feelings about attending class. He is bothered when he hears they would rather be elsewhere, but also humbled that the students have a level of comfort with him such that they can be honest about their feelings. An important aspect of developing this ease of relation is that Zakir ensures he is present in other community spaces beyond the classroom with his students. He shows a keen interest in the students’ lives, what books they are reading, what movies and shows they like to watch, what is happening in their school life and other such aspects. He wants the students to see that he cares about them as people, not just as students, and hopes that they too extend a reciprocal care towards, “the things I care about such as the things that we talk about when we are in class together.” In the
excerpt below, Aidan also emphasizes the importance of continuing the conversations outside of the classroom space.

Aidan: (HC) I see it as ongoing, the classroom is not the only space that they will talk to me. We can use other avenues to have these conversations and also look at intersection points in the curriculum. You have to have conversations outside of class; there is not enough time otherwise. If you only see yourself in the classroom, it won’t be enough; the dialogue will never come to an end.

According to Aidan, it is not only the verbal conversation with the student that extends into community life, but also the mental conversation he continues to have with his students as he is going about his daily life. He shares an example of one of his students, Amin,64 who continually questions the existence of God. “So, when I am watching the news, I am thinking of Amin and how I can present a response to him, not as an answer, but as a way of showing I am on a search too.” These are the kinds of things, Aidan believes, that can solidify the teacher student relationship.

For Khaliya, she is continually interpreting who she is as a teacher and where she finds her grounding for the relationship with her students. She questions how she can embody the values she aspires to teach through how she chooses to define her being in the classroom.

Khaliya: (HC) How much control do you let go and how natural are we in those spaces and how contrived are we in those spaces? I have been playing with that which has led me to the need to feel more grounded in a spiritual sense. I get nervous when I feel I need to be a certain way, liked enough, cool enough, witty enough. These are all feelings I have in terms of the persona I am trying to have that would make me relate better to a group of adolescents. But that is dangerous territory when you start to wade in places like that. Are you trying to win a popularity contest or being true to who you are and allowing students to see that and honor that and in so doing, honoring the quality of being unique?

64 Pseudonym for student name
Yasmine points to the continual interpretation she has to bring to her interactions with the students. She expresses that some students are very difficult to “read” and do not feel comfortable in revealing parts of themselves in the classroom space. There are times when “they don’t want to let you in.”

Yasmine: (HC) Even when they walk into class, they come with their own mood, sometimes you can tell there is something going on, you have to read and be aware of those pieces. Because we see them every week there is so much that happens in their life from week to week that changes; it is never necessarily the same kid entering your class each week. Also, as students articulate what they are thinking, they are providing you with information; as a teacher, you are trying to absorb it, you are trying to understand why they said what they said, there is a reading of their particular comment or question.

Raziq passionately challenges the age old dichotomy between being a teacher and being a friend asserting that both are important and necessary in this context to build a sense of community. He characterizes his relationship with students as one of friendship grounded in respect and trust. It is only then, he believes, when students will see you as both a teacher and a guide they can turn to with their questions.

Raziq: (HC) I have always been looking for bonding moments in the class, something that lets me in. Once they let me in, then I know there is something I can build the relationship on, then they will open up to me. A student shared that they went drinking last weekend and by accident kissed their friend’s girlfriend. I have to do both, listen to them and also provide them guidance in getting them to think about his behaviour and the choices he is making in life. Also, humour is such an important part of teaching. You have to be light about things. We are human beings, we are not robots here; be fun and interactive and engaging. You need to be talkative and dynamic, create an energizing environment. If the students are coming in tired already, you don’t want them to leave the class even more tired, at least make it jovial and humorous.

As I listened to the teachers and interpreted and re-interpreted their words, there seemed to be a relational consciousness between themselves and their students emanating through: an awareness of humanity, an awareness of community, and an awareness of self within community. This was interesting because with the introduction
of the program and the professional teachers, there was an assumption from the IIS, from ITREB and from us as educators that the students would come to class because of the curriculum. What the teachers are saying is that relationality is paramount in the religious education space. This is not to say the learning is not important or appreciated but rather points to the criticality of looking a little more closely at the needs of adolescents to feel a sense of belonging, to search for meaning and purpose, and to make sense of the reality or their world around them. Certainly, the curriculum strives to do all three. I wonder, however, whether one can search for meaning or engage in interpreting the world around them if they don’t first feel a sense of belonging, a sense of safety, and a sense of trust in the religious education space. And perhaps relationality is not only a pre-requisite to inquiry, but more so, a necessity if a child is to embark on an intellectual search about faith. I pondered over the description Raziq used to portray his relationship with his students as he used the words teacher and friend. In education, one of the “golden rules” has always been not to confuse the two, “You are not their friend, you are their teacher.” And yet, Raziq has challenged that conception saying that the kind of trust friendship engenders is an unconditional trust and love, which makes me ask, are trust and love necessary conditions for a community in dialogue about faith? Does a tradition sustain itself and become a living tradition not only because of the understanding and articulation of faith, but also because of the love and care felt amongst members of community, all within the canopy of the Divine?

The teachers are exploring and interpreting what it means to be with children in religious ways. These ways are being portrayed through nurturing personal relationships of care; being reflexive about their own persona and mode of being in the presence of their students; attending to the students’ words and behaviours as texts; understanding the teacher student relationship and responsibility as extending beyond the classroom; and redefining the teacher role as one of authority as well as security and support. The foundational pieces to these conversations were grounded in the concepts

65 These developmental needs of adolescents have been drawn from the IIS Secondary Curriculum Teachers’ Guides.
of love, care, trust, and friendship. As educators, we sometimes dismiss these terms or see them as either obvious, that is, of course we need to have caring relationships with each other, why are we even speaking about it, or as too personal for the educative relationship, that is, yes I believe in care, but I am here to teach and to do my job. However, Huebner (1987a) is asking us to conceive of love as not only the intimate connection between two people, but as the very thread that holds the fabric of life and our relations to one another. Faith traditions instruct us to care for the other—the children, the traveller, the aged, the marginalized. To do otherwise, Huebner cautions, is to break from the tradition that guides and shapes our community. I am asking similar questions alongside the teachers. Is love and care in our relationships an inescapable responsibility (Levinas, 1982) or are these sensibilities elective or brought forth only in times of need? Is love and care for the other a necessary condition for community? And how do we create such spaces in our classrooms with our students within our interpretive processes as co-journeymers?

**On the Classroom Space as Community**

The teachers and I also delve into what kind of a communal space we want the students to experience when they walk into our classrooms. Aidan describes the religious education space as one in which students can “exhale” where students can feel safe and unpressured and simply “be in a learning space where the teacher is eager to teach.”

Aidan: (WP) I watch students both physically and mentally exhale as they enter this space. Students are not reserved at this age and bring forth exactly how they are feeling. They will walk in and say, “Guess what my mom did to me this morning”, and “I am so exhausted from school, can we not do any writing today”, and “I’m tired, but I still came.” I have rarely encountered a student who walks in with nothing to say.

Aidan articulates that a teacher can only affect change once this relational community space is created and it is this ethos that can feel spiritual or spirit-ful for both the teacher and the students. He explains in our hermeneutic conversation:

Aidan: (HC) Sometimes we ask where is the spirituality in the curriculum? Now I see it when I couldn’t see it before, I
was always thinking I had to bring it in. It is not written to be explicitly spiritual but it’s all there. You still need to know the information and the facts in order to ground yourself in that history. You can’t just say we’re going to have this journey and not that journey; it’s about finding the cool balance between the two. Years later, you are not going to say I really remember the class about the Abbasids and the growth of Muslim civilizations, but you are definitely going to remember the teacher holding up a mirror to you challenging your behaviour and speaking about the struggle of the Prophet which was similar. These pieces will stay with them, if the content speaks to these pieces, then the content will stay alive forever.

Khaliya speaks about accessing the possibility of community through the encounter with the other. She questions whether in our daily interactions and encounters, we are mindful to honor one another instead of taking people at face value.

Khaliya: (HC) I want to give the students the opportunity to really meet one another and to listen and to really honor one another and to know one another and in doing so, we are honoring and practicing a sense of sacredness. I always think about the realm of the imagination when I think about spirituality. Much of what we ponder about when we think about the scope or the magnitude or the great power of the Divine, it is imagined, we think about all sorts of possibilities. How is it that you bring wonder into the students’ lives? How do you allow them to marvel at something? How do you allow them to sit with something that feels inspirational or moving or take them to another space that they have not experienced before? These are all ways of developing relationships with the Divine. It is about those wondrous moments, something that feels refreshing or deeply comforting.

In thinking further about her lived experience description, Aryana and I discuss how she approached a lesson on the pursuit of knowledge. She wonders why she did not think to ask her students about their pre-understandings of the relationship between the pursuit of knowledge and the practice of faith and if, in fact, there exists a relationship between the two. We inquire into how we interpret our aspirations for our lessons and how those interpretations shape our interactions with our students and the ethos of the classroom space.

Aryana: (WP) I often ask myself, how I can get my students to wonder, to inquire, to see for themselves, whether, and if
so, how, the two connect, or potentially can connect. I would love if my students would dig deep, using their desire to learn, to understand, on their own terms, or, at the very least, become curious with respect to the role of faith and how it has played, how it does play, or the specifics of how it can play a role in the life of a Muslim. But can they do this on their own? Will they do this on their own? Do they even want to? Is the desire present within? If not, is this something I can stimulate in my students?

(HC) I think I was really connecting to the aspirations I had for the class and for my students. Except that when I started thinking about the initial aspiration of having students “clearly understand”, I started rethinking that approach. At the end, I was realizing, this isn’t about any one absolute understanding, I can’t get my students to clearly understand any one thing, I can open windows for some, I can deepen understanding for others.

The teachers are uncovering insights about the interdependency between creating spaces of inquiry and creating spaces of relationality. Aidan’s insight is that the space needs to be one of ‘de-layering’ so we are able to access our interior selves and leave ourselves open to the otherness of the content and where it can ‘lead us out’ to. Khaliya shares her understanding of how we can be with each other in authentic ways and see both the familiarity and the strangeness of the other as a way to ‘lead ourselves out’ beyond ourselves. And Aryana discovers that her ‘leading out’ is not one of absolute understanding to be arrived at, but rather to ignite a spark for the love of the search. Parker Palmer’s (1987) words resonate with these insights:

I understand community as a capacity for relatedness within individuals—relatedness not only to people, but to events in history, to nature, to the world of ideas, and yes to things of the spirit . . . that kind of community depends centrally on two ancient and honourable kinds of love. The first is love of learning itself. . . And the second kind of love on which this community depends is love of learners. (pp. 24-25)

Palmer is suggesting as educators, we are seeking to cultivate two kinds of love: love for the search and love for each individual in the various communities within which we participate. Huebner (1987a) speaks about this as the dialectic between knowing and loving. We can transcend ourselves as we know more about the other, the other being the content (the world) or the humans we encounter. It is through caring for the other that we are able to see our own sense of infinite possibilities in the everydayness
of life. Frances Schoonmaker (2009) offers, “educators need to learn how to see spirituality inherent in the everyday acts of learning, in coming to know, and in being in the classroom and to make space for the unseen” (p. 2713). We cannot make the assumption that because the educative environment being discussed is religious education classes, they are replete with spirituality. In fact, the interpretive quest of the teachers illuminates the need to create spaces to access the transcendent within our daily experiences amidst community. How do we enact this dialectic between knowing and loving? How do we cultivate love for the search and for one another? And how do we develop our own capacities to make space for the unseen? The teachers share some of their insights into these mysteries.

**On Creating Spaces for the Transcendent**

Raziq: (HC) There is a difference between speaking to missionaries and speaking to scholars regarding your own faith journey; I don’t think the scholars can help you with that. So how do we become the teachers that are not only the scholars, because we are faith teachers? How do we become the teacher that is part scholar and part missionary? And that is the duality of the faith teacher, to inspire the love for faith and at the same time, to develop critical and analytical skills in the students to be able to use their intellect to study religion and study their Ismaili Muslim faith, but also inspire faith.

Raziq is speaking to an important duality in creating spaces of transcendence in the classroom. He is conceiving of his role as one of intellectual engagement and also of upliftment, of inspiring love for the tradition. In an earlier conversation with another teacher, this duality was spoken about as a struggle. The teacher was questioning whether his role was one of engaging his students in critical thinking and differentiated it from missionaries whose roles are to provide upliftment. We explored this distinction further and discussed how each child is seeking something different from the religious education space based on their life journey and their lived experiences. Whether the

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66 Missionaries are being referred to as individuals who have taken on the role of teaching about religion through delivering sermons in congregational settings. These individuals also provide pastoral care to community members through more personal interactions.
students are coerced to come to class by their parents or come of their own volition, there is something, some question, some light waiting to be ignited and that light will shine differently in each child. For one child, it may be through critical engagement, for another, it may be through some sort of upliftment, for a third, it may be through a genuine connection with their Ismaili teacher and knowing they are accepted and valued for who they are. As religious education teachers, we have the opportunity to touch each child and to know each child in a very unique way. It needn’t be grand; a flicker will eventually turn into a flame. Here, I return to the theme of love. It is my sense that the community wants to be taught, and they want to be loved and cared for. That too, after all, is central to the human condition. When we attend to both (the engagement and the upliftment), I wonder if we are nurturing our living tradition as we bring together the knowledge of the tradition and the life and spirit of each believer to contribute to the vitality of that tradition.

In our quest to create a new paradigm for religious education and in our aspiration to give precedent to the intellect as an integral part of faith, have we distanced ourselves from the human need to feel uplifted, to feel nourished, and to feel inspired? Perhaps the youth of today cannot immediately resonate with the same sense of upliftment through poetry and mythology characteristic of previous generations. However, there are other ways of uplifting the spirit and releasing human potentiality that would resonate and perhaps ignite the light of our youth today. Aidan shares his perspective:

(HC) You have to see their world and then shape the content to address their world. I think I did that before but I did not understand the deeper struggles of the students. I thought you needed to be able to say something about being Muslim out there and how do I prepare them to respond. I did not look at the human struggle; I looked at the Muslim struggle (of articulating their identity) or the societal struggle. I am not separating being human and being Muslim, but I realize I didn’t look at their struggle of how to be good in the world, in the spaces that they inhabit and how is the curriculum going to help them with this. Because there are givens that every student has the potential to be fantastic. When you realize as a teacher that every student has the potential to be fantastic, it changes the way you teach. If you look at it from a deficiency point of view, you will see it as history or an identity piece, something that you have to fill.
Aidan offers the metaphor of a parent to further articulate his thoughts saying that a parent is always going to believe in the potential of their child and will support them through their struggles to reach their potential. If as a teacher, you already see the student through the lens of potentiality instead of deficiency, you will guide them in directions where they can realize their potential rather than feeling the need to fill in pieces of information missing from their knowledge. He emphasizes the need for teachers to access the inherently spiritual nature of each student:

(HC) They don’t know about this period in history and I need to fill it in. If they didn’t care to know it before, they are not going to care now. How do you focus on the deeper struggle they are having? How do you let a child know that they are amazing and you will support them in a deep way to be amazing rather than in a clichéd way?

There has to be something else that pulls them in; the social influence is going to pull them in but that desire to learn and to think, that can only come from the relationship with the teacher. The RE teacher and the environment we create is critical because only we can make that content meaningful to the kids and show them their potential.

Our role in education and in religious education is a ‘leading out’ of ourselves and our students towards places and spaces of transcendence. A recurrent theme in Huebner’s work on curricular inquiry is that of the duality of the critical and the creative; the ethical and the aesthetic. Initially, it puzzled me and I may not have fully grasped the significance of the aesthetic in nurturing a sense of transcendence within us. But as I went through my own process of hermeneutic interpretation, through considering the parts of my experiences with the teachers, with the curricular texts, with Huebner’s and others’ writings, it became increasingly clear to me that critical engagement alone was not sufficient in creating potentiality for our students. We needed to develop our own sensibilities and capacities to also working with the aesthetic, with the creative, as an integral part of the inquiry. This duality of inspiring love for the quest and inspiring love for the good is the essence of giving vitality to a living tradition. There have been several experiences of the teachers that illustrate this premise. Let me present one.

During the later part of our curricular inquiry, as our thinking and interpretive efforts developed, Khaliya revisited parts of her experience with her students where conversations seemed to engage the students in what she called, “an experience of spiritual search—moments where students seem to wake up and think about how to
make sense of their personal experiences from a faith based perspective.” We engage with a poignant lived experience description where the students were looking at the significance of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq’s contributions to his time and for present day. Khaliya had asked her students to create podcasts as a representation of their learning and whilst the assignments were diligent, witty and creative, she felt they lacked in significance. The students had essentially converted the student reader into a performance but had not articulated why any of these contributions mattered. They could confidently state the Imam brought comfort and spiritual guidance to the community through education, but Khaliya felt these were platitudes where students themselves may not know what they mean by the renderings they offered. Khaliya responded by pulling out a specific piece of guidance from Imam Jafar al-Sadiq which spoke about faith in God, as being the action that is most excellent in the eyes of God.

(WP) I started by asking the students what they thought was the action that was most excellent in the eyes of God, and heard many responses, like generosity, bringing a smile to others, being caring, etc... When we re-examined Imam Jafar al-Sadiq’s guidance, now in light of their own perspectives, they seemed quizzical, a little confused, but motivated to figure out a small puzzle – in other words, I suspect they were asking something along the lines of: why didn’t Imam Jafar al-Sadiq speak about our ethics, and why was he talking about faith in God as the most excellent action, which is a given if you are a believer in God, right? And this is where the students started really tackling the conundrum head-on. We talked about the difference between faith and belief, and the concept of placing God in the centre of one’s life, and the notion that if one places God at the centre, that one’s thoughts, words and actions will be aligned (again referencing back to Imam Ali’s guidance). They found this concept fascinating, and made some insightful comments that reflected their ability to move from the world of the tangible, to the world of the abstract. One student spoke eloquently about something along the lines of what true faith really means, and the numerous possibilities that open-up, when one places an absolute trust in a God, which resides everywhere, including within.

Khaliya’s lived experience description helps us to understand why critical thinking is essential to the interpretive process but not sufficient on its own. Her students were able to extract the key ideas from the text and convert these ideas into a podcast presentation but it still felt empty and spirit-less. It could be argued that the critical thinking part was actually the immersive look at the piece of guidance and not the first part of the podcast. Whilst that may be true to a certain extent in that Khaliya deepened
the level of critical thinking with the focused exercise on the guidance piece, it was the beauty of the guidance that brought the intrigue and the enduring power of the conversation.

(HC) They were so focused on creating cool podcasts, but they did not know how to apply it, even though the presentation asked them to speak to the significance of the contribution, not just historically but for the future. That wasn’t something that any of the groups were able to do. They were making vague, closing statements but it wasn’t speaking to anything at all, it did not feel meaningful. We needed to look at something more deeply so they could feel something, so we went there. We took a piece of guidance and explored it thoroughly.

The podcast allowed for students to know about the life of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq and that is all well and good but when you are talking about breathing life into a character, it doesn’t matter if he lived on another planet, that character is speaking to us in all kinds of powerful ways.

It was taking words in the text and bringing it to life by positioning the words so they can begin to have a conversation with it. At the end of the day, when you ask someone what action is the most powerful in the eyes of God, it is a conversation starter. From those spaces, that person has the power to become inspirational. Before that point, that person is just a person.

Looking back to the teachers’ curricular inquiry, they have described the intentionality of the curriculum as aspiring to bring faith and world together in a unity of being for themselves and for the students. They also described the struggle of students in not being able to see meaningful application of this curricular intentionality to their lives. In their pedagogical encounter, the teachers are endeavouring to create hermeneutical spaces of meaning making for the students, spaces of authentic learning (Magrini, 2011). Magrini quotes Huebner by saying in authentic learning spaces, we can do something with our understanding whether it is, “new exploring, more satisfying expression, deeper and more meaningful encounters with others, greater awareness of what and who we are, and more ability to build and transform the world” (p. 142).

Khaliya’s lesson had led students through an engagement of critical thinking about the life of a historical figure in the living tradition. It was an exercise in knowledge acquisition with minimal application. When she moved the class to a place of interpretive activity where they were able to deepen their criticality and uncover the beauty of the enduring ideas in the past and in the present, it gave life to being able to see potentiality for their futures.
Khaliya: (HC) Most of them starting playing with the concept in a very abstract kind of way with their own questions, their own ideas of what it means to have faith and what it means to have belief in God. They were then able to bring those ideas into the conversation and bring their ideas in relation to this guidance. For those students who couldn’t enter that abstract kind of place, it probably was a very different space for them. But for those who did ponder those ideas, all of a sudden, you got questions that blew me away. One student took that statement and spoke about multiple possibilities opening up if you live with God at the center of your life. I think he was speaking to the kinds of possibilities that open up about who you are and how you engage with the world around you. That is powerful, that to me is transformative, because that student is thinking about life in a very different way. You have got knowledge now to really change your life, you can change the way that your life feels, the way your life looks, the direction it takes, the quality of the encounters you have. The fact that he was able to go there was wonderful, conversations do that.

Since the time of Prophet Muhammad, Muslims have ventured to build righteous and just communities reflective of the universal principles of the Qur’anic message. The historical exploration of the Shia Ismaili Muslim principles in Chapter Two revealed that the pursuit of knowledge for the betterment of society is a responsibility of each believer. Individuals are vicegerents of God and are entrusted with taking care of his creation. In this regard, knowledge is purposeful and calls upon individuals to act. This is the concept of community realization described eloquently below:

Islam places emphasis on the individual believer and the community as a whole. The progress of one requires the progress of the other. When a community creates conditions for individuals to realise their God-given potential, it in turn is raising itself to new heights. When individuals contribute to the good of their community and society, they enrich and ennable themselves. (IIS Curriculum, Student Reader, 2010b, p. 57)

The teachers deeply aspire to affect far reaching change in this community of living tradition through their educational efforts. Their curricular inquiry is invested towards an ongoing interpretation of the Shia Ismaili Muslim tradition and how this tradition is represented through the IIS curricular texts with which they have been charged. They are establishing their own relationality to the text through developing an increasing consciousness of the living tradition. And, they are engaging in hermeneutic
efforts to understand how to bring this living tradition to their students through the curriculum. In the pedagogical encounter, the teachers are seeking to respond to their students’ needs and also the curricular needs, and are finding ways to create resonance between the two. They are actively pursuing knowledge of the student lifeworlds and the students’ perceptions of faith and world and interpreting the interplay and integration (or dichotomy) between these two elements. They are seeking ways to enliven knowledge of the living tradition for their students through exploring connections to the values of faith and how these values are manifest in their lives today. Furthermore, the teachers are seeking ways of creating hermeneutical spaces for meaning making to facilitate student relationality with the curricular text. A third layer of the curricular inquiry is the creation of community spaces for their students, spaces where the teachers can establish their own relationality with their students thereby facilitating the bridge between the curricular content and the child.

The core question, whether it is intentional or subconscious, is what kind of a classroom community enables the potential of each individual student? Classroom community is a concept that has been spoken about and endorsed for a few decades now in education. And yes, the classroom community needs to be a place of belongingness, safety, and trust for the students. And yes, the teacher’s role in creating that ethos is paramount. But there is more to consider. Just as the IIS curriculum text is a representation of the Shia Ismaili Muslim living tradition for the teachers, the teacher is a representation of the living tradition for the students. The students will see the living tradition through the teacher. They will see the love the teacher has for the tradition and be inspired by that love. They will see the care the teacher has for the student and how the teacher mirrors back to the student their God-given potential so the student can see their potential themselves. They will see how the teacher engages the curricular ideas to learn about how faith and world come together in an integrated way. The students will know the living tradition through the teacher first, and then the curriculum and also their community.

The personal relationship both in and out of classroom spaces is important and a necessary condition to enliven the curricular intentionality with the students. It is these personal relationships that allow for the opening up of spaces of ‘more-ness’ for the students; of ways of knowing and being that the students may not be exposed to
elsewhere. This relationality is taking form in honoring the potentiality of the child, a nurturing of the love for the tradition, and a cultivation of inquiry that is at once both critical and creative. The teacher relationality with the students is not an optional “nice to do.” It is a requisite condition for creating spaces of transcendence in the classroom where students and teacher can co-journey together, can search together, can understand and interpret together, and can find the durational aspects and the beauty of the living tradition together. And when these moments of transcendence happen in the classroom, it is taking the classroom community to new heights and, it is ennobling and enriching for both the students and the teachers. This is not a story of glory each day. We have seen the struggles of this quest and there are many more to come. Henderson and Gornik (2007) make reference to Levoy (1997) in reminding us that “our lives are not measured in grand sweeps, but rather in small gestures. The most significant epiphanies in our lives generally occur as a result of an accumulated effect after months and even years of grappling with unanswered questions” (p. 58). As such, the moments of transcendence, I think the teachers will agree, are slowly appearing but there are many valleys yet to travel. What will sustain us and uplift us through this quest as we encounter our own valleys of hope, disappointment, astonishment, poverty, unity and the like? How can we work alongside our colleagues to gain insights into the mysteries of community realization? To what extent are the teacher learning communities sources of transcendence in that they are life-forming and renewing? The next section will look at curricular inquiry in the teacher learning communities and their potential to enrich and ennoble the teacher community.

Community Realization: The Teacher Community

The Value of Pluralism

. . . the centrality of pluralism as a way of thinking in a world which is simultaneously becoming more diversified and more interactive. Pluralism means not only accepting, but embracing human difference. It sees the world’s variety as a blessing rather than a burden, regarding encounters with the “Other” as opportunities rather than as threats. Pluralism does not mean homogenization – denying what is different to seek superficial accommodation. To the contrary, pluralism respects the role of individual identity in building a richer world. Pluralism means reconciling what is unique in our individual traditions with a profound sense of what connects us to all of humankind.

(H.H. Aga Khan IV, Extract of Speech at University of Alberta, June 2009)
When speaking about their curricular inquiry, all the teacher participants endorsed heartily that this inquiry could not happen exclusively as an individual. Although there are critical parts of the inquiry each teacher has to commit to individually, the teacher community is essential to creating and deepening knowledge, opening up horizons of thinking that may not have been previously considered, and fostering a level of support, comfort and confidence required for this work. Literature on professional learning communities or teacher learning communities have similar themes on the definition and purpose of learning communities: sharing and interrogation of teaching practice; enhancement of teacher professional growth and learning; enhancement of student learning; celebration, support and collective engagement of staff; capacity building for school improvement and reform; creation of environments for the learning and well-being of self and others (Bullough, 2007; DuFour, 2004; Hord, 2004, 2009; Lieberman 1994; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Stoll et al., 2006; Sullivan & Glanz, 2006). Servage (2008) observes the language used in literature of professional learning communities promotes two ideals: democratic schooling and relationally-bound communities. Most of the literature I have read positions relationally-bound communities as one way of achieving the first ideal. However, as suggested in previous section, relationality amongst us is not a goal to be achieved but a sine qua non of human existence (Huebner, 1963). I would propose, accordingly, that relationality is the primary ideal for any teacher learning community as it is through our relations that we are able to create a pluralistic ethic for our work. The problem, Huebner says, is to find a mode of relationship which offers us the greatest meaning today and allows us to see the possibilities within ourselves, our world and each other. In our efforts to understand and interpret the lived experiences of curricular inquiry within the teacher learning communities, teachers pointed to the learning community spaces as being one of complexity, potentiality, diversity and vulnerability. As the extract from the Conference of the Birds alluded to, each teacher is uncovering their own insights as to the mysteries of how to be in relation with one another towards community realization.

On the Complexity of the Teacher Learning Community

In speaking about the complexity of interpreting curriculum, Shakeel reinforces a certain mindfulness he feels is imperative to the interpretive quest. He suggests that it is important to constantly ask ourselves why we choose particular decisions over others.
From a micro level of the images we select for a lesson activity, to ways in which we speak to students, to the decisions we make about designing our unit plans, we need to ask the question, why are we making this decision. He acknowledges that because time is continually a constraint, it is difficult to engage in this type of thinking. But it is important and more so, important to be engaged in analytical thinking collectively so we can benefit from the fields of visualization (Gough, 2002) individuals bring to create a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Shakeel provides an example of this complexity:

Shakeel: (HC) There are certain skills that one needs in order to really open up the curriculum. One of these is to learn and practice over time these skills such as close reading, looking at the positioning of the curriculum within other discourses out there. Previously, I felt like I looked at a text with a bubble around me even though I thought I made an attempt to look at the context around me, but a really in-depth curriculum inquiry means you have to position the text amongst other discourses and this is how you begin to identify the text as a significant perspective amongst other perspectives out there, otherwise it stands alone in isolation . . . One of the missing pieces is that when you introduce an idea, you have to translate that idea all the way down to the classroom in practice. You have to understand an idea conceptually and understand what it would look like in practice. And that is tough to do.

Aidan also emphasizes the need for community to work through complexity saying that he is not ill equipped with knowledge, but it is the interpretation and translation of that knowledge where he needs a foundation of support around him. Aidan believes working through interpretive processes together and sharing collegial struggles of what it means to enact this curriculum will connect the teachers in the learning community differently. “If we treat the curriculum as something easy or knowledge based, then our learning communities will also be ones that are fostered in a knowledge-based view of the curriculum.” But, if instead, we use the values of the curriculum as a lens or a guide on how to work together, Aidan feels it will bring the teachers together in the way he describes below:

Aidan: (HC) I don’t mean I have this kid in my classroom and I don’t know what to do with that; that’s not the kind of struggle I am referring to because that will always happen. But do we engage in deeper conversations where we ask
ourselves the big questions of what kind of a society do we live in and how are we developing ourselves through our faith? How do we become role models for our kids? How are we reaching the kids? Are we doing the best research in our learning communities? If we don’t have those conversations, we just give each other strategies because we don’t get to the root of the problem or the root of the struggle. And if we don’t understand the root of the problem, we make judgements about each other... We are all concerned about everything else like lesson plans and attendance and that is what we focus on and it becomes a major emphasis rather than the life that everyone is going through. But we are all going through that and if we talked about that, it would bring us closer together and we would be better teachers. Because we are all going through that, nobody is out there saying hey I’m a role model and it is the easiest thing on earth, or the society we live in is so congruent, I know how to practice my faith amidst the forces of modern life.

Raziq puts forth his perspective of curriculum inquiry being both an individual and collective responsibility. The individual inquiry must take place first, which then leads and contributes to the collaborative inquiry. If any part of the unit disengages with the process, a void is left both at the individual and collaborative level. In the collaborative inquiry, Raziq believes members of the learning community need to be comfortable with hearing a multiplicity of perspectives, even if that means their own perspective is challenged. “We need to be able to have the impossible conversations, which secular society tells us we cannot discuss in the workplace like politics and religion.” And these impossible conversations, of necessity, challenge how each teacher interprets and teaches concepts of the living tradition. Raziq shares an example using the concept of revelation:

Raziq: (HC) We are giving words like revelation to a 12 year old; this is tough stuff, what does this even mean? It doesn’t mean anything; they have no comprehension of what revelation is. With the teachers, we still have to engage in an inquiry of these concepts, we have to talk about this. Just because we have been through a double masters’ program doesn’t mean we are experts. We have to engage with our learning communities to understand all its complexities, especially when we are teaching this to 12 and 13 year olds. In our learning community, we talked about how we taught this idea. We were also listening to how the teacher was guiding the conversation and we were able to interrogate that. Why did you ask about this and not that?
The intent was not to judge or critique but to inquire. The teachers brought up their different perspectives and it broadened and brought out the understandings.

The teachers are recognizing the complexity required of the learning community space for it to be transformative and generative. They are aspiring for a space where the questions are not about what is “present-hand” (Magrini, 2011) which is the matter of the day or the problem to be solved. They wish to evoke the deeper questions about epistemology—why are we doing what we are doing, ontology—what is our being in this role, and interpretation—how do we understand this concept and how does it relate to the lives of our students and to our living tradition? Huebner (1962b) states that the complexity of teaching is akin to the complexity of life. It is this complexity of teaching and of life as a faith educator that the learning community space must hold and nurture for teachers to be in relation with one another in ways that will support and advance their curricular inquiry. As we ventured further with our interpretive efforts, the teachers revealed that limiting the communal curricular inquiry with their colleagues to simply the sharing of best practices and review of lesson plans was limiting the potential of the space, and sometimes, the relationality of the community. This is because each teacher comes to the table with diverse perspectives on how they interpret the curriculum, on what effective teaching practice looks like, and on what their expectations are of the curricular inquiry in the learning community. The challenge then is to take this diversity and change it into a pluralistic way of working together where we begin to see difference as a way to learn about ourselves, the other and our worlds.

**On Diversity in the Teacher Learning Community**

The diversity inherent in the learning community experience is spoken about by Yasmine as a struggle on how to create a space that allows for individual interpretation and learning and yet, also benefit from the diversity of perspectives to enrich one’s own understanding. Yasmine describes her curricular inquiry as an intensely personal journey where her meaning making of the curriculum has been informed by her experiences, both in and out of the classroom. She elaborates below:

Yasmine: (WP) Because each teacher is faced with different experiences in the classroom and engages in their understanding differently we all have an independent understanding of how to make sense of the curriculum. And
because this understanding is constantly evolving there is a need to continuously engage in conversations with colleagues so that we can share our insights and learn from each other. However, we have not yet found a consistent and organized way to engage with the curriculum in a meaningful way. When we do come together, there are glimpses of great questions to uncover and topics to delve into but some voices are not as confident yet and others have perspectives that are more fixed. We are still struggling to find room for a truly collaborative space.

And because the curricular inquiry is personal, Zakir adds that when sharing lesson plans, the rationale makes sense to the individual teacher who has crafted the lesson plan, but may not to the other teachers. Often times, teachers do not understand why their colleagues are choosing one approach or perspective over another. He points to the importance of knowing his colleagues in order to understand their interpretive processes.

Zakir: (HC) Each of us comes with our own understandings, our past experiences, what we know of the classroom, our own journeys, and our specific contexts. It all makes sense to me, but when you are speaking to another colleague, they are looking at it from their perspective. There are points of overlap, but also many points of divergence. You have to look at the teacher and understand where they are coming from and then the rationale; you understand the rationale once you understand the teacher. Our personal beings are such a large part of this and because you can’t separate the two, it is difficult to share our work with our colleagues.

On one level, the teachers agree with the benefits of enriching their own thinking through being exposed to the interpretations of their colleagues. There are instances, however, when the diversity of interpretations of the curriculum and the living tradition result in engagements which are not fulfilling for the individual teacher.

Aryana: (HC) When the teachers come together, we are all trying to make sense of it in our own way, we’re collectively sharing, and we’re collectively offering perspectives. But at the same time, the teacher has designed their own unit plan using a certain way, a certain vision and a certain approach so they offer feedback from that vantage point.

Khaliya: (WP) I think another tension is that we each choose to privilege certain aspects of the curriculum over others, and so when we come together, our discussions very rarely
proceed beyond what is different in our approach, to finding points of commonality, in order to build something as a collective. The only points that we seem to regularly converge around are our feelings of frustration or angst, in trying to make the material appealing and engaging for our students. If the aspects that we are usually bonding around are feelings of negativity, I wonder how this fuels creative thinking, inquiry, and development.

Although in some cases, teachers are experiencing the learning community spaces as one of complex questions to be engaged with, in other cases, the potential of the learning community lies latent still to be awakened. Part of the quest is to respond to the diversity of the individuals in the community and how to create a pluralistic ethos for learning. It is much easier to say that diversity is appreciated than to work with, learn from and find enrichment in alternate points of view, particularly when our own personal values feel challenged. Another part of the quest is how to understand, interpret and respond to, or be in relation with, parts of experience that may leave teachers feeling vulnerable or frustrated.

**On the Vulnerabilities and Tensions of the Learning Community Space**

Tensions in the learning community space are experienced differently by each teacher. For some, they feel a sense of purpose when the focus of the space is on teaching, learning and curriculum and they describe those spaces as joyful. However, conversations are arduous and draining when centred on more procedural aspects of the organization such as facilities and policies. One of the teachers identified organizational constraints as being the largest impediment to his progress in curriculum inquiry.

Shakeel: (WP) The process of making design decisions is very demanding, especially when I am surrounded by a thousand constraints which do not make it possible for me to be thoughtful. In a context where changes are happening constantly, where infrastructure is weak (I have not yet had a proper office space for over a year), where classroom facilities are not proper, where processes of teacher collaboration are not clearly defined, where teachers take on multiple portfolios (system management, parental engagement, episodic programming and many more) and thus spend less time actually designing their classrooms, where curriculum content is new every year, and the sophisticated interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum
demands constant research, where the religious education is not always the top priority for parents. To “do curriculum” in the above cultural environment is to courageously work against the grain. I often ask myself: who am I becoming in this environment?

The frustration felt was that these types of constraints were impediments; impediments which prevent the teacher from engaging in deep interpretive curriculum work necessary to fulfill the immense responsibility of the horizon which has been entrusted to the teachers. The teachers need to feel they are indeed making meaningful change through their efforts as expressed in this statement, “We are human beings; we want to see the fruits of our labor.” The constant exigencies and continual change demanded from the system hampers a level of ‘settling’ to take place and the teachers are questioning how they build foundations on grounds that are ‘continually shifting.’ Another tension felt by teachers is the paradigm of the societal and organizational ethos which does not seem to align with what they understand to be a more community oriented ethos reflective of the living tradition.

Aidan: (HC) The society we are in plays a big role and we as teachers are also immersed in the same competitive environment. The STEP program was competitive; this job still has the element of competition. How do you go from this frame of hierarchy and power into a more communal model? Why does it need to shape itself to match something in the secular world? Why can’t it shape itself into something new? You need those things, office hours, pay, pension, you need those things, but it is the same question. Are we using a secular model to teach something that does not suit a secular model? Importance is placed on secular or organizational aspects, if you use that paradigm, you will always see it as work and never see it as more than work. I see everyone including myself trying to negotiate this tension. For example, tonight is the intergenerational event, but a lot of people are saying, it is my day off so I’m not going. But we’re just going to play bingo with seniors.

The competitive tone being referred to above or the pressure of performance felt by individual teachers can pervade into curricular inquiry processes and constrain authentic sharing of experiences. One teacher observed that there is a willingness to share successes amongst members of the learning community but there may be less openness to sharing failures.
Zakir:  (HC) A lot of times we want to share our successes, it is not very often that you want to say I failed at something; but those are the opportunities for learning. There is a lot of good that can come out of our failures because we can learn from those. I don’t know if people are comfortable in doing that. I want to say I failed at this, but I don’t because I am worried about how I am perceived by my colleagues. Because people don’t share those failures, you are on your own or feel like you are on your own with your struggles. Everyone seems to be having these great lessons, and you feel like why am I the only one struggling?

The sense of vulnerability increases when teachers are challenged about the approaches they have chosen for their curriculum design in their unit and lesson plans. This was explained as being reflected in the extensive personal investment each teacher puts towards their work. “Because we pour a great deal of ourselves into our teaching and if our teaching is questioned, examined or interrogated, we feel as though we [emphasis in original] are being questioned, examined and interrogated.” Even though teachers understand critiques are not personal attacks, there is a degree of sensitivity which is important to recognize when the learning community comes together. The teachers are asking how their learning community spaces can be more representative of the spiritual ethos they are aspiring to create in their classrooms. One teacher submits that until we develop an awareness of the deep interconnectivity of humankind and, are aware of the vulnerability as well as potential of the other, we risk creating spaces which run contradictory to the very values we teach.

Khaliya:  (WP) It is in such a space, that presence must wrestle with the illustrious images of self and other that have been created; and whose images exist with such vigor that one can feel their collective weight, in the forms of performance anxiety, tension, competitiveness, gossip, and envy. These illusions about self and others seep into the very life of the institution, and from here they wield the very real potential to de-centre, de-stabilize, de-grade and de-tract from our truer, more authentic beings.

These words are painful to witness as they put into question the very essence of how we create spaces for individuals and communities to realize their potential. The teachers describe their lived experiences as one where horizons or intentions of the curriculum, their colleagues, and the organization may not always align. For some, there is an overemphasis and abundance of time invested in infrastructure processes of
schedules, facilities, and policies leaving less time for the rigorous curricular inquiry which is essential to this effort. For others, it is the diversity of perspectives between colleagues on what this role is and what it means to be in community. There was a sense of a secular paradigm shaping a religious education institution and the dissonance this perceived mis-match can cause. There was also a recognition that whilst we come together physically in community, the authenticity of community may not be present in the space because of personal vulnerability, fear of being perceived in a particular fashion, or the need to put forth a constructed identity of sorts. Perhaps these are the challenges of pluralism and living amidst difference whether it is institutional difference or collegial difference.

The learning community space can be seen as a microcosm of our larger community where pluralism is easy to practice when we are like-minded but excruciatingly challenging when we encounter the foreignness and strangeness of the familiar amongst us. Heesoon Bai (2003) asks us to consider a relational ontology where the self has meaning only in relation to other beings. She suggests freedom of self is found in responsibility for others and therefore, agency is about finding one’s place within the moral universe and developing the capacity to respond from that place. As Bai (2004) explains elsewhere, intersubjectivity is not a forced exertion of will upon the other to master our understanding of the other. Rather, it is also an act of consciousness where we practice “the willingness, even if only provisional, to be open, engage and participate in the emergent reality of the other” (p. 62). Intersubjectivity as described by Bai and her co-authors, Scott and Donald (2009) is “the capacity and ability to sense and feel everything in terms of the bond and strength of intimate relationship” (p. 324). It is a connection with fellow human beings as ‘heart-full and soul-full beings’ of intrinsic worth. In the next section, the teachers explore ways they can consciously connect with their peers through participating in the emergent realities they share. They engage with how our teacher learning communities can open up spaces of potentiality amongst us.

**On the Potentiality of the Teacher Learning Community**

Although all teachers acknowledge the learning community space as being one of diversity, vulnerability and complexity, all teachers also recognize the potential of the
learning community spaces in furthering their curricular inquiry in ways that would make them more effective teachers and inspired professionals. Aidan discloses that the idea of being vicegerents of God and taking responsibility for one another plays out in the classroom but still has to be sparked between peers. He feels a level of care does exist as it is apparent during times of sorrow, or conversely, during times of celebration amongst colleagues. However, he admits that work needs to be done to cultivate a consciousness of unconditional care or the kind of relational ontology being referred to earlier amongst all in the work environment.

Aidan: (WP) As I have been reflecting about this, I feel as though the obstacle is that we are unaware of our shared journeys and struggles. When do we as teachers have those deeper conversations about faith, life, and struggle? I have been thinking about this deeply, that perhaps this kind of hermeneutical conversation67 is one we need to have in our teaching communities...to base ourselves in our shared journeys, so that once we see the other as a soul, we have no choice but to help that soul, to love that soul, to nourish that soul.

Aidan believes that such consciousness of unconditional care will be pervasive into the classroom environment and will result in teachers who are increasingly confident and prepared to interact authentically with students. He shares the example below:

Aidan: (HC) For example, the Syrian Ismailis are affected by warfare and as a group, we will talk about offering prayers and how to interweave it into the lesson. But we won’t talk about how we feel about it and what we are dealing with. And then you walk into the classroom space and you are unprepared, you feel shaky in that space because you haven’t internalized it yourself. And what better way to deal with it then talking it through with colleagues who are going through the same thing? So if a student says, how can this happen when there is a God, you don’t know what to say and it affects your confidence and sense of self. Sometimes it remains within us and we have not had the

67 Reference to the hermeneutical conversations engaged in the research process with the study participants
opportunity to articulate it and hear other views that allow you to then respond comfortably with students.

In a similar vein, Shakeel believes we need to draw inspiration from the creative vision of our living tradition and continually ask ourselves when we are amongst others, how we are practicing the ethics of the tradition in real time. This is something we all share and can become a binding force regardless of the diversity of the individual. Too often, we are consumed by the urgent tasks of the day. If, however, we find places of inspiration as a collective body and use those as starting points for our work, Shakeel feels we can develop a culture of inspiration that reminds us we are here for the service of the community. He offers his thoughts:

Shakeel: (HC) When I reflect upon my own context, there is a history and culture where everyone is tired and fatigued. And I ask myself why . . . We have to cultivate that “more” where teachers are not always in the same atmosphere of fatigue, where they get out and they bring new energy and it is not that teachers are not willing to see the gifts in others but you are in a tough environment where you don’t feel you are making any impact at all, where you feel you are working against a system that is not enabling you (I’m not saying it is a reality, I am saying it is a perception). You really got me thinking that how is it that we can, not in a superficial way, but really cultivate that happiness amongst our learning community. Part of me also believes you are happy when you are happy with yourself. When you are confident in who you are and when you are secure within yourself in a profession. You want to be able to say, I am a teacher who is competent, a teacher who makes a difference. When you don’t feel that, that is when it breaks down, and it manifests itself in the entire learning community.

Khaliya puts forth her view that the nature of interaction in a learning community space can have a profound impact on the inspiration and fulfillment derived by the teacher. She suggests we need to consciously craft a way of conversing with colleagues which lends itself to further growth and mental, intellectual, and emotional stimulation. This art of conversation then needs to be practiced by the collective so everyone is enhanced by expanded views, provocative questions, and insightful connections. We explored two lived experience descriptions of curriculum inquiry in the learning community, one which was experienced as meaningful and the other less so,
and tried to decipher the qualities that characterized each experience. Khaliya describes the positive experience in the following way:

Khaliya: (HC) In one space, we really tried hard to understand where each person was coming from and when we didn’t, it was a safe enough space to ask questions. It was a space of inquiry and exploration and really trying hard to understand how the other person was seeing the curriculum and why there was emphasis on one aspect of the curriculum over others. It was inquiry focused at the core and that is what made it more stimulating, there were so many more questions coming out of it.

These discussions are so critical because none of these connections or links are really clear in the student reader or the teachers’ guide and I don’t think it was meant to be. They have not written that material in a definitive sense. The way they have written it actually stimulates further thinking around the material. In the ways things are written, articulated and positioned, it begs further questions. It asks the professional to question, according to our own tradition, where do we see ourselves fit into the larger picture, what is happening here? And that is what I am saying about the inquiry piece; we were all drawing connections, asking questions and making hypotheses, that in itself is invigorating and that is what draws teachers to the teaching profession. You want to be an active learner for life.

Raziq’s thoughts conclude this section well as his views bring back the idea of insights into mysteries articulated at the beginning of this chapter and how each individual in a community needs to seek out and take responsibility for a way of being that contributes to the enhancement of the community. It is through the interpretive quest, not only the hermeneutics of the letter in understanding what the curriculum text is saying, but more importantly, the hermeneutics of the spirit of the living tradition and the idea of life that this spirit stands for.

Raziq: (HC) You could very easily be in that space in that time and once your lesson is done, you don’t have to think about it anymore. But I think that is where the problem is. You have to constantly be thinking about it; that is when the faith journey of the individual is engaged. Is this only a 9-5 endeavour or do you really wish yourself to understand? This is where it can get beyond superficial for the teachers; this is where it can happen. You can’t just take the key messages and plot them into a lesson and not go beyond
that with a deeper understanding. You have to push further and you have to try and understand differently and find different entry points. You have to listen to each other because everyone has a unique perspective on things. . . You may figure out as well that other teachers are questioning the same thing that you are. You may find other teachers are going through the same thing. And that becomes a binding experience, just to have the dialogue and see everyone’s points of view, that becomes a collective experience. The fact that we are in charge of the religious formation of our youth, the notion that we have the responsibility of understanding the curriculum in depth to bring about that change, for our own self-transformation and then that of our students and community, those are unifying perspectives.

As I pondered over the words of the teachers, those above and the many others I could not include due to space limitations, I began to see that we work consciously and intentionally to create communal spaces of inquiry for our students, but we tend to expect communal spaces of inquiry for our peers to take shape with less intentional effort. I began to think about how I am with children and how I am with adults. Is it that when we are with children, as educators we are less vulnerable because there is a power differential but also a knowledge differential, and we know children will accept what we say as experts? Whereas when we are with adults, do we feel threatened or compromised when there are a diversity of views “in our face” and our sense of self becomes shaky if there is difference in perspective and understanding? Or is it that the work of teaching and educational leadership and curriculum is always of that urgent nature that we fall into technical ways of speaking and thinking and are driven toward production rather than understanding, interpretation and relation? How is it that we choose to make service to the community as our life’s work, and yet, we struggle to subsist and flourish in our very own communities? I am not speaking only about the teachers here; I am speaking about all of us in this institution as I am struggling with the dissonance of how we are aware that pluralism is a sacred imperative rooted in the Qur’an and yet, I am troubled by the inconsistency of community vitality amongst us. We can discuss this, we can intellectualize it, but to what extent are we successful at living it?

Greene (1978) reminds us that we learn to become human within a social context of community. She asks us to take responsibility to be fully engaged and to develop the
ability to see through the eyes of others. The more we put forth such efforts of learning about the other, the more richly individual we become.

The activities that compose learning not only engage us in our own quests for answers and for meanings; they also serve to initiate us into the communities of scholarship and (if our perspectives widen sufficiently) into the human community, in its largest and richest sense. Teachers who are alienated, passive and unquestioning cannot make such initiations possible for those around. Nor can teachers who take the social reality surrounding them for granted and simply accede to them. (pp. 3-4)

Tariq Ramadan (2010) offers his view on interpretive activity being a cornerstone of spirituality in pursuit of inspiration and freedom. For Ramadan, such interpretive activities necessitate developing an awareness of how we function as individuals and as communities, learning to establish a distance between ourselves and the world around us, developing the capacity to listen to others and to speak and communicate differently, and place our interpretive activity within our own complexity and those of others. Ramadan describes this sort of engagement as the lived experience of spirituality which helps us to live well alongside others. He also argues for three outlooks that are implicit in all traditions: first, the subject is autonomous insofar as not being wholly dependent on that which affects it; second, there is the conscious acceptance of responsibility; and third, a lived spirituality finds it sustenance in a hopeful and constructive attitude.

The teachers have spoken hopefully and constructively about the potential of the teacher learning communities for curricular inquiry. And, the themes they are unearthing are similar to those ways of knowing they wish to cultivate with their students. The learning community space is being conceived as a space of responsibility to care for and to nourish the other. Huebner (1993) submits that “content” can be conceived as curriculum text, but it can also be conceived as other human beings and the process of being in relation with that ‘other.’ Because human beings are diverse in that they understand, interpret and act differently, they point to a different future for me which is not just a continuation of me but a possible transformation of me. To co-journey in this way, however, requires me to give up a part of myself to become who I am not and hence, the necessity of love and care to support each other through the vulnerability and uncertainty of the transformative process (Huebner, 1987b).
Additionally, the teachers conceive of the learning community space as a complex space of conversation and dialogue, even impossible conversations, which promote inquiry, questioning, and the desire to understand alternate horizons of that which may not have been previously visible to us. Here, Huebner (1963) distinguishes between communication and conversation with the former being an exchange of ideas and transfer of information, and the latter suggesting that the recipient is enabled to act on this information, reshape it for him or herself and continue the dialogue at a new level. Teachers spoke about the importance of such conversations with relation to their own understanding of faith to prepare them for the unanticipated conversations in the classrooms with their students. To engage in conversation requires the willingness to be influenced, openness toward the awe and wonder of the world we face, and recognition that humans are never complete and always in the process of becoming.

The potential of the learning community was also spoken about as a place of revitalization and renewing the spirit through the inclusion of aesthetic ways of thinking and speaking. Examples that were given were reconnecting to the vision of this vocation, of distancing oneself from the urgency of the day-to-day, and of bringing forth a mindfulness of tradition into daily interactions. Thinking and speaking in aesthetic ways, what some would refer to as our meaningful horizons or the enduring values of our tradition, allow for us as human beings to access new insights, to see beauty in our surroundings, to shift from a perspective of control and mastery to one of search and inquiry. The learning community has the potential to be the space where teachers support each other and co-journey on their interpretive quests. Whilst each teacher is uncovering mysteries and insights and creating their relational pathways individually through the ‘signs that come to them,’ the quest is a communal one. It is a quest of teaching as living, a quest of attending to the meaning and value making of the teacher within the living tradition, and a quest to create community that can realize its potential so that “we live more truthfully, justly, openly and beautifully in the classroom” (Huebner, 1987a) and out of the classroom with our larger communities.
Living within the Hermeneutic Circle: Towards Community Realization

Silent Dais

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq said: ‘Study in order to acquire learning, and to adorn yourself with it; cultivate dignity and goodwill; treat with respect those who teach you, and those whom you teach. Do not make your learning oppressive to anyone, and do not permit your vanity to destroy the effects of what is really good in you.’ ‘Be silent da’is for us.’

(Al-Qadi al-Nu’man, Encounters in Muslim History, Student Reader, IIS, 2013, p. 33)

The extract above illustrates guidance given to Ismaili da’is for their educational work some 1000 years ago. In Chapter Two, the work of the da’is was discussed as those individuals appointed to teach people about the Shia Ismaili Muslim faith, sometimes in formal educational spaces as in the Fatimid times, and other times informally through a master/disciple relationship. Historically, much emphasis was put on the preparation of the da’is for their educational mission and role. The expectation was that the da’is were highly learned not only about matters of faith, but of a variety of disciplines that included philosophy, jurisprudence, governance practices, and the sciences. In addition, da’is were expected to practice the highest ethical conduct at all times. The da’is did not impose their acquired knowledge on people. Instead, they lived and immersed themselves amongst the local community and learnt about the problems and the traditions and customs within the community. This knowledge was then used for their teaching. I am not suggesting that as Muslim educators, we are da’is. But what I am asking is that given our educational responsibilities, what can we learn from past educational efforts about our living tradition? The essence of the messages above would be relevant to teachers today, whether they are religious education teachers or teachers of another discipline. The curious part of the message is why silent da’is? Teachers are anything but silent. In fact, we often pride ourselves in being articulate and it is through our words that we teach and show passion and love for our learners and for our discipline. One possible response to my question is that at the time of this guidance historically, Ismailis were under persecution and therefore the da’is were to do their work of teaching about the faith in subtle ways so they would not be exposed. Another
possible explanation is that we teach about morality and goodness not necessarily by preaching it to our students, but by exemplifying it in our interactions and embodiment with them. A third possible interpretation I would offer, in addition to the preceding two, is the importance of silence or of contemplative inquiry in our quest as teachers towards our own self-transformation.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2001) argues that one of the fundamental problems facing modern individuals is the division between contemplation and action with the latter having eroded the former. Contemplation, which according to Nasr relates the knower to higher modes of being, should co-exist harmoniously with action, with contemplation leading to action and action leading to contemplation. Qur’anic verses have expressed the relationship between contemplation and action advising the wisdom derived from contemplation should urge the individual towards correct action for the community. It is the act of contemplation that puts the individual in a graceful state which then influences his or her acts of good within community. Nasr puts forth his interpretation of correct action depending upon the correct mode of being.

How often is this simple truth forgotten in the modern world where men want to do good without being good, to reform the world without reforming themselves, to exalt action and belittle contemplation, unaware that without observance of the above hierarchy no action can ever yield completely fruitful results, especially so far as human welfare in its broadest sense is concerned. . . At the same time, correct action follows from contemplation and is related to the realized aspect of knowledge which contemplation in fact makes possible. The Arabic saying that knowledge without action is like a tree without fruit can be interpreted to mean precisely that theoretical knowledge is incomplete if it is not actualized through contemplation into realization, which in turn leads to a transformation. (p. 104)

Nasr’s words illustrate that inquiry and interpretation can provide us with the wisdom and the vitality to transform our actions towards the betterment of self and towards the betterment of community. Alfonso Lingis (1994) reinforces the transcendent

\[68\] A similar interpretation was presented in Chapter Two of al-Kirmani’s thought on double observance by works and knowledge emphasizing the interconnectedness of faith and action.
possibility in action positing that to act is to break with what has come to be to the future; it is to give form to one’s powers. He suggests we cannot grasp all of reality and it is through our actions within community that we find our substance and recapture our powers in another position, at another moment of presence. “In acting, one discovers the real possibilities of the world and finds one’s forces in the midst of the real potentials and functions of things” (p. 161). Bai (2004) adds an important reminder of balancing receptivity and activity saying we must learn to “engage the ego in worthy pursuits but also limit it sufficiently so it does not take up the entirety of self and leave no room for grace to enter” (p. 63). Part of this grace can come from what Scott (2011) refers to as “grand will” where we practice receptivity and openness to what is partially unknown, listening to what emerges inside and outside ourselves, and being attentive to the beingness in the world. “All that Buber suggests is transformation of attitude: remain human, continue in your individual path, but be open to the possibility of radically transforming your relation to self, to other, and to the cosmos” (p. 56).

What our curriculum inquiry has revealed is that contemplative inquiry is central to the interpretation of our knowledge and to cultivating ways of knowing about the world, about tradition, and about ourselves. Chapter Five illustrated how the teachers developed their own consciousness about the living tradition through developing relationality with the curricular text. This inquiry is considered contemplative in that: the teachers are developing their own understanding of and connection to the living tradition; they are interpreting how tradition and modernity can be mutually informing rather than conflictual; and they are immersed in thinking about how to make sense of these complex ideas for their students. In Chapter Six, the inquiry becomes further contemplative in: searching for knowledge of the students’ lifeworlds and their perceptions of life and faith; in interpreting what lies behind the struggles in the pedagogical encounter; and in creating hermeneutical spaces in the classroom for students to cultivate ways of knowing which reveal transcendent possibilities for their worlds.

Chapter Seven shows an increasing rapport between contemplation and action. In nurturing the relationality with their students, the teachers are creating conditions for the kind of contemplative inquiry which allows their students to search, to question, to
converse, to interpret, and to re-form their worlds. Teachers are endeavoring to create inquiry spaces for students that are loving, affirming, and generative which in turn enable students to see how their actions and being can be guided by the same grace. The teachers are also aspiring to create contemplative spaces within their own teacher learning communities. They are searching for ways their colleagues can come together to inquire into the complex questions of their work. They desire to have the ethos of the space characterized by support, care, and values of the tradition to hold the vulnerability of the other. They seek to have such contemplative spaces provide psychical distance from the urgency of the day-to-day in order to bring about closeness to the larger aims of the work. To be a silent \textit{da'i} does not mean to refrain from speaking. It means to allow for hopeful and constructive spaces that invite contemplative inquiry of the larger purpose, the spirit, the grace of the work and in doing so, have that purpose, that spirit, that grace, influence our actions so we can be raising our community to its potential and discovering our own God-given potential.

The kind of interpretive knowledge we are contemplating on and inquiring into, to realize our aspirations for community, continues to be relational knowledge, temporal knowledge and hermeneutic knowledge. In our communities with children, we pursue relational knowledge in nurturing our relations with children through our love for each child. As the teacher is the symbol of the living tradition for the child, the child sees his or her potentiality as revealed by the teacher, and hence, by the tradition. We pursue temporal knowledge in bringing forth our love for the tradition within our classroom community spaces where we can co-journey with our students on our search. In this way, the students witness not simply a knowledge deliverer of the tradition, but a believer who is finding love and beauty in the tradition to inspire their search. And we create conditions within the community for hermeneutical knowledge, for ways of knowing. The process of search is one that needs to be taught and lived in the classroom community to move it from a place of abstraction to a place of understanding. Learning how to question, how to interpret text symbolically, how to find richness in the perspective of the other, these are all ways of knowing and ways of contemplating which can engender personal search.

Within our teacher learning communities, we can seek relational knowledge through learning about the other and how they relate to their world. How do you see the
curriculum? Why have you chosen to approach the lesson in this way? What are your aspirations for your students? What are your struggles, your joys, your uncertainties? It is through understanding the diversity of relations around us by being aware of ‘the signs that come to us’ that we can begin to understand pluralism as a fact of human existence and access the potential it presents. We can seek temporal knowledge in exploring together the durational aspects of our tradition that we have carried with time, how we continue to give expression to these values and beliefs, and how we understand our values to be ‘moments of vision’ (Huebner, 1966b) for ourselves and for our communities. And finally, we can create hermeneutical knowledge together, ways of knowing as community, where we can contemplate upon and interpret our theoretical knowledge and move it to action to transform ourselves, our students, and our community.

What is important to note, in conclusion, is that this cannot simply be a journey of inquiry; it needs to be one of contemplative inquiry. Inquiry is often a critical questioning and resultant pursuit of knowledge. If knowledge acquisition and inquiry alone were sufficient, we would not be in this quest of struggle to create a unity of being between faith and world. Contemplative inquiry brings the creative dimension to the inquiry in recognizing that we need to critique our interpretation of the world, and in concert, we also need to enhance our understanding of the world through accessing the artistry and the beauty of what tradition can offer us. We are not only accessing knowledge in abstraction, we are accessing ways of knowing through our contemplative efforts. In the sense it is being referred to here, contemplation does not mean meditative prayer. It means being able to place the parts of experience within the wholeness of life, within the aesthetics of life. As teachers, we can be skilled creators of beauty and heighten sensitivity to the significance, meaning and possibility of life (Huebner, 1962c) for ourselves and our students. Instead of expecting to transform others, we need to be attentive to our own self-transformation and how we can be in relation with others and with our world. In doing so, we can elevate our inquiry to increased levels of awareness and wide-awakeness as we discover life’s insights and mysteries and raise ourselves to new heights towards community realization.
Chapter 8:

Living Within the Hermeneutic Circle: An Interpretive Quest towards Beauty and Infinitude

The Valley of Love

“Love’s valley is the next, and here desire
Will plunge the pilgrim into seas of fire,
Until his very being is enflamed
And those whom fire rejects turn back ashamed.
The lover is a man who flares and burns,
Whose face is fevered, who in frenzy yeams,
Who knows no prudence, who will gladly send
A hundred worlds toward their blazing end,
Who knows of neither faith nor blasphemy,
Who has not time for doubt or certainty,
To whom both good and evil are the same,
And who is neither, but a living flame.
But you! Lukewarm in all you say or do,
Backsliding, weak – O, no, this is not you!
True lovers give up everything they own
To steal one moment with the Friend alone –

(Excerpt from Conference of the Birds, On the Wings of Words, IIS, 2009, p. 107)

This chapter is the concluding discussion to the study. Interpretive quests of the researcher, the study, the insights the study has offered and its resultant questions will be presented. Chambers (2003) offers several ways to think about the impact of hermeneutics in curriculum studies. First, hermeneutics resists the temptation to foreclose answers to questions. It requires educators to remain open to further questions and possible responses that are within our grasp and those that are yet to be discovered. Second, hermeneutics encourages educators to understand the difficulty of the problem. It asks educators to stay with that difficulty to find and release its pedagogical and transformative possibilities rather than rushing to affirm expedient and
formulaic solutions. And third, the word hermeneutics is derived from the Greek God, Hermes, who is known for making intelligible to mortals the words of gods and goddesses. Hermes is also known for his playfulness and being a trickster which Chambers relates to our human fallibility and potential. Rather than cite definitive conclusions, this chapter will present insights revealed through the interpretive quests undertaken. I will also highlight the difficulty of understanding the problem as well as raise questions and considerations that may release further possibilities for curriculum inquiry. The discussion will entail glimpses into the researcher’s interpretive quest, followed by the interpretive quest of the study, and will conclude with reflections on the interpretive quest of curriculum inquiry within the context of a living tradition.

My Interpretive Quest

I remember sitting at our table with my head dropped into my hands feeling overwhelmed, stressed and frankly, quite inadequate with handling the pressures of being a mother and a daughter, being an Academic Director, and also working through this doctoral study. As I sat there trying to figure out whether I should continue on with the PhD or if there was a way I could find a dignified exit strategy, my twelve year old son came and sat at the table inquiring into why I looked so troubled. “I feel like I should never have started this PhD,” was my response to him. “I can’t give up my family and I can’t give up my job so maybe I need to give up the PhD.” He looked at me for a moment and then said, with a smile on his face, “But you love what you are doing so why do you feel that way?” I am not certain why it took the wisdom of a twelve year old to help me see what I was losing sight of and why the blessings in my life were being experienced as burdens. This study was and has always been a quest of love. Did I want to be “lukewarm” or did I want to be a lover who “flares and . . . yearns?” Through my educational life, my being has been “enflamed” by the question of how curriculum can be transformative for children and for us as teachers. I have now re-articulated this question to be: How can curriculum inquiry be an interpretive quest towards the potential of self and community?

And so, I set out on my own interpretive quest and had encounters on the way where cautions were raised. Can you really do a study on the Ismaili community? How
can you be the Academic Director and the researcher at the same time? What if your study is seen as only being applicable to this particular context; wouldn't it make more sense if you were to do a comparative study on Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious education? Is your study going to be able to tell us anything about how STEP should be implemented? I didn't really know if I was going to be able to answer any of these questions. What I did know or felt fiery about was that we needed a different level of understanding, a different kind of conscientization, about how we interpret curriculum in our encounters with students within our community life. And why this question enflamed my being is because I asked myself what the point was of learning about history, about literature, about ethics, or about scriptures of the living tradition, if these engagements did not result in more of a joyful, responsible, participation in the world (Huebner, 1961) or result in motive forces for the guidance of conduct that is more vigorous, consistent and enlightened (Dewey, 1909). How can we inquire into and enact curriculum such that our students understand religion not as “a detached and compartmentalised phenomenon, but in terms of its multi-faceted connections with other dimensions of human life” and, “are led progressively to reflect on the place of the sacred in human culture” (One World Many Hopes, Teacher’s Guide, IIS, 2010, p.8)? And why could as Esmail (1995) asks,

. . . future Muslim generations in the West not remain true to their spiritual vocation while achieving a harmony with their cultural surroundings, with the languages and the scientific and humanistic knowledge of modern times at their disposal – and indeed, placing these resources in the service of the spiritual and ethical vision of their faith? (p. 457)

I wanted to better understand how curriculum inquiry can bring about an increased consciousness of unity of being between faith and world and enable us to know the possibility our world offers through the beauty of our living tradition.

As I traversed the different valleys, the complexity made itself known to me. It was not enough to draw solely upon curriculum theory to construct the conceptual framework for this study. The notion of inquiry required a deeper look at the hermeneutical tradition. Inquiry into the lived experiences of the teachers also necessitated knowledge of phenomenology. The living tradition of the Shia Ismaili Muslim community required some understanding as the curriculum being referenced is
steeped in this community’s perspective and historical experience. And, the study also needed to be situated within religious education and Islamic education. Furthermore, what was required was not only having some knowledge of the areas above, but more importantly, to identify and pull through appropriate threads on which to weave the fabric of the study.

Identifying the thematic areas for data collection was no less complex. It was not possible to “bracket out” the classroom or the learning community or the role of the teacher, and to hone in exclusively on the interpretation of the IIS curriculum, as the lived meanings created by the teachers are shaped by an integration of these factors. There was also my experience as the Academic Director which added to the interpretive process and construction of lived meanings. The challenge of epistemological humility was daunting, sometimes filled with uncertainty, other times with light. The quest of this study was much longer than I had envisioned, and much more complex and rich than I anticipated. I began to see with increased clarity how as human beings, we tend to live in the “parts” of our lives and how the opportunity and awareness of continually revisiting the “whole”, what we consider to be the horizon of important questions (Taylor, 1991), can result in a sensibility that leaves us increasingly “wide-awake” (Greene, 1971) and move us to pursue the quest for meaning and the quest for good (MacIntyre, 2007). The study is interdisciplinary; it is multi-layered; it is interpretive; it is complex and remains full of questions; it is deeply personal and yet intensely communal. And that is the nature of faith and living faithfully in the world.

Why then would this study be of interest to educators who are not of a religious persuasion or who are not Muslim? I have asked myself this question throughout this quest, initially from a place of worry and concern and then later, from a place of observation and reflection. Both my children attend an International Baccalaureate (IB) school whose mission statement is about excellence in education and in life. The IB mission statement reads:

The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. (Accessed from www.ibo.org)
I can see how the curricular program at the school promotes inquiry and knowledge about world issues. What is less apparent to me, however, is how the students interpret their acquired knowledge through their critical inquiries to contemplate, make sense of, and act upon their worlds differently. My older son, who is just completing grade 10, was required to do what is referred to as Personal Project as part of his IB requirements. This project requires students to choose an area of passion and to research this area producing a 4000-word paper as well as some sort of artifact or product to share during a public exhibition for the school community. My son decided he wished to develop a computer designed building to explore his interest in architecture. I encouraged him to make his focus meaningful by asking what purpose this design would serve. His response was that the students had been encouraged to choose an area of interest and his peers were choosing passions such as sports, singing, photography, writing, and model making. It didn’t need to be purposeful; it just needed to be something the student was interested in learning more about. After some discussion, we agreed he would work with his original idea but he would research Islamic architecture and draw principles from Islamic architecture to generate his computer design. I then asked him again what he would do with this knowledge and if there was some way he could use his knowledge in a service capacity. He reflected on this question and decided to develop a lesson plan following the completion of his design which could contribute to the school's Humanities 8 curriculum. The objectives of the lesson plan would be to: increase knowledge about Islamic architecture and its principles; to shift existing stereotypes about Islamic architecture being characterized by domes and minarets; and also, to develop an increased awareness about the impact of the built environment on individuals and communities.

