

# Poetry, Reflection, the Human Experience: Creating Spaces for Listening and Becoming

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## Abstract

This work is a collaborative, reflective exploration of our lived experiences interacting with students who are directly or indirectly affected by conflict. We inquired into these experiences using poetry and wrote three poems. We present these as visuals to enrich the poetic expression. Through poetry, previously unidentified themes regarding our beliefs about teachers' roles and identities emerged. This process demonstrated that collaborative reflective practice among educators is immensely valuable for creating inclusive and evolving teaching and learning spaces. Dialogue and open-mindedness in such spaces will foster student growth, enabling them to become confident members of society.

## Where We Begin

"Why do you feel so overwhelmed by something that's happening all the way on the other side of the world?" This was one of the questions I (Kashaf) posed in our World Wednesday discussion as my Grade 9 students shared what they had heard, read, or seen in the news that week. Most importantly, World Wednesdays, a result of students' interest in current affairs, allowed them to share their feelings. Feelings of confusion, stress, frustration, and a lack of direction surfaced almost every week from these discussions. Often, I took these conversations to my colleagues.

What Kashaf shared was akin to what I (Mariam) had felt. I recall living in a conflict zone, not knowing if there would be a tomorrow. At the time, I was around 9 years old and had many hopes for the future, but the war and conflict made me feel as though none of my hopes or dreams would come to fruition. During this time, I felt lucky to be able to go to school and sought answers from my teachers. However, I saw that the conflict caused my teachers to feel uncertain and stressed as well. This conflict impacted every aspect of my life, including my learning.

Education cannot be ignorant of the realities of the world, and therefore, learning spaces cannot exist in isolation. We live in times where conflict around the globe is a part of our lives in one way or another. With the increasing presence of technology, information is instantly available anywhere in the world. This means that conflict is not limited to a specific geographical location or to a certain group of people. Students in our classrooms are constantly aware of conflict zones, even if they are not physically present there. A conflict zone is an area of political instability or polarization that experiences violence and disruption of essential services, such as healthcare, nutrition, and education (Krause, 2021; Prasad & Prasad, 2009; Wood, 2006). This awareness impacts their mental and emotional well-being (Houston et al., 2018; Pfefferbaum et al., 2015; Vesco et al., 2025).

Students enter the classroom with feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and stress (Houston et al., 2008; Houston et al., 2019; