Holistic Education For Alternative Adulthood
Springhouse School, Sourced Design, And Alumni Perceptions Of What It Means To Be An Adult

Michael Lyngstad

E-mail: mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca

Received May 2026
Accepted for publication October 2026
Published November 2026

Abstract

This study employed semi-structured interviews to examine the perspectives of seven holistic school alumni regarding their views on adulthood and how their school experiences influenced their ideas about what it means to be an adult. This article draws from data collected for a doctoral dissertation research project exploring the differences in how adulthood is perceived by mainstream populations as compared to graduates of Springhouse School, an alternative holistic school in Virginia, U.S.A. This paper analyses how Springhouse School's philosophical framework of *Sourced Design*, as expressed through a variety of school experiences related by the participants, can be seen to be a significant influence on participant views of adulthood.

Keywords: *alternative education, subjective adulthood, holistic education, systems thinking, community, human development*

This article is derived from the findings of a Ph.D. dissertation (Lyngstad, 2026) exploring the influence of school experiences on how alumni of a holistic school view adulthood. This research was also grounded in exploring broader questions and concerns regarding popular notions of how adulthood is framed in education in the 21st century.

Significance to Education Research

There exists a notable gap in the education research literature in terms of investigating the link between school experiences in adolescence and how people view adulthood after school completion (Erentaitė et al., 2018). When looking at the research in the fields of alternative and holistic education, the absence of studies exploring this connection becomes even more apparent. This research project aims to address this gap and to contribute to the conversation around the influence of alternative schooling on perceptions of adulthood. Within the fields of psychology, sociology, economics, and to a lesser extent, education, there are academic studies that isolate facets of schooling such as formal courses, interventions, and teacher influence, and correlate these influences with isolated aspects of identity such as environmental identity (Dewey, 2021),

gender identity (Corner & Dallavis, 2022), or civic identity (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2022). However, little research operationalizes theoretical models of adulthood and how perspectives on adulthood are influenced by schooling. Conversely, psychologists and sociologists have conceived of several models of adulthood, but few of them consider the various interdependent factors that contribute to how people form their ideas about adulthood (Ho et al., 2022). Much research explores correlations between experiences that influence aspects of personality, yet according to Bosch et al. (2016), the socializing factors that might predict identity formation remain under-researched. Education stands as one such socialization factor.

In recent years, psychologists and sociologists have become more interested in the transition to adulthood (Piotrowski et al., 2020). Alongside this, there is a growing call within the research community for studies on how young people develop their subjective identities as adults (Johnson et al., 2007). Rich and Schachter (2012) believe in the potential that schools have as sites that influence identity development, going on to describe findings from the sociological scholarship on identity development that confirm this assertion. This research is intended to contribute to an emerging theory about this connection.

Seven alumni of Springhouse school, a learning community designed around holistic principles, were interviewed for this study. Participants between the ages of 19 and 31 were asked about how they viewed adulthood and how those views on adulthood were influenced by their school experiences at Springhouse. Springhouse school was chosen as a research site at the suggestion of the researcher's doctoral supervisor, who had heard about the school through an acquaintance and suggested that the school might be a site where novel educational approaches were being practised. To provide some context about the school and its connection to holistic education, a description of the school, including a brief overview of the school's philosophical and theoretical grounding follows.

Site Context: Springhouse School

Located near the town of Floyd, Virginia, Springhouse is an accredited K-12 Spanish/English language day school that also offers intergenerational learning opportunities to adults. Day school students attend blended-age classes of varying sizes during the September to June school year. In addition to class time, students work one-on-one with mentors/teachers on projects of interest throughout the school year (Springhouse School, 2020b). In this arrangement, teachers act primarily as mentors; guiding and facilitating student learning, aiding them in the process of identifying topics that resonate with them, and finding and organizing information they need to explore (Finn & Stabler, 2024). Aside from individual projects, the school organizes learning experiences ranging from embodied activities such as dance and other movement-based learning, contemplative practices, experiences in nature, singing, hands-on construction projects, printmaking, art, gardening, and visits to sites of learning across the region (Finn & Stabler, 2024; Springhouse School, 2020a, 2020b).

Springhouse is an intergenerational learning community, which is relevant to this study due to one participant (Liz) attending a learning program for adults in her twenties. Drawing on embodied practices such as wandering on the land, roleplay, creative expression, movement, and rituals, alongside voice dialogue, deep imagery, and writing, learners in the adult program explored their own inner worlds and shared their discoveries and reflections with the other participants (Springhouse School, 2023). As part

of the program, members also observed and engaged with learners in the K-12 day school and worked one-on-one on personal development projects aligned with Springhouse's own principles of *Sourced Design* (as outlined in the theoretical framework section that follows) over the span of nine weeks (Springhouse School, 2023).

Literature Review: Holistic Education and Adulthood

As its name communicates, the central aim of holistic education is cultivating human wholeness (Novak, 2019b). Following from the ideas of Plotkin (2008), in discussing the emergence of adulthood in the individual, one cannot place enough weight on the importance of the ideas of soul or spirit in this process. Holistic learning is about increasing spiritual well-being (Ng & Man, 2022) and about recognizing that "the human being is a complex, existential entity, created by multiple dimensions. Such an approach assumes that human development occurs in at least two spheres, the personal and the spiritual or universal" (Bosacki, 2002, p. 55). Thus, the basic assumption of all holistic educators is that humans, and in fact everything in existence, are fundamentally spiritual and are thus capable of spiritual development. Therefore, one of the major aims that holistic education has is the cultivation of a spiritual worldview as the primary ontology and epistemology in adulthood. R. Miller (2000) specifies that this includes approaches to education that are centred on various notions of development of healthy human personalities. Novak (2019a) along with Forbes and Martin (2004), extend beyond developing personality to state that the overall goal of holistic education is maximizing all aspects of human potential and raising learners to the fullest level of development of their capability.

More modestly, Byrnes (2012) explains that holistic education balances embracing human uniqueness and diversity while also valuing connectedness and interdependence. It is an approach to education that calls on one to cultivate the ability to discern what is truly important in life (J. Miller, 1998), to find one's place and purpose in society (J. Miller, 2019), and to see the importance of developing positive relationships with the self, with community, and with the natural world (Darken, 2009; J. Miller, 1998; Morcom, 2017; Rudge, 2008). Smith (2022) explicitly relates what they feel are the core responsibilities of adults, and especially of teachers, ought to be within the holistic education paradigm. These responsibilities are: to (a) instill love for local place and the people in it; (b)build interdependent, close community; (c) aid in discovering and nurturing talents and skills that benefit the community; (d) develop practical skills to meet basic survival needs; (e) build positive mental health; (f) develop more constructive communication skills; (g) refine observational skills around the local world and how to sustain its integrity; and (h) build collaborative networks with other communities.

The influence of holistic education during the formative period of adolescence into adulthood is the primary focus of my research question. Regarding the connection between adulthood and holistic education, Fisher (2020) provides a succinct description of the type of adult that holistic educators envision, and the reasons why this type of adult is so needed in the world today. They write:

> Perhaps the central task of adolescence is to discern the unique gifts, powers, or genius, the soul-level image or question, that we will incorporate into our adult selves. Knowing our dharma or spiritual duty – to use another language for this task – is to give our adult life its compass,

> worth, depth, and place. It is to know how we belong to and serve the whole in our own particular way. Need it be said, very little effort is made in the modern world to help adolescents arrive at this soulful adult place. Quite the opposite, in fact, given how the capitalist system requires that we remain wounded children with limitless desires. (p. 94)

The idea that mainstream society is not interested in producing whole people, but rather, more interested in preparing young people for the world of work, citizenship, and participation in a capitalist system, is an idea that arises time and time again across the holistic education literature.

Plotkin refers to Joseph Campbell's concept of *The Hero's Journey* (Campbell, 2020; Campbell & Moyers, 1991) as a representation of the process that transforms an adolescent into an adult. According to Plotkin (2008), a process of individuation begins in adolescence, when one is offered the chance to step away from their socially safe and isolated world. They are called to experience with as much variety as possible, not for the sake of hedonism, but with an eye for what calls the soul forth – for what truly brings one to life (Plotkin, 2008). The central task of adolescence, therefore, begins with fashioning an authentic life that is separated from the family unit that defined the self in childhood (Plotkin, 2008). He views this stage as an apprenticeship, not of adulthood or even to the soul, but training in the art of differentiation between the social self and of belonging to an extra-familial social group. Through exploring the world beyond the family unit, the individual brings back a piece of the unknown to the culture of their community, thus vitalizing and enriching not only themselves but the culture as a whole.

In reviewing the holistic education literature, one notices the vast majority of what has been written about holistic education adopts a narrative or rhetorical approach focused on communicating the various frameworks devised by each author and to relaying their personal experiences of holistic education. Aside from studies that focus on the popular forms such as Waldorf and Montessori schools, there is very little in the way of empirical research that investigates holistic programs and schools. In a way, this connects to the practice of holistic education itself, which values knowledge that is a product of personal contemplation or belief equal – or even superior to – any information gathered and communicated by formal research methods.

Theoretical Framework: Springhouse School's *Sourced Design*

Sourced Design was developed by the Springhouse community and is the philosophy that underlies all the school's educational activities, as well as the social fabric of the school itself. It is a framework that reflects the ongoing process of regenerative culture-building that is central to the school's vision (Finn, 2023; Springhouse School, 2020a). Rather than being prescriptive concepts devised a-priori, *Sourced Design* principles reflect a description of the positive qualities that have emerged from the school community since its founding. They have been generated inductively through the community examining and reflecting on positive aspects of their lived experience at Springhouse (Springhouse School, 2022). The five principles are *taking care of vulnerability*, *cultivating personhood*, *building beloved community*, *respecting living systems and learning from the wisdom of the Earth*, and *love and serve others*. A description of the five principles, along with the practices that define each principle are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Principles and Practices of Sourced Design

Principle	Practices
Taking Care of Vulnerability	Openness to new experiences that may lead to new possibilities
	Exploring new practices
	Communities of practice
	Seeking guidance of trusted mentors
Cultivating Personhood	Getting to know one's humanness: contemplation yoga, and meditation
	Appreciating the sacredness of life: explored through various techniques aimed at cultivating attention including prayer, mindfulness, or cooking
	Developing self-awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses. Community feedback is part of this
Building Beloved Community	Respecting individuality. Holding empathy for all group members, safety and mutual trust.
	Emphasizing commonalities and shared purpose. Practised through group activities such as singing or dancing
	Taking care of relationships
Respecting living systems principles and the wisdom of the Earth	Choosing a place to build community around a common purpose
	Community reflection on lessons learned
	Sustaining community through a network of like-minded communities
	Sharing of knowledge
Love and serve others	Accepting oneself and the state of the world as it is
	Following one's call
	Trust in a long-term process, not short-term goals. Commitment to one's mission regardless of perceived barriers

(table adapted from Lyngstad, 2026)

Through striving to follow these principles, learners prepare themselves to serve the world with courage, creativity, clarity and compassion. The means by which I explored these principles and practices with participants is outlined in the following methodology section.

Methodology

This study explored participants' views on adulthood and how they perceived their school experiences at Springhouse influenced those views of adulthood. The overall methodology is a qualitative study drawing on elements of phenomenology, including a focus on bracketing, participant perceptions of their experience, and horizontalization of data in analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data analysis relied on meaning-making and processes drawn from suggestions from methodological literature surrounding phenomenology and interview methods. The main source informing the interview and analytic process involved use of Seidman's (2013) inductive method of code and theme creation based on data gathered from one-on-one interviews. This was paired with a relational strategy informed by Douglas' (1985) suggestions for *Creative Interviewing*.

Method: The Interview

In the context of this research, which requires the overcoming of distance in space and time in order for the participant to recount and explore past events (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2018), interviewing is an appropriate tool. Following both Seidman (2013) and Douglas (1985), a fluid and open-ended approach to interviewing was used to provide a more accurate, if less tidy, picture of the participants' subjective perceptions of reality.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

Recruitment took the form of an invitation to participate letter, which was sent to Springhouse's head of school, who worked with other staff members to send the letter to alumni via email and text message. At the time of recruitment, there was a total population of 29 graduates, all of whom were contacted by the school. Seven potential participants responded to this initial recruitment round. These potential participants were sent information packages including consent forms to sign and return to me via email. When each consent form was received, a Zoom interview was arranged according to participant availability during the months of May to July, 2025. Recruitment attempts were also made throughout the interviews using a snowball sampling approach (as per Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Interview Process

Each interview had three main sections. The first comprised a set of questions regarding demographic information, which helped build a limited profile of participants as a unique individual. The second part of the interview involved questions addressing the central research question, which was approached through two sub-questions. The first question was: *what does adulthood mean to you?* This question was pursued naturalistically with the participant, with both responsive and pre-determined follow-up questions being asked which probed the participant to provide clarification of meaning and more precise details about their experiences (Douglas, 1985; Seidman, 2013). When I had determined that each participant's concept of adulthood was explored in sufficient depth to inform the research question, I followed with the second question: *from your perspective, how do you feel your experiences at Springhouse influenced your ideas about adulthood?* As with

question one, responsive and pre-determined prompts were explored with the participant until the topic was exhausted and I felt that we had sufficiently informed the research question. Initial questions were intentionally broad and open-ended with the purpose of minimizing interviewer influence while eliciting the participants' own perspectives (Seidman, 2013). In addition to probing in response to what the participants shared with me, I had prepared follow-up questions that drew from my knowledge of the school's philosophy of *Sourced Design*, my understanding of the school's physical site, ideas from the holistic education and adulthood literature, and from what was shared with me by prior participants in their interviews. Having gathered sufficient data to inform the research question, I shifted focus to the third and final set of questions for the interview.

The final part of the interview involved questions about the participants' pre-Springhouse memories of what they felt made someone an adult. This element of inquiry was inspired by Seidman's (2013) guidance of constructing an idea from the perspective the participant held prior to being exposed to the phenomenon in question, to assess any differences between pre and post-phenomenon perspectives. Similarly, I explored potential post-Springhouse influences on ideas the participants had about adulthood. This was done to both test to see if influences they cited as coming from Springhouse were perhaps more grounded in post-graduation experiences, and to catch any potential influences from Springhouse that may have been missed in the second section of the interview. The interview concluded with asking participants about any influences various forms of popular media had on their conception of adulthood. The third part of the interview, though not related directly to the research question, permitted me to engage with the participant in an investigation of whether their currently held ideas of adulthood are grounded in their Springhouse experiences, are perhaps linked to other life events, or are some combination of both.

Analytical Process

Analysis involved interpreting the participants' perspectives of adulthood and their ideas about influential experiences at Springhouse through the lens of the *Sourced Design* principles. The first step was a process of phenomenological reduction using horizontalization of the interview data, which involved considering everything within the transcript to have equal weight (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This early stage of analysis had me exploring the data inductively; engaging with the intent of forming probable generalizations informed by the available data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). Throughout this early stage of analysis, I identified meaningful passages based on what I found relevant (Seidman, 2013) with intentional regard to how the data answered my research question, which focused on the participants' perspectives of how their experiences at Springhouse influenced their idea of what it means to be an adult. After extracting data from the transcript using a phenomenological reduction, passages referencing school experiences that I felt reflected the *Sourced Design* principles were categorized according to the principles and practices that aligned. I then constructed profiles of how each participant views adulthood along with inferences about how their stated experiences reflect principles and practices of *Sourced Design*, as seen in the findings that follow.

Findings and Discussion

What follows explores and interprets the influence of *Sourced Design* on each participant's views of adulthood. To illustrate this connection, prominent pieces of each participant's views on adulthood are presented alongside commentary on how these views reflect principles and practices of *Sourced*

Design (Finn, 2023). Different elements of the philosophy can be seen across the participant responses, reinforcing the idea that each person's time at Springhouse has had an influence on their ideas about what it means to be an adult. Each participants' views and influences are presented as a profile in chronological order of the interviews, beginning with John.

John

Adulthood in John's view is grounded in the ideas of internal development, understanding that adulthood is complex and uncertain, and in valuing different perspectives. John mentioned his experiences with exploring his *inner child* at Springhouse. Through these experiences, he has learned about how protective psychological mechanisms one has used in childhood hold the potential to manifest in the form of unbeneficial internal and external behaviours as an adult. In discussing prerequisites of adulthood, John does not believe overcoming these dysfunctional psychological phenomena is necessary, but he does believe that one should be actively engaged with investigating these internal forces if one is to be considered an adult. These views connect to the principle of *taking care of vulnerability* in that any transformative process of self-exploration requires that one engage in a new practice. This also reflects the principle of *cultivating personhood* because through these exploratory internal practices involves getting to know one's humanness and building self-awareness. Finally, an underlying connection to *building beloved community* in the form of taking care of relationships is prominent, specifically that taking care of community requires one to take care of oneself.

Also important to John's definition of adulthood is cultivating an understanding of the complex nature of living and learning across the lifespan. John values adulthood as a project of experiential learning where answers are often not clear, however one learns and grows with persistence. He attributes the influence of his experiences at Springhouse through stating "those experiences that I had in there really taught me something about how important it is to have patience and stick with things and remember that success is built cumulatively over years." He credited the development of this belief to his interactions with and observations of his Springhouse mentors and schoolmates. He also felt that the discovery-based learning model he experienced at the school had an influence on his views. This aspect of John's idea of adulthood is connected to the principle of *loving and serving others*, reflecting the principles of accepting reality and being resilient and persistent. The principle of *taking care of vulnerability* is also prominent in the form of John trusting the guidance of his mentors in forming his beliefs around uncertainty and lifelong commitment to inquiry.

Seeing and valuing different perspectives stands as a final facet of John's idea of adulthood and is rooted in his experience of having his personhood acknowledged at Springhouse. Alongside this, he developed appreciation for different perspectives through experiencing a community where he was valued and cared about. He stated the Springhouse community "loved the hate out of me" which he juxtaposed against his prior parasocial online community that he described as one of "right-wing indoctrination." Through experiencing these two forms of community, John is now equipped to empathize with young men who are in situations like the one he was in prior to Springhouse as a member of a racist, misogynist, and homophobic online community. His willingness to experiment with a new community is rooted in the principle of *taking care of vulnerability* in that John was invited to be vulnerable by one of the Springhouse mentors, who acknowledged his personhood by gently inviting him to let down his guard and trust the

community to care for him. His change is also an example of the principle of *loving and serving others* as he came to accept reality and understand that sometimes a personal change is necessary for growth. Finally, the principle of *building beloved community* connects in that John has chosen to respect others' individuality and to take an approach to exist in a community that fosters unity rather than sustaining discord.

Elliot

Exploring his purpose loomed large in Elliot's vision of adulthood. This central element is supported by his valuing engagement with a project of slow community building and striving to live his life according to his values. Numerous discussions with his mentors at Springhouse were cited as being instrumental in why Elliot values seeking purpose. He believes "you can find a purpose anywhere...I can still feel purposeful so I don't have to change everything to feel like I'm doing what's right for me." These qualities ground purpose in everyday reality rather than focusing on ideas of *higher purpose* aimed at changing the world. As following the guidance of a trusted mentor was a major factor in his adopting this pursuit, it reflects the principle of learning by *taking care of vulnerability*. It could also be considered influenced by *loving and serving others* in the form of Elliot following his calling and committing to the patience and persistence required for the long-term project of seeking purpose. Perhaps most significantly, the principle of *cultivating personhood* is evoked by this aspect of adulthood in that he is getting to know the sacredness of life through growing his awareness of self and in trusting the process of finding purpose.

The aspiration of living his life in line with his values is another facet of Elliot's concept of being an adult. In his interview, Elliot related a personal project of identifying his values intentionally and reflecting on how he might steer the course of his life in accord with them. At Springhouse, he explored his values through values-clarification exercises and through self-assessment of his alignment with what he termed *competencies*, which he stated as being "things like self-awareness, contextual sensitivity...trying to be just honest and compassionate with other people." He also mentioned using regular solo contemplative time that was part of regular practices for seniors at the school to delve into his thoughts about what it means to live according to one's values and to live as an adult after graduating. Each of these are examples of the principle of cultivating personhood in that they represent life values exploration and considerations about how to live well. Through these life and values explorations, Elliot is getting to know the sacredness of life in the form of growing his self-awareness and humanness by considering which values are resonant within him, deciding on which values to follow, and in considering how he might live through his values in adulthood.

Connected to living through his values, Elliot also described an important aspect of adulthood as being committed to serving as a seed for a healthy community. He related his desire to anchor others in community in a way that is similar to how he experienced community at Springhouse, as the larger project of which his own self-development and living according to his values are essential parts. To Elliot, the development and sustenance of a healthy relationship with himself lies at the heart of a project of furthering positive relationships in community. These qualities are salient examples of the principle of *learning from the Earth*. Since they reflect living systems principles emphasizing the interdependence of the individual and the community system of which the individual is a part. A desire to cultivate community also reflects the principle of *taking*

care of vulnerability, which is grounded in establishing practices with others over time.

Felix

Felix focused on the subjective nature of adulthood throughout their interview, centring on their own experiences of feeling like an adult. In discussing criteria of adulthood, Felix focused on building and establishing healthy relationships, cultivating their emotional intelligence, and their experiences in mentorship roles as being important to their subjective adulthood. Their highlighting of understanding human nuance and social experiences at the school were framed by Felix as being "so Springhouse" and arose as a product of both observing and interacting with Springhouse staff. Many of the phenomena and concepts they described as characteristically "Springhouse" are deeply rooted in the principle of *building beloved community*. This is especially relevant in cases where the practices of respect for individuality and practices based on taking care of relationships in community are emphasized.

This connects directly to Felix valuing the building and maintaining healthy relationships as markers of adulthood. Felix shared an experience where, rather than avoiding the situation or demanding accommodations from school leaders, they were forced to set boundaries with another student with whom they were having a conflict. This event was emphasized as a pivotal experience that influenced Felix's ideas about adulthood and encapsulates the principle of *building beloved community* in that it relied on practices of respecting their classmate's individuality while also representing a desire to practice fostering unity with them. As an example of an event that influenced Felix's conception of adulthood, this is also an example of them *cultivating their own personhood* because experience required them to follow the practices of understanding themself more deeply and growing their self-awareness.

A major theme in Felix's ideas about adulthood focused on developing emotional intelligence. Again, this links strongly to the principle of *cultivating personhood*, as Felix's growing understanding of emotional intelligence was something they felt defined them as an adult. According to Felix, growth in their emotional intelligence was prompted by intentional activities at Springhouse, and through observing and interacting with Springhouse staff and mentors. Felix spoke at length about the significance of having the opportunity to explore their emotions as part of their schooling in adolescence. Felix believes this provides Springhouse alumni with an advantage in their emotional development, stating "we learned these skills in high school that most adults start learning when they're like 22." In line with their subjective view on adulthood, they felt this did not translate to them being a better adult, just different. This is another example of the practice of respecting individuality within the principle of *building beloved community.*

As a final piece of Felix's personal ideas about adulthood, their experiences with their own mentors at Springhouse influenced their valuing of adopting mentorship roles as an indicator of adulthood. Being an example of the practice of following the guidance of trusted mentors, this aspect of adulthood directly connects to the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*. Since mentorship might be considered a practice that one engages in over time with others, the mutually supportive relationship Felix participated in along with their peers, their focus on mentorship also reflects the principle of *building a beloved community* grounded in trust and support. Felix related how numerous mentorship roles in the past, including becoming a teacher and a mentor musician, represented a throughline of purpose in their journey toward adulthood. As such, their

valuing being a mentor as a sign of being an adult resonates with the principle of *love and serve others*, specifically as an example of Felix following their call as a practice.

Liz

Self-development in service of community, following her vocation, and mentorship stand as Liz's most significant indicators of adulthood. As with other participants, self-development defines Liz's view of adulthood. However, she believes that self-development alone is not sufficient, but that it should be pursued in service of community. She stated repeatedly that personal development for the sake of one's own self is "navel gazey" and self-serving, emphasizing the importance of contributing to healthy community building as the ultimate goal of self-development. This focus on bridging the personal and the communal is an example of how the principle of *building beloved community* has had an influence on her idea of adulthood. The practices associated with this principle that are most evident are fostering unity and building healthy relationships. *Cultivating personhood* is also represented in Liz's belief that individual development can become "hyper intra-focused and lose...the service component...then it just becomes a self-perpetuating gross, self-serving, personal journey for only the purpose of serving yourself and not for the purpose of refining yourself in order to be a better service to your community." Influence from the principle of *love and serve others* can also be seen in Liz's pursuit of this aim of building community, which is reflective of following her call, and her long-term commitment to her self-development-in-service project.

Another significant aspect of Liz's view of what it means to be an adult that is connected to following her call comes in the form of resisting social and cultural expectations for the sake of pursuing her vocation. As an adult, Liz has decided to follow a path other than the one laid out for her by her schooling, her family, and her local culture. Although her time at Springhouse reinforced the value of this commitment, based on her interview she has been pursuing this path since high school. Thus, experiences at Springhouse were not the source of this view on adulthood, but it is worth noting that the community at Springhouse legitimized and validated her worldview which likely made it easier for Liz to maintain this aspect of her views on adulthood. The alignment with the principles and practices of *Sourced Design* suggest that Liz's experiences at Springhouse not only reinforced the legitimacy of her pre-existing values but enabled her to more deeply commit to them as defining features of her own subjective adulthood.

Directly connected with Springhouse, Liz also explored the value she places on proliferating ideas aligned with Springhouse's philosophy. She feels that part of being an adult is being responsible for adopting a mentorship role in guiding people in the project of *building beloved community*. In the way she described this, influence from the principle *learning from the Earth* is represented in her idea of serving as a seed and example for others, followed by spreading community, and ideally building a network through which to share the forms of personal and community development she experienced at Springhouse.

Cassidy

Cassidy conveys the importance of managing her emotions, working toward independence from her parents, living according to her values, and learning to navigate relationships as factors significant to her definition of adulthood. Most significant was independence from her parents, especially in terms of decision-making and working with her feelings of anxiety. In her interview, she cites experiences that took place

during field trips at Springhouse and via her interactions with and observations of her Springhouse mentors. Being aspects of personal development, these elements reflect the principle of *cultivating personhood* in that her experiences at Springhouse invited her to get to know her humanness and, by doing so, grow her self-awareness. There is also an expression of the principle of *taking care of vulnerability* since Cassidy's exploration of new ways of being independent from her parents involved her experimenting with new practices intended to take care of the *Vitality* within her.

A direct example of her developing an understanding of her own self-awareness, and in Cassidy's subjective adulthood, involved learning the difference between what Cassidy called "feeling safe" and "feeling familiar" in relationships. She referred to her relationships prior to Springhouse by stating "I was comforted by the familiarity of hurtful people or like of toxic environments...I think a lot of the world kind of revolves on that...people are attracted to environments that feel familiar rather than feel safe." She cited participation in Springhouse's *beloved community* as the source of this realization, explaining that the community provided her with models of what healthy relationship-building looks like. The question of safety and familiarity within herself suggests that Cassidy was influenced by the principle of *cultivating personhood* in her nascent perception of how her innate humanness might confuse safety and familiarity, and how her growing self-awareness showed her both how this uncertainty manifested in her past and the method of distinguishing between the two in the present and future.

Like Elliot, Cassidy feels knowing her values and living her life according to them is a vital part of being an adult. She stated "some adults are very much more connected to their childhood self...and that's something I want to keep in myself is the connection to my childhood self." Observing and interacting with the adults at Springhouse was the source of this value for Cassidy. She commented in her observation that although they conveyed a sense of mature grounding, the adults at Springhouse expressed a child-like playfulness in how they interacted with the community and in their exploration of ideas. The principle of *cultivating personhood* appears to be a meaningful influence in how Cassidy reflected on the capacity for adults to maintain positive aspects of childhood, and on the value that she attributes to this quality. As a clear example of the practice of following the guidance of her trusted mentors, this experience also evokes the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*.

Tatiana

In line with mainstream research, Tatiana sees adulthood as a more stabilized sense of self than adolescence. Moving outside of the mainstream, she also considers emotional awareness, healthy relationships, and a developed idea of the meaning of home as being essential elements of being an adult. Tatiana discussed aspects of self-awareness involving one's sexuality, emotional intelligence, as well as exploring meaningful values alongside learning to set boundaries with others. As with several other participants, a significant influence on her thoughts about adulthood came through interactions with and observations of the Springhouse staff, especially her mentor. She also discussed values-clarification activities as meaningful influences. Rooted in *cultivating personhood*, Tatiana's defining factors of adulthood are built on practices related to knowing her humanness and developing self-awareness in terms of her emotions as well as how her values guide her in setting boundaries with others. Setting boundaries is also reflective of the influence of *building beloved community*,

since understanding healthy boundaries is an aspect of building healthy relationships with others. Boundaries also signify respect for individuality as they show she practices respect for her own individuality and recognizes the individuality of others.

This also connects to Tatiana's dedication to healthy relationship-building in community. Through conversations with her mentors where they related their experiences navigating complexity in their own relationships, Tatiana was influenced in her own ideas of what relationships should look like in adulthood. Again, this references the principle of *building beloved community* in the form of taking care of relationships. However, it also draws on the practice of fostering unity as it includes motivation to maintain healthy relationships over the long term. Since Tatiana was influenced by the guidance of her trusted mentors, this is a clear example of a practice taken from the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*.

Exploring the meaning of the word "home" was an indicator of adulthood unique to Tatiana. In a capstone project, which she reflected on in solo contemplative time in the forest, she asked "what is home? You know, is it physical? Is it embodied?...that was part of why I ended up doing the solo in the woods, was it was a deeper exploration of that." Both the capstone and the contemplative exploration serve as examples of *cultivating personhood* as in speaking of home, she stated "I think it's related to adulthood in the sense that when you are an adult or becoming an adult, your idea of home shifts a lot. It's no longer just your family or the house that you grew up in...it becomes much more expansive." These connect to practices of developing self-awareness and potentially practices of connecting with humanness related to the idea of home.

Angelica

To Angelica, being an adult involves commitment to internal emotional and reflective work toward self-development, exploring her potential as a human being, and understanding her values and living in accordance with them. Through her relationship with her mentor and participating in the Springhouse community, Angelica was invited into a new way of reflecting on her needs and how she was prioritizing the needs of others over her own, thus evoking the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*. She engaged in a process grounded in *cultivating personhood* as she delved into her human desire to serve others before herself. She relayed the influence the Spring house community had in this regard by sharing the following:

> Then as I grew older, and the more I kept getting hurt, and not hurting anybody back and just taking and taking it, I guess Springhouse was like, you're like, you know, you're about to explode. We can tell you're like a ticking bomb right now. We can see it in you and like, let it out.

At the time of the interview Angelica saw her self-development as being centred on herself, in contrast to Liz's assertion that self-development should be in service to community. These two aims may seem at odds. However, when looking at Springhouse's living systems design more closely, Angelica's priority on herself could be seen as part of a protracted project of community building, reflecting the principle of *love and serve others* in the form of long-term commitment to the vision of *learning from the Earth*. Her potential to contribute to the community is thus improved by her focusing on her own development first.

Understanding and exploring personal potential was also a prominent marker of adulthood for Angelica. Her experiences at Springhouse such as experimenting with adult roles and the physical

and psychological challenges associated with activities in the outdoors signified two principles. First, they represent ways to *cultivate personhood* in the form of getting to know what she is capable of in terms of the work involved with adult roles and with the limits of her body and mind when placed in physically challenging situations. These experiences also allowed her to retrospectively reflect on what she is capable of and on the fullness of her human potential. Second, they reflect the principle of *taking care of vulnerability* as they represent new experiences that Angelica was able to practice that helped her cultivate her potential. Furthermore, physical activity has become a regular practice that Angelica continues to practice in her project of self-development.

As with Elliot and Cassidy, Angelica placed great emphasis on the importance of understanding and clarifying her values in considering herself as an adult. The values exploration activities she described are indicative of the intimate connection between the individual and the community as they connect *cultivating personhood* and *building beloved community* through *loving and serving others*. By exploring her values Angelica developed a connection with her intuitive and authentic self and cultivated an awareness of how acting outside of her intuited values did not feel authentic. Since the values exploration activities she described were done in a group setting, they depended on taking care of relationships within the group while at the same time respecting the individuality of others as they explored their own values. Finally, when her classmates claimed her central value as resilience, she felt this was insulting, since she felt resilience was like "a weed who can just get through things. But then at the end of the day, what really are you?" Through reflection in community she revised her opinion, stating that "without resiliency, I wouldn't have been able to get through anything in my life. And it's actually the tool that I've used the most. They were, they're really accurate with that." Accepting the group's assertion that the value of resilience was one of her defining characteristics represents accepting reality, a facet of *loving and serving others*.

The preceding discussion of participant perspectives demonstrates how Springhouse's *Sourced Design* approach is the core of what has influenced not only their view of what it means to be an adult, but how they are living their lives as emerging adults. Worth noting outside of the general influence of *Sourced Design* through the social environment and practices is the common influence of the mentor/mentee relationship. Across all participants, the guidance and role-modelling of the mentors represents a clearly significant part of how school experiences influenced how participants framed the way they could be-in-the-world as adults.

Limitations

Participants were all self-selected and recruitment was done with the aid of Springhouse staff, who contacted alumni through email and text messages. Thus, it is possible that negative cases self-excluded if they did not have a positive relationship with the school or staff. Another limitation could be the small sample. However, the focus of this qualitative study is on the perceptions of the participants and is not intended to make broad claims beyond these perceptions. This is an exploratory study that addresses a significant gap in the research literature and is intended to provide grounding for tentative theory-building on the influence of school experiences on perceptions of what it means to be an adult.

Conclusion

This research is aimed at contributing to the field of holistic education by exploring ideas about how views of adulthood held by alumni of a school based on holistic principles were influenced by

their school experiences. The findings show the school's guiding philosophy as expressed through the social environment and practices alongside the mentor/mentee relationship as significant influences on how participants came to frame their ideas about what it means to be an adult. These conclusions draw attention to the potential importance of carefully considering the educational design underlying the school's social environment and the structure of the teacher/student relationship as these were elements that played important roles in how participants developed their perceptions of adulthood.

References

Bosacki, S. L. (2002). Spirituality and self in preadolescents: Implications for a connected curriculum. *Journal of Beliefs & Values, 23*(1), 55–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/13617670220125674

Bosch, L. A., Serido, J., Card, N. A., Shim, S., & Barber, B. (2016). Predictors of financial identity development in emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood, 4*(6), 417–426. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696816631845

Byrnes, K. (2012). A portrait of contemplative teaching. *Journal of Transformative Education, 10*(1), 23–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344612456431

Campbell, J. (2020). *The hero with a thousand faces: The collected works of Joseph Campbell* (Kindle). The Joseph Campbell Foundation (original work published 1948).

Campbell, J., & Moyers, B. (1991). The power of myth (Kindle). Anchor Books.

Corner, S., & Dallavis, J. W. (2022). Religious schools, home schools, and gender-role beliefs in adulthood. *Review of Religious Research, 64*(4), 739–769. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-022-00514-0

Creswell, J., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches* (Fifth Edition). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Darken, R. (2009). Holistic education. In E. Provenzo & A. Provenzo (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the social and cultural foundations of education*. SAGE Publications,Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963992

Dewey, A. (2021). Shaping the environmental self: The role of childhood experiences in shaping identity standards of environmental behavior in adulthood. *Sociological Perspectives, 64*(4), 657–675. https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121420981681

Douglas, J. (1985). *Creative interviewing*. SAGE.

Erentaitė, R., Vosylis, R., Gabrialavičiūtė, I., & Raižienė, S. (2018). How does school experience relate to adolescent identity formation over time? Cross-lagged associations between school engagement, school burnout and identity processing styles. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 47*(4), 760–774. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0806-1

Finn, J. (2023). *Consider the source: A design for living*. Sourced Press.

Finn, J., & Stabler, S. (2024). *Sourced education* (H. Leopold, Ed.). Sourced Press.

Fisher, A. (2020). T*he thrumming relationality of all things* (By J. Macy; S. Kaza, Ed.; Kindle, pp. 89–96). Shambhala Publications Inc.

Forbes, S., & Martin, R. A. (2004). *What holistic education claims about it*self: *An analysis of holistic schools' literature*. 1–26.

Ho, P., Park, H., & Kao, G. (2022). *Diversity and the transition to adulthood in America*. University of California Press.

Johnson, M. K., Berg, J. A., & Sirotzki, T. (2007). Differentiation in self-perceived adulthood:

Extending the confluence model of subjective age identity. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 70*(3), 243–261.

Lyngstad, M. (2026). V*itality-centred education for adulthood: Exploring alumni perspectives on the influences of Springhouse School on subjective adulthood* [Dissertation]. Lakehead University.

Merriam, S., & Tisdell, E. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation.* Josey-Bass.

Miller, J. (1998). Making connections through holistic learning. *Educational Leadership, 56*(4), 46–48. https://doi.org/https://ocul-lhd.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01OCUL_LHD/q95b79/cdi_eric_primary_EJ577254

Miller, J. (2019). *The holistic curriculum* (3rd ed.). University of Toronto Press.

Miller, R. (2000). Beyond reductionism: The emerging holistic paradigm in education. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 28*(1–3), 382–393. https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2000.9977003

Morcom, L. A. (2017). Indigenous holistic education in philosophy and practice, with wampum as a case study. *Foro de Educación*, *15*(23), 121. https://doi.org/10.14516/fde.572

Ng, S. F. E., & Man, T. W. (2022). The filial piety learning in the radio drama activity. *Holistic Education Review, 2*(2), 1–7. https://doi.org/https://her.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/her/article/view/2197/2294

Novak, B. (2019a). Foundations: Introduction. In J. Miller, K. Nigh, M. Binder, B. Novak, & S. Crowell (Eds.), *The international handbook of holistic education*. Routledge.

Novak, B. (2019b). Hebraism, Hellenism, and Holism: Finding sources of life in western culture. In J. Miller, K. Nigh, M. Binder, B. Novak, & S. Crowell (Eds.), *The international handbook of holistic education* (pp. 328–335). Routledge.

Peräkylä, A., & Ruusuvuori, J. (2018). Analyzing talk and text. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th ed., pp. 669–691). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Piotrowski, K., Brzezińska, A. I., & Luyckx, K. (2020). Adult roles as predictors of adult identity and identity commitment in Polish emerging adults: Psychosocial maturity as an intervening variable. *Current Psychology*, 39(6), 2149–2158. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-018-9903-x

Plotkin, B. (2008). *Nature and the human Soul: Cultivating wholeness and community in a fragmented world*. New World Library.

Rich, Y., & Schachter, E. P. (2012). High school identity climate and student identity development. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, Identity Formation in Educational Settings, 37*(3), 218–228. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2011.06.002

Rudge, L. (2008). *Holistic education: An analysis of its pedagogical application* [Dissertation]. Ohio State University.

Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Smith, G. (2022). Education and regeneration. *Holistic Education Review, 2*(1), 1–7.

Springhouse School. (2020a). *Our Pedagogical Approach.* Springhouse Community School. www.springhousecommunityschool.org/pedagogical-approach

Springhouse School. (2020b). *Springhouse Handbook for Learners and Families*.

Springhouse School. (2022). *Sourced Design: A Model of Regenerative Culture*. Springhouse.

Springhouse School. (2023). *Explore the Mysteries of Nature and Soul*. The Well. https://springhouse.org/the-well/

Weinschenk, A. C., & Dawes, C. T. (2022). *Civic education in high school and voter turnout in adulthood. British Journal of Political Science*, *52(*2), 934–948. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000435

Author Bio

Michael Lyngstad holds a PhD in Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts of Education from Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. A former public alternative secondary school teacher, his research interests revolve around alternative education, transformation theory, Commons' theory of hierarchical complexity, and the history and philosophy of education – particularly as these fields relate to education for adulthood. He is especially interested in the influence that alternative education experiences in adolescence have on post-schooling ideas of what it means to be an adult. In addition to teaching private music lessons, he currently works as a contract lecturer at Lakehead University, teaching masters level courses in foundations of graduate studies, history of education, and philosophy of education. He also teaches undergraduate courses focused on democracy and education.