It is not my intention to make generalizations about educational practice based on one anecdote. However, I do see recurrent trends in the education of my own children and in the education of children around me that invite an increased thoughtfulness about what curriculum can mean and how we can create conditions for inquiry and interpretation in our classrooms and amongst our teacher learning communities. I do believe educational settings have become increasingly inquiry oriented. What I am less sure about is whether the inquiries are developed sufficiently: to enable our students’ capacities to relate to their world and to each other; to articulate
enduring values emanating from the tradition they are studying whether that tradition be math or literature; and to engage with a plurality of knowledge sources in interpretive ways that open up horizons of potentiality for themselves and for their worlds (Huebner, 1966a, 1966b, 1967). The claim this study is making is that curriculum inquiry is an interpretive quest for both teachers and students. The interpretive quest necessitates attention to cultivating relationality with text, with disciplines, and with individuals. It calls for an understanding of the temporal aspects of existence as they reveal themselves in traditions and disciplines. And it requires a pluralistic engagement with ways of knowing our world so we are able to see the possibility for transcendence within ourselves, within each other, within the tradition or discipline, and within our society. These thoughts resonate with Huebner’s (1974b) thoughts on intentional education as he writes about the individual-world dialectic relationship. Huebner asserts that curriculum work and design need to attend to the phenomena of tradition, to the activity of hermeneutical interpretation as a bridge between self and other, and to the idea of community living as a caring collective. I would respectfully submit that such notions are important to investigate further in teaching, teacher education and curriculum work, not only in the Muslim context, but more broadly. I am acknowledging that these ideas are engaged with in classrooms. However, the question I am raising is to what extent do we work the idea through for its transformative possibilities towards community realization? To refer back to the Personal Project example, designing a computer generated building would draw on the tradition of architecture and its enduring principles. It would also require a degree of hermeneutic interpretation in understanding how to apply those principles to meet the intended purpose. But in what way would the act of inquiring into and developing this design enable some sort of realization for the school community and its students? As we consider and develop the various parts in the hermeneutic circle of our educational practice, how can we continually revisit the whole, our larger horizon, to shape and enrich the parts of our experience? Those are the nature of questions I am suggesting this study is inviting us to consider.
The Interpretive Quest of This Study

*Signs For Those Who Reflect and Reason*

With it He grows for you grain, olives, palms, vines
and all kinds of other crops.
There truly is a sign in this for those who reflect.
By His command He has made the night and day,
the sun, moon and stars all benefit to you.
There truly are signs in this for those who use their reason.

(Qur’an, 16:11-2)

The Qur’anic verse above is rich in symbolism and offers a multitude of interpretations. One interpretation that has inspired this study is the bounty of life on earth and the richness it can offer when we engage our reflective and intellectual capacities to disclose layers of new meaning. Our opportunity in religious education, and I would suggest in education more broadly, is to reflect and reason alongside our students nurturing their awareness of signs around them and cultivating their reflective sensibilities to discover their own potential and the potentiality of their world. In this study, I am suggesting that curricular inquiry pay attention to the dimensions of relationality with our world, of the enduring values and collective wealth (Huebner, 1974b) offered by tradition, and of ways of knowing that enable us to see potentiality and bounty in our world.

The study examines the lived experiences of seven secondary religious education teachers from the Ismaili community and of how through their curricular inquiry, the teachers are interpreting and creating lived meanings about curriculum, about pedagogy and about community. I commence by situating the study’s importance and complexity. The Ismaili community is in the beginning phase (the first five years) of initiating a significant shift in secondary religious education. This shift entails the introduction of a global religious education curriculum which takes on a civilizational and humanistic approach to the teaching of Ismaili Muslim religious education. The other significant aspect to this shift is the formal preparation of the teachers through a double masters’ program in Muslim Societies and Civilizations and in Education for their professional role with the ITREBs.
In looking at curriculum inquiry within a religious education context, three considerations are presented as societal factors that may be impacting both teachers and students. The first is forces of secularization; the second is conceptions of tradition and modernity; and the third is misperceptions of Islam in the West. Why these considerations are discussed is because in secular environments, religion is relegated to private rather than public spaces. Although secular conditions make it possible for several faiths to co-exist rather than privileging one dominant faith, the presence of religion has declined from public spaces. This means that encounters with religion may be limited in everyday life as students spend most of their days in public spaces. Accordingly, if religion is experienced only in private spaces of the home or spaces of worship, tradition and modernity may be seen to be conflicting notions even though concepts of tradition and modernity are plural, diverse, contextual, interdependent and continually evolving. Hence, the less society comes into contact with religions, the less informed we are about particular religions. As a society, unless we pursue knowledge and understanding on our own initiative or as part of our schooling, the media becomes our knowledge source on religion and our conceptions are influenced by what the media chooses to portray. This is particularly prevalent with Islam which is associated with fundamentalism, traditionalism, violence and resistance to modernity. Muslims need counter voices to such stereotypes who can articulate the richness of the values of Islam, its contribution to world civilizations historically, and the potential of this heritage to conceptualize new expressions of being for the modern world.

These considerations are important to take into account when deliberating on the religious education of adolescents in a minority Muslim community within the Western context. In looking at religious education, however, it is beneficial to acknowledge not only challenges but also promising opportunities for the holistic development of children. Some promising perspectives on religious education highlighted in Chapter One include opening up transcendent epistemologies for students, encouraging meaning making and interpretation about the world and the views of others, increasing confidence and skills to engage with existential issues, providing a rootedness in one’s tradition, and nurturing consciousness about what it means to live faithfully in the world. The study is asking questions of how the teachers are interpreting their experiences and creating lived meanings about the IIS Secondary Curriculum and its intentionality; of how these
interpretive meanings influence their development and enactment of classroom pedagogies and the pedagogical relation with students; and of how the interpretive meanings of their lived experiences influence the curricular inquiry in their teacher learning communities.

**Interpreting Temporal Knowledge**

The IIS curriculum is a representation of the Shia Ismaili Muslim living tradition, its historical evolution, its civilizational influence, its normative beliefs, and its value systems as shown through history, literature, philosophy, ethics and doctrines. The community is a global community dispersed in over twenty-five countries and hence, heterogeneous in its social and cultural practices. The unifying factor for the Ismaili community is the allegiance to the Imam of the time and his authority to guide the global community in its spiritual and material affairs. The intention of the second chapter of the study is to highlight temporal aspects of the living tradition. The initial point to note for those less familiar with the Muslim community is that although all Muslims are united by the *Shahada* meaning, there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, Muslims have diverged over time into multiple communities of interpretation. The specific community of interpretation guides how Islam is understood and practiced right from the interpretation of the Qur’an to present day.

For the Shia Ismaili Muslims, the knowledge of the Qur’an and the ability to interpret this knowledge, *ta’wil*, has been vested in the authority of the Imam beginning with Imam Ali and continuing through rightful hereditary passage\(^{69}\) to the current 49\(^{th}\) Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV. Through time, the Imams have provided guidance on the temporal aspects of this living tradition emphasizing the unity and balance between faith and world, *din and dunya*. In this view, faith is not viewed as being a detached entity from the world but the relationship between faith and worldly engagements, between the immanent and the transcendent, are inextricably woven together. Therefore, the ongoing pursuit of knowledge of the world and of the transcendent are an

\(^{69}\) Hereditary through the family of the Prophet, the *ahl al-bayt*
integral part of the quest of the living tradition as it is through increasing our knowledge and our interpretive capacities that we are able to define our relations to the world and understand our being within the world. Furthermore, as vicegerents of God on this Earth, we are responsible for using our interpretive knowledge to protect, nurture and steward God’s creation towards enriching community and society. A central belief is that humankind is created from one common soul and hence, our quest is also to discover the God-given potential and beauty in ourselves and in others. Such insight is revealed and formed in the interpretive process characteristic of the esoteric tradition of the Ismailis which invites the believer to look beyond literal meanings and uncover what may not be readily apparent. In that way, we are able to see the infinitude of possibilities before us that allow us to make and remake our worlds within the grace of the Divine.

The quest of the Shia Ismaili Muslim living tradition has been and continues to be an interpretive quest. Our teachers are already in the midst of this living tradition and its interpretive perspectives. The study’s aim was to garner a better understanding of the ways teachers are interpreting the living tradition and the curriculum for themselves and for their students. I wanted to examine how interpretive principles are being enacted within themselves and their students; and also, how curriculum inquiry can summon forth the rich inheritance of our interpretive tradition.

**Interpreting Relational Knowledge**

I turn to the educational discourse to see what we can learn about curriculum inquiry that facilitates our relationality to the world. Dewey’s (1909) quote presented at the beginning of Chapter Three continues to play on my mind as he is referring to the moral purpose of education and how instruction can render our behaviour more consistent, more enlightened and more vigorous. The question being provoked for me is what kind of education or instruction or curriculum or pedagogy is compelling enough to have us change our habituated behaviour and ways of thinking. The reconceptualist movement (Pinar et al., 2008) offers a way of understanding curriculum through

\[\text{Qur’anic reference 4:1}\]
interpretation and re-interpretation. Reconceptualist scholars draw on a variety of fields from the humanities in an effort to ‘humanize’ the curriculum or make curriculum relatable to students. Within the reconceptualist theories, phenomenological and hermeneutical curriculum inquiry invites us to increase our consciousness about our taken-for-granted notions of the world and, to continually re-establish our understanding and interpretation of the world (Aoki, 1990; Chambers, 2003; Jardine, 1987). One of the endeavours of the hermeneutical effort is to situate the weightiness of everydayness within grander scheme of life (Smith, 1991). This perspective is reflective of the effort being pursued in the Ismaili religious education context of finding a unity between faith and world. Relationality with the self, with the world, with the discipline and with others is brought about through attentive, creative engagements with our world (Smith, 1991) and a deepening interpretation of our fields of visualization (Gough, 2002) and of curriculum as a system of complex relationships (Doll, 2002). Hermeneutical and phenomenological curriculum inquiry asks us to be present to our experience and to take responsibility for understanding and interpreting that experience in relation to others. This continuous process of understanding and interpretation can create motive forces in the guidance of conduct that render behaviour more enlightened, vigorous and consistent.

Dwayne Huebner's work in curriculum has been drawn upon for its alignment and suitability to this study. Huebner’s work privileges attention to the human spirit in the educational environment. He does not see the spirit or the spiritual as a detached entity from education. Instead, his claim that educational work is moral and spiritual asks us to consider how we work with curriculum and how we are with children in ways that recognize our temporal nature. The most significant aspect of Huebner’s work to this study is that Huebner sees the transcendent as already within us and also, within the content in our educative environments. His curricular efforts are focused on: increasing our understanding and interpretation of the discipline or the tradition and discovering the durational aspects of the tradition; ameliorating our knowledge of the other and leaving ourselves open to transformation through the possibility revealed by the other; and acting upon the world to create and re-create just and caring conditions for children. The beauty of Huebner’s work is his presentation of curriculum as transcendent possibility in enabling our relation to our worlds, and in enabling a joyful, responsible participation in
our lived moments, drawing from the past, creating moments of vision in the present, and projecting our potentiality into the future. Huebner’s work provides a provocative framework for the curriculum inquiry of this study.

Offering phenomenological and hermeneutical possibilities, the IIS Secondary Curriculum is a representation of the curricular inheritance from the Ismaili Muslim tradition. Our teachers are seeking to understand this curricular inheritance and to give the inheritance life and meaning for students through their cumulative interaction. In taking a civilizational approach which integrates the humanistic experience and portrays normative beliefs, the curriculum situates faith phenomenologically, that is, within human experience. The curriculum also calls upon its educators and its students to engage critically and creatively with the text and draw forth meanings through hermeneutical interpretation. These interpretive efforts allow us to understand the transcendent and the immanent as interrelated notions and thus, allow us see our life and our enactments as practices of faith. In other words, we do not live our lives in selected moments and live our faith in other moments. Like the hermeneutical circle, we develop the ability to understand and interpret the everydayness of life within the horizon of our faith tradition.

**Interpreting Hermeneutical Knowledge**

Discussions of Chapters Two and Three have presented the importance of interpretation as a central tenet of the Shia Ismaili Muslim living tradition, and of curricular inquiry which seeks to bring about insightful relations with and thoughtful actions in our world. This study required a methodological frame which honored and applied hermeneutic tradition in looking at the lived experiences and lived meanings of the teachers’ curriculum inquiry. The study was not intended to arrive at definitive answers as to what teacher curricular, pedagogical and community practices should be. It was intended to disclose a greater, more nuanced level of understanding of the lived experiences and lived meanings as interpreted from those experiences of curricular inquiry. In doing so, the study has highlighted the importance of relationality with text, with humans, and with the tradition as a condition for interpretation. The study has also suggested that relationality enables interpretation of temporal knowledge. And lastly, in order to see possibility in our worlds, the study is proposing we need to cultivate hermeneutic knowledge, ways of knowing and ways of interpreting our world.
The concept of the hermeneutic circle was used to design the methods of the study. Understanding is not linear, it is circular, referential and dialogical where the individual receives words and extracts meaning through a divinatory process (Palmer, 1969). The teachers, in interpreting their curricular inquiry, moved back and forth between the larger understandings of the Ismaili living tradition as represented by the IIS curriculum and their role as educators, to the parts of their experiences with curriculum text, with students, and with community. Through the study, the hermeneutic circle deepened understanding and subsequent interpretation and application to experience. The teachers began with their own horizon of pre-understanding. Through interpretive processes with myself as the researcher, with various texts including the texts of their own experiences and interpretations, they began to access new ways of understanding curricular inquiry as did I. Together, we were cultivating a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Gadamer (1981) in his philosophical hermeneutics is arguing for a self-conscious knowledge that enables us to know more about the world. In this way, we benefit from both the progress of modern science and the rich cultural inheritance of human knowledge to achieve a new self-understanding of humanity. Gadamer (1960/1989) views tradition as integral to conditioning our interpretation and asks us to actively engage with our pre-understandings and to venture into spaces of the familiar and unfamiliar. We enter into conversation with tradition mediating between past and present and opening up meaning and possibilities into our world (Gallagher, 1992). The experience of the research process allowed for the teachers to develop a consciousness of their pre-understandings through phenomenological writing and through hermeneutic conversations. They played with the parts and the whole in our conversations; we interpreted back and forth both open to conversion of our existing understandings. The teachers had the opportunity to carry their lived meanings with them to subsequent experiences and reflect their evolving interpretations back through writing and our hermeneutic conversations. We were all guided by the possibility of new ways of seeing and thinking within a deep sense of tradition (Smith, 1991) and of reconstituting ourselves as educators enriched by an awareness of our profound interdependence as a human community (Atkins, 1988).

Our hermeneutical inquiry was not chosen fortuitously from a plethora of other research methodologies. It was essential to this study as the deep sense of tradition
being referred to is a tradition of inquiry, of quest, and of interpretation towards self-understanding. It is the act of continual interpretation that makes a tradition living and gives it diverse expressions over time. The esoteric nature of the faith demands ongoing interpretation to avoid the fossilization of faith, religious experience, and our evolution as human beings. Interpretation is a going beyond what is known; as humans we are capable of transcending the finitude of what is known (Esmail, 1998). And in doing so, this quest is a relational quest. Esmail explains that the sacred is known in a context of a relationship; the sacred becomes known to man in intermediary forms, and relationship through its own nature is plural and not definitive. Interpretation allows us to see our world symbolically rather than seeking exact representations of reality. Meanings lie latent in our educational conceptions, decisions and enactments. It is through our inquiry and continual quest of reflecting and reasoning on ‘the signs around us’ that we can increase our luminosity, our capacity to ‘see’ and understand ourselves, our students and our community as incomplete but aspiring towards ideal fulfillment (Esmail, 1998).

The Interpretive Quest of the Teachers’ Curriculum Inquiry

_The Birds Find the Simurgh_

_A new life flows towards them from that bright Celestial and ever-living Light – Their souls rose free of all they’d been before;_

_The past and all its actions were no more... There in the Simurgh’s radiant face they saw Themselves, the Simurgh of the world – with awe They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend They were the Simurgh and the journey’s end.

_They see the Simurgh – at themselves they stare, And see a second Simurgh standing there; They look at both and see the two are one, That this is that, that this, the goal is won._

_They ask (but inwardly; they make no sound) The meaning of these mysteries that confound Their puzzled ignorance – how is it true That “we” is not distinguishable here from “you”?

307
And silently their shining Lord replies:
“I am a mirror set before your eyes,
And all who come before my splendour see
Themselves, their own unique reality;
You came as thirty birds and therefore saw
These selfsame thirty birds, not less nor more;
If you had come as forty, fifty – here
An answering forty, fifty, would appear;
Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far,
It is yourselves you see and what you are…
Though you traversed the Valleys’ depths and fought
With all the dangers that the journey brought,
The journey was in Me, the deeds were Mine –
You slept secure in Being’s inmost shrine.”…

Then, as they listened to the Simurgh’s words,
A trembling dissolution filled the birds –
The substance of their being was undone,
And they were lost like shade before sun;
Neither the pilgrims nor their guide remained.
The Simurgh ceased to speak, and silence reigned.

(Excerpt from Conference of the Birds, On the Wings of Words, IIS, 2009, p. 112)

The poem, Conference of the Birds, is a mystical fable written about a group of birds who travel with their guide, the hoopoe, who serves as their mediating figure through their journey. This literary piece draws upon themes of struggle and discovery, oneness and diversity, amongst others as characteristic of quests pursued. At the end of their journey, thirty birds survive and assemble looking for what they have journeyed for. They turn inward to discover the Simurgh\(^{71}\), their mythical originator, is within them. “In experiencing their joint quest and condition, they have discovered their commonality and destiny” (Nanji, 1995, p. 4). One of the insights the poem offers is understanding emerges from experience of self and knowledge of the Other (Nanji, 1995). A related idea is presented by MacIntyre (2007) in which we come to understand the true nature of the good and of the self through the quest.

\(^{71}\) The translation of the Persian word ‘Simurgh’ is thirty birds.
This study was designed to invite a group of teachers to live in the hermeneutic circle and to continually interpret parts of their experience, the valleys that they are traversing, and how their interpretations and the lived meanings they are forming increase understanding of the whole. The teachers also engaged in articulating and interpreting their understanding of the whole, of the larger horizon or vision of the living tradition, of who they are as teachers within this tradition, and of the intentionality of the curriculum they are entrusted with to guide the parts of their practice. The hermeneutic circle or quest does not end; it advances or spirals upwards. Their interpretive efforts brought about an increased awareness of the need for, or the value of, three presences of knowledge when interacting with curriculum, students, and the community: relational knowledge, temporal knowledge and hermeneutic knowledge. The quest is not to reach a final destination; it is to continuously create our destiny as a community. Destiny, in the educational way Huebner has conceived it, is choosing to remake ourselves through the continuous interpreting of the past within our potentiality of being (Magrini, 2011).

We make and remake our being in the world through our deepening interpretations of the world and the moments of vision education opens up for us. Like the birds, the quest becomes one of self-understanding and of understanding the other through the continual pursuit and interpretation of knowledge. Our potentiality for being is revealed in seeing the transcendent within ourselves and within our relations through our communal pursuit to discover possibilities in our aspiration towards the ideal. One way of thinking about the ideals reflective of the living tradition is to characterize the quest as one of seeking a unity of being between faith and world, epistemological humility, community realization and an attunement to beauty and infinitude. The first three interpretive principles have been related to curriculum, pedagogy, and community in previous chapters. The fourth, attunement to beauty and infinitude, will be developed further as a concluding discussion to this chapter.

**Curriculum as Consciousness: The Quest towards a Unity of Being**

In what ways does curricular inquiry with the IIS curriculum text bring about interpretive perspectives towards a unity of being, a unity of faith and world? What is the intentionality of the IIS Secondary Curriculum as interpreted by the teachers? The teachers’ responses were thematized in the following way: first, they shared their experiences as to how they are observing the relationship of their students between faith
and world as one that is dichotomized and one that struggles with identity articulation; second, the teachers shared their interpretations of the intentionality of the IIS curriculum and how the curriculum situates faith within our contemporary environment; and third, the teachers spoke about their own hermeneutic processes with the text and the need to internalize and embody the enduring ideas of the living tradition before they could bring the content alive for their students.

The teachers described how they are interpreting their students’ relation between faith and world. These responses are not intended to be generalized or representative of the majority of the student body. They are intended to give a sense of some of the lived realities requiring consideration for curriculum inquiry. There is a sense of a lack of groundedness or rootedness in the living tradition shown by the teachers’ description of some students as aimless and wandering. There is a sense of the tremendous academic pressure students are under, which is shown through their inconsistent attendance as well as their perceived lack of engagement. And there is a sense of students conceiving of their faith as prominent in congregational spaces and less so (not absent, but less prominent) in their everyday lived moments which teachers described as a dichotomy between their “religious lives and their regular lives.”

There is also indication that students are negotiating, and in some cases, struggling with the multiple identities they experience or feel they should have. The students’ questions are not centred solely around what it means to be Ismaili but seem to inquire as to what it means to be Ismaili and Muslim or what it means to be Ismaili and Canadian or what it means to be Ismaili in today’s day and age. Depending on the demographic in which the youth find themselves, they are either not very well equipped to articulate the legitimacy of the Shia Ismaili interpretation amongst other Muslims or they are not required to speak of their identity to any great depth in non-Muslim settings and prefer to be evasive putting up walls between their religious and secular lives. This last bit of preferring the fragmentation of identity was interesting as there has always been an assumption in our work that the need to articulate our identity is urgent for the youth. In one hermeneutic conversation, a teacher described her students as responding that they were fine with their identities and did not feel this urgency in their daily lives (non-Muslim settings). These students were interested in their peers’ narratives about having to explain their identity, but felt it did not affect them to a great
extent. In both cases, however, student confidence in their identity and living tradition does not seem to be prevalent, or at least the students’ ability to articulate their identity and reconcile what it means to be a Canadian Muslim Ismaili. A related sentiment that was revealed was students asking about, “How do I connect with my faith?”Whilst some students consider practice of faith as their regular participation in congregational prayers, others according to the teachers, seem distant or disconnected from their faith. As far as curriculum inquiry is concerned, these themes show there is a range of diverse needs; the nature of the students’ relationship between faith and world is not only diverse but complex. Hence, much thought needs to be given as to how the curriculum content is being situated for the students, and whether the situating of the curriculum content is in relation to the lived realities of the students, or whether the curriculum is being situated on the assumptions of the teacher influenced exclusively by the teachers’ interpretation of the intentionality of the curriculum.

In accessing the teachers’ pre-understandings about the concepts of curriculum and living tradition, the teachers indicated they were still formulating their conceptions of these constructs and appreciated the space to work through their emerging understanding. All teachers recognized the dynamic nature of tradition and saw their role as “breathing life” into the tradition to attach new meanings to it. This process of meaning making required intellectual engagement from both the teacher and the students. There was recognition of change and constancy as being integral aspects of living traditions and teachers expressed that this was an important area to dwell on further as part of the curriculum inquiry. Questions raised for further reflection included, “Which parts are changing and which parts are constant? Am I even certain of this? Is this duality reflected in my planning within my lessons?” Teachers did conceive of curriculum as a text inviting interaction and interpretation, that it was not an inert text, but a text that once again needed “life breathed” into it. The metaphor of breathing life, spirit and vitality into the curriculum and the living tradition was used repeatedly by most teachers and they saw themselves as the ‘life-giving sources’ to the curriculum.

The teachers interpreted the intentionality of the IIS Secondary Curriculum as an endeavor to enact our inherited tradition in a manner that is resonant with modern times and reflective of the human narrative. One teacher spoke about the horizon of our living tradition and the curriculum being a route or journey towards this horizon. How the
curriculum offers this route is through portraying the ethos of the Shia Ismaili Muslim living tradition phenomenologically through human experience and how the values of this living tradition has influenced (and continues to influence) interpretive efforts in shaping human experience and meanings over time. The curriculum calls upon students to learn in an interpretive way through critical thinking, personal reflection, and the search for meaning. In this way, the curriculum can offer students enriched perspectives or ways of knowing their world and can inspire students to ‘author their destinies’ within the values of their faith. The teachers in this study have a sophisticated understanding of the integrated approach of this curriculum. They were able to articulate how the living tradition is placed with the context of the human narrative. They were also able to articulate how humanistic aspiration is related to the flourishing or demise of societies and civilizations in the past and in present day. The triad referred to by Huebner (1962), and in more contemporary scholarship (Henderson & Gornik, 2007), of curriculum being the study of the individual, of society, and of the discipline or tradition, surfaced repeatedly in the hermeneutic conversations. However, what appeared to be less certain was the ability of the teachers to hold these three pieces and integrate these aspects seamlessly into their thinking, their planning and their teaching. There tended to be primacy given to one or two of these pieces rather than a consistent interweaving of the three. MacIntyre’s (2007) description of the quest of a living tradition as historical (the tradition or discipline), social (society) and the search for good (individual) resonates with this triad as does Hodgson’s (1974) conception of creative vision (tradition or discipline), group commitment (society), and cumulative interaction (the individual’s journey).

In reflecting to what extent the curriculum enables an integration of the immanent and transcendent, all teachers endorsed the ideal of curriculum as being transformative, connected to a greater good, and having the potential to inspire students to live differently. Teachers felt the curriculum should be a source of transcendent knowledge.
Some teachers felt the transcendent aspects are not apparent in the curriculum; others felt they are beginning to see the transcendent or the spiritual inherent within the content. All teachers expressed that accessing transcendence was dependent on the particular teacher and the interpretive consciousness they carried about the living tradition. In other words, a teacher’s disposition towards spirituality was the prime factor in how the curriculum content was related or not related to transcendent elements. Most teachers also shared that although they desired an integration of faith and world for their students towards a unity of being, they themselves experienced a struggle in carrying or feeling a ‘God-consciousness’ at all times within themselves, particularly in the urgency of the moment in planning or in the classroom. Mechanical habits for us as teachers are hard to break through, and yet, the teachers admitted they knew their effectiveness in this role was contingent on embodying this curricular consciousness both in and out of the classroom.

The teachers spoke of developing their curricular consciousness in two ways through their hermeneutic inquiry with the curriculum. The first was their own understanding and deepening interpretation of the Ismaili Muslim living tradition. As is to be expected, the teachers have established and pursued their own respective faith journeys and each one has deep commitments to the community and to the tradition, although these commitments are enacted in different ways given the personal nature of faith. Most teachers spoke about their increasing consciousness of faith prompted by the involved curriculum inquiry required for their work. For some, this consciousness came about as an increased alignment to what was described as the Qur’anic ethos. For others, it increased their awareness of how what they were teaching about requires an engagement in their daily lives in order to bring about coherence and integrity between what they were teaching and who they are as human beings. For some, it was a broadened understanding of faith. And for others, it was an increased comfort in and inspiration from the normative beliefs of faith. Although the impact is being felt in

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72 This perception may change once all the curriculum modules have been completed and published, particularly the modules on Faith and Worship and on the Qur’an.
different ways, what is consistent is a sense of increased consciousness to the living tradition that is present in their daily lives. This consciousness is enabling the teachers to see their worlds in different ways and is provoking questions on how they should be in this world and the impact of their choices. A teacher emphasizes passionately, “As a teacher, you are curriculum . . . you are constantly engaging with the world around you with purpose . . . for ways you can see it anew."

The other hermeneutic engagement, which in all likelihood has resulted in the curricular consciousness being discussed above, is the willingness and desire to be in conversation with the curriculum text. The teachers are looking beyond the literal meaning of the text and are asking questions about why the content has been selected, what is absent and why, what pre-understandings they are bringing to the text, what meanings lie latent in the text awaiting discovery, and how to make the content present to the students (Huebner, 1974a) or what this content would mean for the worlds of the students? The interpretive engagement with text is not one of “detached empiricism” as one teacher expressed. The immersion in the text is iterative, layered and dialogical. It is iterative in that there is a hermeneutic of the letter in their manifold attempts to understand what is written. It is layered in that there is the hermeneutic of the sense in peeling back the layers to understand the contexts in which the content is being presented. It is dialogical in the desire to know the hermeneutic of spirit which is the view of life within which these ideas stand (Palmer, 1969). Entering into conversation with the text requires an openness on the part of the individual to give freely of his or her self and to remain open to conversion by that which is yet to be known (Huebner, 1963). The interpretive process for the teachers is characteristic of this kind of conversation where, as they discover increasingly the inspiration of the living tradition, they desire to bring this inspiration, this life and spirit, to their students to bring about a curricular consciousness for unifying faith and world.

What then are considerations for curriculum inquiry with the text? The interpretive processes of the teachers can be described as relational, temporal and hermeneutic. The teachers are seeking ways to teach the living tradition through the curriculum to bring about a greater sense of faith consciousness in the everyday moments of their students’ lives. The aim is to foster commitment to the creative vision of this living tradition and to generate cumulative interaction where life is lived.
underpinned by the values and ethos of the faith. Their curricular inquiry entails an inquiry into the relations between the living tradition and the world. How is faith present in our civilizations of past and present and what is the relationship between faith and world? The curriculum inquiry entails a second aspect of temporality where teachers are uncovering durational aspects of the living tradition and how these aspects have inspired the human narrative over time. How is our living tradition representative of beauty, truth and freedom and how do I see those values in our tradition today? A teacher shared in his final protocol, “When speaking about a tradition, we are talking about something we care deeply about, that holds some resonance and that carries great meaning for those who follow the tradition.” The third aspect of the curricular inquiry is the interpretive process of what content, ideas and spirit should be summoned forth for the students. How do we bring forth those aspects of our living tradition to our students to enable a love and a responsibility for our world, for each other and for the tradition?
The following considerations are being put forth as emerging from the study:

a. Curricular inquiry should entail all three dimensions presented above: relational, temporal and hermeneutic. Teachers are paying attention to these three elements to varying degrees; however, what is being suggested is that sustained attention is needed for all three dimensions to internalize the depth and breadth of not only the ideas but also the spirit the curriculum and the teacher can offer. The questions of, what is the relationship between this tradition (or discipline) and the world? What are the enduring values this tradition offers of beauty and possibility? What about these ideas and the view of life within which the ideas stand can be summoned forth for our students? These are questions pertinent to curricular endeavors of any discipline be it religious education, mathematics education or business education.

b. Curricular inquiry of this nature requires appropriate conditions of support from the educational organization. These conditions include: mentorship from experienced educators; relevant and responsive professional development; processes for the sharing of peer expertise; and the acknowledgement that curricular inquiry is a long term process and needs to be sustained for gains to be made. In this case, both the IIS and the ITREBs should take responsibility to ensure that both pre-service and in-service teacher development processes are developed within common frameworks and principles and are embedded within curriculum theory and practice. Another significant consideration is emphasizing curricular inquiry at the field level through according the time and the resources necessary for this type of hermeneutic work. Teachers repeatedly shared that they are not looking for quick solutions or strategies but they are vying for time to engage in interpretive thinking and to ensure that the spirit of the curriculum and the consciousness of the living tradition is threaded through to the classroom. Currently, it is not always so. One teacher expressed, “The curriculum emphasizes the importance of articulation, identity formation and creating meaning for oneself.” But she went on to say that teaching can easily divert from these intentions to a content-heavy, daunting experience with “pressure to perform rather than to explore.” Professional development efforts need to consider the interpretation of experience and place theory within this interpretation rather than attending to theory alone. Praxis-oriented development is complex, needs to be sustained, and takes time. This consideration would be equally applicable to secular settings.

c. For curricular inquiry to be generative, each teacher must take responsibility for their active, intentional engagement with the hermeneutic circle. Through the IIS, the work at ITREB, and interactions with community and other texts, parts of our experience and understanding will be revealed. It is up to each of us as teachers to take these parts and make meaning of these parts in relation to the
whole of the curriculum, our living tradition and our role in mediating between the two. The curricular consciousness we are seeking is an understanding that is formed through our historicity, our social location, the nature of our life narrative (Gadamer, 1960/1989; MacIntyre, 2007) and our engagement with community and tradition. Once we have formed our own curricular consciousness, we are then able to bring it forth to our students and communities of learning for further interpretive efforts to enable a fusion of horizons and a new self-understanding of humanity (Gadamer, 1960/1989) towards an effort to enrich our communities of scholarship (Greene, 1978).

As teachers, we need to be in the continual quest of reflecting on the signs around us and using our reason, our intellect, to interpret these signs so we can fulfill the obligations of our role in a manner that is responsive to the world around us. Huebner (1966d) offers the term, ‘responsibly responsive.’ Influenced by corporate discourse, we often hear words such as change and innovation as ways of leading educational reform. Huebner suggests evolution should take place by respecting the historicity of any situation and describes change as a continuous process of keeping something alive, viable and responsive to the world. Responsible responsiveness is the awareness of our “obligations as historical beings for the continual creation of the world,” (p. 120) and interpreting our decisions through the continuum of both change and permanence. The curricular consciousness we are seeking is one of both change and permanence; change to be responsive to the world around us and permanence of the roots of our living tradition. As one of the teachers said, “There is no doubt that people coming of age in the 21st century will need to develop unprecedented levels of intercultural cooperation, mutual and moral concern, creativity and skill in effectively addressing the challenges of our world today. And, if she succeeds, she thereby situates the universal (learning about being human) within the particular (learning about being Ismaili) and vice versa by drawing inspiration from the faith.” Through our curricular inquiry and the ensuing acts of practice, we can summon forth the spirit of the living tradition for our students and nurture dispositions of being responsibly responsive within our communities.

The Pedagogical Encounter: A Quest for Epistemological Humility

The teachers understand the IIS curriculum as a representation of our living tradition which invites students to engage in meaning making of the integration of faith
and world. Their responsibility is to inquire into and enact a responsiveness of this curricular inheritance to the worlds of the students. The teachers indicated that their curriculum inquiry does not stop at working with the text; it flows into the classroom where a greater realization and a deeper internalization of the curriculum take place for the teacher through working with their students. The teachers have the opportunity to establish their relationality with the IIS curriculum text and its ideas of the living tradition. The curricular endeavor becomes more complete as it is taken into the space of the pedagogical encounter and the student intentionality is brought forth into the inquiry. In the work with the curriculum text, there seemed to be an increasing level of confidence and comfort emerging from the teachers as to the kind of curricular consciousness they are developing through their interpretive efforts with the IIS curriculum. However, there was a sense of uncertainty, unpredictability and doubt about the pedagogical encounter and to what extent this curriculum of the living tradition was resonating with the students. In responding to their struggles, the teachers are seeking knowledge from a plurality of sources to enhance and elucidate their understanding and interpretation. They recognize that this teaching effort requires more than knowledge of the discipline and knowledge of instructional skills. It requires knowledge of the students’ lifeworlds, their dilemmas, their struggles, and their relationship to faith. It also requires crafting new ways of working with children and creating spaces for inquiry and interpretation in their classrooms. This epistemological humility puts into challenge what is already known and asks for not only openness, but an active search towards what is yet to be known.

The teachers have come to this vocation with deep commitment and noble aspirations of wanting to affect large scale community transformation. The intensely personal nature of the work is sometimes elevating and sometimes burdensome. As educators, we derive our fulfillment from believing we make positive impacts on the lives of children; that is why many of us have chosen this profession. We desire so earnestly to provide our students with education that sparks a connectedness, a sense of inspiration and wonder, a thirst to know more, and we wish to contribute to the future of our living tradition within our community. And yet, when we encounter sporadic attendance, disinterest or what we perceive as disengagement from learning, and questionable actions from our students, we tend to think of those experiences as personal failures as we are deeply invested in being agents of change for our youth.
This weightiness can result in a loss of morale, confidence and love for the work and can cause self-doubt.

The complexity of the challenge of the pedagogical encounter increases with the ambiguity and multi-faceted demands of the teacher role. Most teachers anticipated their role to be that of preparing curriculum plans, implementing these curricular designs in a pedagogically appropriate way for adolescents, establishing systems for assessment and feedback to students and to parents, and contributing to parental and community education. Yet, in addition to these projected roles, there is also the experience of the unanticipated where teachers are describing expectations of their roles as mentor, friend, performer, pastor, and counsellor. Perceptions from the community sometimes indicate that the teachers need to be the education expert, the community expert, the religious expert and the programming expert. The reality is that the teachers are not trained for all these roles and, they are mostly in the beginning stages of this particular career and are still in the process of developing mastery in areas of their work. Furthermore, there is great difficulty and sometimes great angst in distinguishing between where their professional responsibilities end and where their personal lives come in. In our commitment to this vocation, we have dissolved the lines between personal and professional; the work and its demands and blessings have become intensely personal and intensely professional.

The pedagogical space is not a space of distress, in fact for the most part, lessons are as you would see in most secular places. In my role as the Academic Director, I have sat in on many classes over the past five years. The students are generally polite and respectful, they oblige and do what the teacher asks of them, they lapse into social behaviour chatting and laughing when the opportunities present themselves. There is some groaning, rolling of the eyes, resistance to activities, particularly when associated with reading and writing. Some students are satisfied with what is being offered and go along on the journey. Others less so and their actions and gestures indicate they do not understand why they are learning what they are. The teachers are drawing from their own history of educational practice to create their educational environments as well as searching out new ways of educational practice suitable for the religious education and community context. Generally speaking, the activities and discussions are fairly good. However, in our hermeneutic conversations,
the teachers are raising questions regarding to what extent the kids are “connecting the dots” about how their learning is reflective of our living tradition and can be applied in ways that show potentiality and possibility of enhancing the everydayness of their lived moments. In other words, are the students able to take the parts and see them in relation to the whole? What kinds of epistemologies do teachers and students need to draw from to enable inquiry and interpretation within the hermeneutic circle? As is reflected in the data excerpts shown in Chapter Six, the teachers are exploring different interpretive processes with their students in the classroom space. This next section will provide a summary of the hermeneutical spaces and the lived meanings being formed from these spaces by the teachers. I will then propose further considerations for curriculum inquiry arising out of the pedagogical encounter.

Creating spaces of in-betweenness entails honoring both the curriculum material and student voices in concert. This does not mean that the students define the curriculum. It means that the teacher needs to pay close attention to moments when the nature of engagement is interpretive for the students. Rather than thinking about the pedagogical strategy as an entry point, the teachers are realizing that it may be necessary to flip the thinking and enter instead from where students are engaging in lively discussions and examining what the impetus seems to be for interpretive learning. As more than one teacher remarked, when incorporating newness into practice, particularly newness that is difficult, there is a tendency to fall back into habituated ways of practice. I suppose that is true of any practice, be it educational or religious. What is it then that provides the motive force for shifting our way of being?

Creating spaces of self-reflexivity may in part respond to the question above. The teachers are uncovering the possibility of the curriculum as a lens to examine how we know what we know, how our knowledge is formed, and how our knowledge influences our decisions. Self-reflexive questions such as what do I believe, why do I believe what I believe, and how do my actions align (or misalign) with my beliefs are explorations that may lead students to a strengthened sense of their own agency and how the values of tradition can guide that agency. I am reminded of Huebner’s (1974) thinking on making the content present to the child to enable them to create and re-create their worlds instead of hoping that what happens in our students’ lives is a consequence of our offerings.
Self-reflexivity can happen with the cultivation of inquiry skills. The teachers are also endeavoring to foster deep intellectual inquiry through spaces that uncover and engage the question behind the questions. An important concern for curricular inquiry should be to what extent are we asking students to use their already existing thinking capacities and to what extent are we nurturing new thinking skills and new ways of looking at the world. Part of the ability to conceive new paradigms calls for releasing existing ways of thinking, being dissatisfied with the first possible response, and embracing doubt and uncertainty as a condition for furthering knowledge, not seeing these as a limitation to knowledge.

Related to the above, is the hermeneutic attempt to seek out and interpret multiple forms of knowledge. The teachers are working towards creating spaces of knowledge relationships. A further illustration of this interpretive process is a teacher who took the idea of ‘competition’ from the curricular materials and developed understanding around this idea from various knowledge sources. With her students, she looked at how competition plays out in their lives and its impacts. They looked at how the Ummayads were spurred by a spirit of competition from other civilizations which resulted in architectural accomplishments. They looked at the interpretation of the Qur’anic reference, “Race to do good” (5:48). And finally, the students were encouraged to integrate the different sources of knowledge (tradition, self, and world), find relationships between them, and re-create conceptions of competition that would open up possibilities for their lives within the view of their tradition. This experience allowed students to see tradition as an evolving force whose dynamism is prompted by the contextual environment and given expression to by the interpretation of individuals guided by enduring values.

Prompted by Huebner’s work, the teachers and I had involved hermeneutic exchanges of what it means to create educational spaces of sacredness and contemplation. A distinction was made between critical thinking and contemplative thinking in suggesting that contemplative thinking has the notion of the Divine encompassed within it. As we have seen, Huebner’s position (1985, 1993) is that spirituality is not an abstract entity we need to add on as an afterthought or as a separate dimension to the lesson. The transcendent can be accessed through the language of disciplines such as art and philosophy, through the social encounter with the
other, and through invoking awe and wonder in our environment (1966a, 1966b). The ability to see the spirit within our worlds can move us to new levels of existence where possibilities are revealed for ourselves and for others. In this way, contemplative thinking becomes an active process of meaning making in the educational environment rather than a detached experience from the world. One teacher reflected that learning, “cannot be measured solely in terms of cognitive skills and knowledge, but also must address wider aspects of the heart . . . including conscious self-regulation, ethical and social responsibility, and empathy and compassion for others.”

In the above interpretive effort, the transcendent is found within the immanent. Creating spaces of divinity within humanity allows for the immanent to be placed within the transcendent. One of the teachers reflected that adolescents may not be able to relate to abstract concepts of faith and therefore, we have to be more intentional about situating the abstract within the familiar. Huebner (1974b) refers to Palmer’s description of Hermes in symbolizing bringing the unintelligible or foreign to the intelligible or familiar for the child. If Hermes does not work, that is, the unintelligible is not made intelligible to the child, there is a risk of alienation from the tradition or the world. In wanting to access aesthetic ways of knowing, I have seen teachers over the past years incorporate artistic activities into their classes and asking students to express themselves and their ideas on abstract concepts such as love for Divine. For some students, they have appreciated the opportunity to do so. For others however, there is a struggle to express themselves as the meaning making work of establishing the child’s relationship with the concept, of bringing the unintelligible to the intelligible, was not undertaken as part of the educational process. Just as we can develop capacities to see the ‘moreness’ in the immanent, we can equally develop capacities to see the everydayness in the transcendent.

The teachers are thinking of classroom spaces as spaces of co-journeying where the curricular questions, the teachers’ questions and the students’ questions come together to define the pathway of the pedagogical journey. One teacher describes this space as a space to discover truth, beauty and meaning in the curricular narrative and to make meaning of these ideas for themselves. In doing so, the students and teacher become windows and mirrors to one another for the possibility of what this tradition can be in their lives. There were realizations that in making curricular decisions, the “sexy activity” had to be reconsidered or put aside for the activity that would have
lasting impact. The metaphor of a lesson as a quest seems fitting here. The birds needed a guide, the Hoopoe, to lead them through the journey, just as the students need the teacher. Nonetheless, the quest required the birds to traverse the valleys and arrive at their own self-understanding with the guidance of the Hoopoe bird. Similarly, our students need to seek out in their learning unity, disappointment, mystery, insight, impoverishment, and love, and create meaning about these human concepts and their relation to tradition. In this, the teacher is a co-journeyer who is also seeking self-understanding alongside the students.

The following considerations are being proposed for curricular inquiry emerging from the pedagogical encounter:

a. Priority attention must be given to the classroom space as being transforming, life-forming and renewing for both teachers and students. In the introduction to this thesis, I made reference to Said’s (1987) remarks on beginnings and how we shape beginnings will enable what is to follow. The beginnings of this educational program have been varied and stretched in many different directions from scheduling to parental education to career pathways for teachers to mentoring colleagues. And whilst all of these pieces and their institutionalization are necessary for an educational program, the classroom experience is one of several pieces rather than being the predominant piece requiring maximum attention and support. The teachers feel that they are pulled in multiple directions, which sometimes compromises the depth of thinking and dialogue needed for this unique educational endeavor. We need to have an intimate sense of what is happening in every classroom with every teacher, not for the purpose of monitoring performance, but for the purpose of supporting the interpretive processes. There may be a need to shift from models of observation and feedback to that of sustained dialogue partners. The experiences of the teachers are paradoxical, sometimes terrifying, sometimes elating, sometimes troubling, and sometimes provocative. The teachers require processes to think back to their lived experiences and talk through the meanings they are attributing to these experiences and how these interpretations are seen in relation to the curricular aims and student lifeworlds. If well supported, vulnerability can lead to openness and newness (Huebner, 1985a) rather than being incapacitating. Many times, the teachers expressed that they knew something different had to be done but they didn’t know how to do it. Here, I am not referring to an instructional technique but rather how to create powerful, hermeneutic spaces for students to interpret their living tradition in ways that reveal the beauty, truth, vitality and promise of their lives (Huebner, 1966c).
need to ensure our focus remains on the teaching and learning in the classroom and organizational decisions are made from that locus.

b. The role of the religious education teacher can be reconceptualised to include community presence and involvement as a formal part of the role. In previous chapters, I have emphasized that the teacher is more than a deliverer of curriculum. The teacher is a symbol of the living tradition who is looked upon as a model of enactment. As community educators, who we are as believers and how we enact our living tradition is associated with our role. Even though the argument can be made that faith is personal, and therefore these concerns are private concerns, the curriculum can remain latent until it is brought to life by the teacher both in and out of the classroom. One teacher pointed out the irony that although they are educators of the community’s living tradition, they teach behind closed doors and most of the community is not aware of what they are teaching. The study participants also expressed that vital teaching is done informally in their conversations with students outside of the formal teaching spaces. A consistent presence in the community as part of the teacher role would enable teachers to be in the community spaces inhabited by their students and the parents of their students. This presence needs to be a predictable, structured one. For example, if I am responsible for sixty students who attend my classes, I would need to know the activities they are involved with in the community and offer my involvement in a focused way where my students are present. In this way, the curriculum would extend outside of the two-hour class and students would see the living curriculum in their teachers and in their community life. Structuring the community presence as part of the teacher role also ensures work/life balance is maintained for the teachers. Moreover, the community involvement of the teachers should be cohesive with the students they are teaching and consistent enough to bring the curricular ethos to community spaces. The community presence would flow from the classroom out rather than community presence as being disassociated from the classroom.

c. In his final written protocol, a teacher puts forth his understanding saying that the curriculum text alone is, “not an illuminating source for the students” but how the inquiry is created and enacted by the teacher is what will bring light to the teaching and learning space. The hermeneutical spaces created by the teachers in their curriculum inquiry have generated questions that are well worth reflection when designing educational environments of value (Huebner 1966a, 1967) for our students. Some of these include:

- Am I continually holding both pieces, my own curricular interpretation as a teacher and the curricular interpretations of my students, in designing my educational environments?
• In what ways are my lessons providing students opportunities to be self-reflexive using new understandings and new ways of looking at their worlds?

• Am I providing structures for inquiry—consideration of alternate paradigms, discourses, questions—and creating an environment for inquiry that embraces doubt, uncertainty and mystery (Huebner, 1966d)?

• Is the content I am making present to the students mindful of three curricular presences of the tradition, the relationship to the world, and what matters to the individual (Huebner, 1974b)?

• Where in the lesson are there moments to discover and contemplate upon the spirit within the content, the transcendent within the immanent?

• How am I situating abstract notions within the familiarity of what is known to my students in order to open up the “moreness” (Huebner, 1993) of present conceptions?

• What is the metaphor of my lesson design? Is it a journey, a quest, for my students? What is my role in this journey? How are we discovering and creating destiny as co-journeymen? (Huebner, 1993).

The pedagogical encounter is a quest for epistemological humility where we are giving life to knowledge that enables human beings to transcend themselves. Every mode of knowing is the awareness that there is a better way of being in this world in relationship with the other. Our willingness to search and inquire, to be vulnerable and yet hopeful, to be creative and contemplative, lead us towards transcending possibilities of our human lives (Huebner, 1985b).

*Insights into Mysteries towards Community Realization*

Lingis (1994) provides an important insight into the mystery of pluralism and community realization. He presents recognition of the other as an interpretive activity where we are obligated to inquire about not what our needs are or what external needs are, but rather to inquire into the imperative, the thought, the narrative that the other comes with. The interpretive responsibility we carry is to understand the “imperative” of the other, their narrative, their needs and their quest for good rather than being limited by our own horizontal view. In Lingis’ view, to recognize the other is to sense the “imperative” in the thoughts of the other as a force that binds us together.

To recognize the other is to see his or her position and movements as commanded by a representation his or her thought formulates for itself in subjection to its own imperative. It is to see his position, not as produced
by laws of gravity and his movement, not as effects of physical pressures, but as produced by a representation his thought formulates for his will. It is to see her posture ordered, not by the codes of culture, but by what she sees as her task. It is to see his clenched fist or expansive smile, not produced by biological drives or psychological compulsions, but by representations of the desirable and the imperative his thought formulated. It is to see her formulations and expressions, not as instances of professional training or ethnic codings, but as issuing from her own representation of what is required and what is proper. (pp. 25-26)

Huebner (1966b) offers a related insight of the inescapable connection to the other in describing the ethical stance of the educator in the encounter with the student, "not as an embodied role, as a lesser category, but as a fellow human being who demands to be accepted on the basis of fraternity not simply on the basis of equality" (p. 110). The ethical relation between teacher and student is the foundational element of classroom community and educational life. As teachers, we carry the interpretive responsibility of sensing the 'imperative' of the child and how that imperative is manifested in their being within community.

We have seen in earlier discussions that the teacher is a symbol of the living tradition for the students just as the curriculum is a symbol of the living tradition for the teacher. If the teacher is perceived as the life-giving force to the curriculum, it is also the teacher who brings forth that life and offers the spirit of the living tradition to their students. The relationality between the student and the teacher is not functional, ends-oriented or authoritative. As teachers, we are entrusted with the care of our students and it is within this canopy of care that our students come to know the living tradition and come to love their tradition. It is not the students’ encounter with knowledge that the teacher is facilitating; it is the students’ encounter with life and its plenitude of meanings. Authentic education shows a concern for both the individual and the community where educators and students dwell together in the midst of a living tradition to consider questions about what aspects of the living tradition can be pulled forth to project our destinies (Magrini, 2011).

The teachers shared their interpretive understandings about what it means to be in community with their students. Our inquiries revealed that relationality was not simply a desirable quality in the classroom; it is paramount to the religious education space.
There is no prescribed method for relationality. As with any other ethical imperative, we create our conceptions through our individual insights and apply those interpretations to action. The teachers develop their relationships with students through opening themselves up to the students during class and outside of class, through intentionally being present in community spaces to interact with their students, through awareness of their being in the encounter with students, and most importantly, to being present in the fullness of the moment with the students for who they are rather than for what we would wish them to be. This relationality is essential for conditions of inquiry and search. It is intellectual stimulation for the quest and it is also an unspoken covenant that assures the student they will be held, cared for, and guided unconditionally through their search.

The teachers are on a quest to create hermeneutic spaces with their students that enable accessing the transcendent in their world through the possibilities and values offered by the living tradition. In doing so, they are conceptualizing the beginnings of a different kind of educational space where students can experience alternate ways of being in and knowing their worlds. The students do not need one more secular educational space that offers learning as thematized knowledge to be internalized and objectified. They are seeking spaces that allow them to “de-layer” and to explore their existential questions in an environment where doubt, uncertainty and mystery are a necessary part of the journey. One of the teachers raised the tension of our religious education spaces as undergoing an “identity crisis” and suggested we need to give due consideration to whether we are an educational program modelled on the secular system or whether we developing a space for youth to explore and interpret their understandings about how to live their faith as an integral part of their lives.

Huebner (1972) cautions religious educators to refrain from blindly accepting secular education norms for religious education communities. Instead, he suggests we need to rethink what it means to be in community and if there is a uniqueness about religious communities which lead to asking, critiquing and responding to educational questions in different ways. Khaliya’s lived experience description presented in Chapter Seven was a provocative illustration of importing contemporary educational practices and yet, finding that these practices alone may not open up the depth and possibility of the interpretive potential of the curriculum. Huebner continues his thinking on education and religion saying, “Religion is, for me, responsiveness before infinite transcendence;
attention to the norm of absolute otherness which raises into question all finite condition, all life styles" (1972, p. 179). If we fall into educating within already established finite conditions, norms, or ways of being, we can unreflectively and uncritically accept our own ways of being in the world and rest within our finite constraints. Nasr (2013) contributes that we cannot solve a problem by assessing it from the same paradigm from which the problem originated. Our classroom spaces need to embody the same spirit of “moreness” that we aspire for with our students. And through this sense of going beyond, of being in ethical relation with the other, our visions of our journey can shift and become reformed or transformed as our participation in the transcendence becomes increasingly visible (Huebner, 1993).

Much of what the teachers discovered about their classroom community can also be thought about in relation to the teacher learning communities. As was shown in Chapter Seven, the teacher learning communities are described as spaces of complexity, vulnerability, diversity, and also spaces of possibility. Or perhaps it is the complexity, vulnerability and diversity that open up the possibilities of the learning community space. The teachers are questioning how the learning community space can become a space that is increasingly interpretive rather than administrative or functional. They recognize the complexity in the concepts of tradition they are teaching our youth, in the role they are undertaking in and out of their classrooms, and in the pedagogical encounter with their students. The teachers are suggesting that the learning community space can move beyond dimensions of planning and sharing educational best practices to engaging with this complexity and its resultant struggles. There was a sense from the teachers that although they are community educators and a good part of their work is done collaboratively, the experience can still be one of isolation and loneliness. This aloneness is not a physical experience; it is an emotional and cognitive experience. Entering into conversation as colleagues and embracing the “impossible questions” is one way of creating a strengthened sense of community and relationality.

The practice of engaging in conversation is one which Huebner (1963) describes as a pathway to the realization of self. Conversation is not a recitation of what is already known. It is acknowledgement of our knowledge being partial and always forming and more importantly, an acknowledgement that no single body of knowledge or knowledge system can give adequate form to all that we face as human beings. Difference of
perspective can be seen as tools or skills to broaden our existing understanding of concepts and experiences and can prevent us from reifying ideas. The diversity amongst the teachers can be seen as parts of understanding, each one valid and legitimate in their own right. These parts can be brought forth in relation to the whole of the curricular endeavor and the whole can be further elucidated from the parts teachers bring forth. In this way, the hermeneutic circle provides a framework for developing shared points of commonality and still maintains the parts of experience and lived meanings as distinct. The quest here is to situate our individual identities within a communal identity, not in the sense of a ‘melting-pot,’ but in the sense of understanding how each part, each one of us as individuals, contributes to the ennobling formation of the whole. And reciprocally, how our community identity influences our own individual formation and enriches us as individuals in the process.

Huebner (1974b) reminds us that the concern of education is a concern for transcendence, liberation and emancipation. It is a question of how a “being is sheltered in this world, how he is cared for and honored, how he is respected and responded to as creator” (p. 187). Although Huebner is referring to children in this statement, this responsibility and trusteeship extends to our colleagues as well (Bai, 2004; Levinas, 1982; Lingis, 1994). It is in caring for and honoring the diversity of each other and the beauty inherent in each of us that we are able to be sources of transcendence for one another in mirroring what our God-given potential is. Huebner suggests that just as we give primacy to the individual, we must claim equal places for the primacy of tradition which is our collective wealth, and for the primacy of community. Our curriculum questions must inter-relate these three presences and ask what parts of the tradition we can make present for the child in the presence of what community. The concept of community and what kind of community we wish to be as Ismaili Muslim educators is of substantive importance to our educational work and to the communities we wish to realize.

The following considerations are being proposed in regards to classroom and teacher learning communities:

a. How can we theorize the concept of community within a religious education context based on our living tradition? Community is integral to living traditions and their sustenance. Currently, the concept of
community is present in our educational work through discourses of professional learning communities and classroom communities as known through educational literature. These discourses are important ones to be familiar with, but they may not be sufficient in bringing forth the notion of community and the relation to the other as an ethical obligation rather than simply structures for learning. The Qur’an says:

\[
O \text{ humankind, We [God] have created you male and female, and made you into communities and tribes, so that you may know one another. Surely the noblest amongst you in the sight of God is the most god fearing of you. God is All-knowing and All-Aware.}
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(Qur’an, 49:13)

Diversity and unity, individual and community, these are not opposing notions. Our role and obligation as community educators is to come to an understanding of how diversity can foster knowledge and promote harmony within unified values of our living tradition. I am not certain we have fully explored the idea of community mindedness within our preservice and in-service development programs. Hence, I am proposing it is necessary to conceptualize community education practices for our context grounded in the values of our living tradition. We are here to serve the community, and yet sometimes, we feel that the community does not understand the ‘service’ we are rendering. I am submitting further thought would be beneficial on the collective wealth (Huebner, 1974b) the community wishes to carry forward in time and how we can enter in dialogue with our community on the question raised by Huebner of upholding the primacies of the tradition, the child, the community and our service to all three presences.

b. How can we reconceptualise the religious education space and the learning community space to be interpretive spaces of both critical and creative engagement? I am thinking about the migration of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina and his venture in building a new community in Medina that reflected the values of the Islamic tradition as they were understood and interpreted by the Prophet and his followers. Why I am raising this is that through his teachings, the Prophet spread knowledge about the message of God but he also acted on the teachings through his effort to build the community in Medina. Chapter Six focused on the efforts of the teachers to create hermeneutic spaces within their student communities to enable their students to interpret their worlds and in doing so, prepare them for their ongoing contribution in creating and recreating their worlds. We were able to see through some of the lived experiences how critical thinking was necessary. We also saw that this critical thinking needed to be extended to the creative process where students were able to not only think critically, but to imagine creative possibilities of how to live differently. I am
suggesting the same kind of visioning and enactment is important in learning communities in asking and responding to the question of what can we build together and how is what we are building reflective of our values? The use of our intelligence is a practice of faith, and through our intellectual quests we come to see the partiality or incompleteness of our knowledge and the need to seek further knowledge towards fulfillment or towards completion. I use the word ‘towards’ as the quest is not one of destination but one of destiny. And just as the intellect of the Alid tradition surpassed reason to encompass a spiritual intelligence or way of knowing (Shah Kazemi, 2006), our community spaces also need a similar aesthetic engagement inspired by the beauty of our living tradition to move us to see beyond what we currently are and to create environments that are more complete, fulfilling and significant to our lives. Critical engagement reveals the incompleteness of the human condition; creative engagement discloses the completeness of the human aspiration towards the transcendent.
Make Me Complete

In the beginning I was non-existent
And was blissful in that nothingness;
Then You removed the dust of non-being
And opened the door to existence to me.
You gave me my soul and my intellect
And from You came my heart and prudence;
Then by Your grace, You caused me to
Be one of the people of prostration.
You immersed me in Your merciful light
And placed on me the crown of ‘We honoured’
And my esteem was adorned by Your glory
When You established my relation with You.
Thus have I reached my present state
And never did You let me perish.
O my Lord! It is not befitting that
You should leave me half-way after this!
O God, help me to complete my work
And if I am incomplete, make me complete!

(Hasan-i Sabbah, Kitab al-Munaqib, in Encounters in Muslim History,
Student Reader, IIS, 2013, p.129)

An Interpretive Quest towards Beauty and Infinitude

Before concluding the study, I would like to offer some thoughts on the fourth interpretive principle I introduced in Chapter Two. The first three interpretive principles, unity of being, epistemological humility and community realization, were used as frames for the data chapters of curriculum consciousness, the pedagogical encounter, and community realization. I have not devoted a chapter to the attunement to beauty and infinitude as I understand this interpretive principle to be woven through the other three and also worthy of the concluding discussion to the study. In many ways, the attunement to beauty and infinitude has been my own interpretative revelation that developed over the course of this study. When I thought about this idea initially as I was writing Chapter Two, I described it as such. The living tradition has been interpreted by

73 Reference to verse 17:70 of the Qur’an
personal search, self-understanding, the discovery of possibilities within oneself and the
discovery of awe and wonder within other forms of being. This principle of interpretation,  
*attunement to beauty and infinitude*, draws on our inherent creativity and the beauty of 
creation around us. Bringing about change and giving new expression through what 
Hodgson (1974) called cumulative interaction is an act of creativity that summons us to 
take note of the aesthetic quality of our human, physical and spiritual worlds. Attending 
to the beauty around us can stir our sometimes latent human impulse to see possibility 
in our world and to create verbal, intellectual, organizational, and aesthetic expressions 
that move us beyond where we can imagine ourselves to be. Attunement to beauty and 
infinitude is the awakening of ‘seeing’ beauty in our world and ‘seeing’ endless possibility 
for the creation of beauty for self and society.

What I neglected to articulate above and came to realize through my interpretive 
journey was that it *is the attunement to the beauty in the living tradition that enables us to see infinitude in the world around us*. As I engaged in the interpretive processes with 
the teachers, I lived in the hermeneutic circle myself through thinking through the parts 
of the lived experiences and the lived meanings we attributed to these experiences, and 
how, all of these parts continually deepened my understanding of the curricular effort 
within a community of living tradition. I came to understand that if we see tradition as a 
dynamic force that evolves over time, then that tradition needs to be summoned forth 
through time. It is pulled from the past, given form in the present, and considered for its 
potential in the future. I reflected upon and sometimes agonized over why, in some 
cases, students were drawn to the living tradition and in other cases, they were not. I 
began to realize that what makes a tradition enduring through time is the beauty we see 
in the tradition. It is this beauty that makes parts of the tradition worthy to pull forth into 
our present and worthy of thinking about how this beauty will endure into the future. If 
our children understand our tradition to be only of the present, it will not endure for them 
because they are used to continual change in their present environments. We need to 
be able to show them the enduring nature of the tradition and how it has existed within 
community and within individuals, not in a series of historical stories or facts, but in the 
spirit that has carried forth to the present. It is this very spirit that can bring light and 
grace to their present moments and transcend them into the future. Why I use the terms 
light and grace is that light gives us the means to see more clearly, more lucidly, things
we may not have seen before. And grace is the result of insights as when we are enlightened, we carry a grace in our being, a flow and vitality (Lloyd & Smith, 2006) that threads or weaves together our life moments and raises these life moments to significance. When we are able to see the beauty of our tradition in our lived moments, this ‘light’ or luminosity reveals possibilities of infinitude for us. We are no longer bound by the finite of what is known; we are summoned forth by the infinitude of what is yet to be known.

Fazlur Rahman (1982) suggests, “All revelation is a work of art and inspires a sense of the beautiful and a sense of awesome majesty. But above all it inspires that irreducible attitude of the mind called faith, which is both captivating and demanding” (p. 4). Through the study, the teachers continued to speak about wanting to inspire a sense of awe, wonder and mystery in their students as they want to stir and move their students towards a constitutive sense of good (Taylor, 2011) rooted in our living tradition. Very early in his curricular work, Huebner (1959) addressed the capacity for wonder and education. His first observation was that as individuals, we are too focused on meeting our needs for the future and are not aware enough of who we are or our ‘beingness’ in the present moment. In addition, he posited that the subject/object divide in education results in us being self-enclosed and limits our ability to live alongside others subjectively and see them as part of our existence.

The response of awe and wonder essentially is going beyond our abstraction of the phenomena and our objectification of it, to an awareness of its individuality—its subjectivity, its existence and consequently our existence. Wonder is a form of participating with the time and being of the other. (p. 6)

Huebner’s words illuminate that it is not enough to understand tradition in abstraction and see it outside of ourselves. In studying tradition, we can participate with it in time and being through asking ourselves, what is the beauty here for me to internalize and then externalize into my gaze of the world? Similarly, in living alongside others in community, we can ask ourselves the same question of what is the beauty in this individual that I can see and how do I reflect this beauty back into our encounter? We seek knowledge of the other and establish our relationality to the other (relational knowledge). We uncover the beauty of our living tradition through our intellectual
engagement with it (temporal knowledge). And we bring forth our knowledge of the world and our knowledge of the beauty of our living tradition in our interpretive efforts to see an infinitude of possibilities for how we can live our lives more faithfully (hermeneutic knowledge).

In speaking of curriculum and transcendence, Phillip Phenix (1975) refers to transcendence as the limitless experience of going beyond any known state of reality. Like Huebner, he claims that every entity exists within a larger context of relationships and possibilities. This never-ending web of unfolding can be thought about as infinitude “which expresses the never-finished enlargement of contexts within which every bounded entity is enmeshed. . . To have a spiritual nature is to participate in infinitude” (pp. 324-325). Phenix also offers a non-theological interpretation of transcendence rooted in John Dewey’s work of experience being a progressive actualization of ideal possibilities. Phenix’s contribution to this discussion is his thinking on a curriculum of transcendence being one which provides opportunity for engendering, gestating and developing inner illumination to foster hospitality towards perspectives of wholeness and emergence of fresh penetrating outlooks of the world. He believes transcendence is a presupposition of the human condition and it is our creative strivings that bring transcendence to the immanence of our daily lived moments and reveal for us hope, beauty and infinitude.

Through this study, the discussion has been centred on the pursuit of knowledge and the interpretive engagement with knowledge as ways of uncovering the beauty and goodness of the world. Each verse of our daily prayer begins with the phrase, Bismillah ir-rahman ir-rahim, In the name of our Lord, the most Compassionate, the most Merciful, reminding us that there is the possibility of grace in each moment of our lives. I ask myself how, as educators, we are attuned to this mercy, this beneficence around us, and how we are attuning our students to the signs of beauty around us. And more importantly, is the attunement to beauty an abstraction or one that draws us closer to our worlds by acting as a motive force for the guidance of conduct and moving us to a joyful, responsible participation in our world? We are teaching the curriculum and are inspired by its ideas, that is, I know it, I believe in it, but how do I act on it? To what extent are we creating these motive forces, firstly in ourselves and then with our students, our
colleagues, our parents, our community members? Jardine (2006) draws on Gadamer’s notion of aesthetic experience in saying,

In these aesthetic moments, we are drawn out of ourselves and our constructions and our methods and our “our”-centredness and get caught up by something, charmed by it, drawn into its sway, into its play. . . Such events—such moments of “opening” and of “venture”—“would not deserve the interest we take in [them] if [they] did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves” (p. 271, emphasis in original).

The horizon of the living tradition is beautiful, we can see it, and we speak passionately and articulately about it. But how does the horizon live in the parts of our daily lived experiences? How can we attune ourselves to the beauty, love, mercy and beneficence present in our everyday so it is in what we do rather than external to it? Our society is under extreme pressures, whether one is a child or adult. The contemplative journey has to be within the immanent not outside of it. In order to be enduring, beauty can be seen and created within the everyday so it does not lapse into forgetfulness or exist only in a few moments of our life. Sometimes, I wonder if we are hardened by the world we live in because we are so exposed and, as a response, we build impenetrable shells or protective guards around us. Beauty releases the softness, the gentleness, the prayerfulness in our being. Think about how we feel a sense of the self dissolving into a piece of art or music or kind acts, how this aesthetic experience breaks down our barriers and leaves us open and receptive to the humaneness in our existence. We are reminded in these moments of our inescapable connection and responsibility to the other and we are drawn to participate with them in time and being (Huebner, 1959). To do this would necessitate a hermeneutic disposition that looks inward and projects outward. How am I understanding my relation to my world? How am I understanding the temporal aspects of my tradition? How am I applying my interpretations in my lived moments and visioning possibilities for future moments?

Curriculum inquiry is a hermeneutic process of understanding, interpreting and applying (Gadamer, 1960/1989) parts of the lived experience of text, students and community in relation to the whole of the living tradition. The lived meanings derived from our relational knowledge of the world help us to know our world so we are able to care for it and enable a unity of being within ourselves of faith and world. The lived
meanings derived from temporal knowledge help us to know our tradition so we can bring forth enduring values from the past and through epistemological humility, create enlivening expressions for these values in the present. The lived meanings derived from hermeneutic knowledge help us to define how we can be of service to our world and realize our potential and the potential of our communities. And finally, attunement to beauty and infinitude reveals the significance of our existence as caretakers of our worlds and the infinitude of possibilities that summon us forth to the enlightened moments that lie before us.

The introductory quote to the study highlighted Said’s (1978) thought on how beginnings have to be made for each project in a way that enables what follows from them. From a hermeneutic perspective, beginnings can be conceived as more than static points which cannot be recovered through time. Perhaps, beginnings can be conceived as the opportunities each day to rethink and re-interpret our experiences, such that these interpretations enable an infinitude of possibilities of our relations with our world, of our enduring values of tradition, and of our ways of knowing ourselves and the other and the beauty inherent in our communal existence.

Pedagogically, the highest priority is in having children and young people gain precisely a sense of the human world as being a narrative construction that can be entered and engaged creatively; to have a sense that received understanding can be interpreted or re-interpreted and that human responsibility is fulfilled in precisely a taking up of this task. (Smith, 1991, p. 201)
References


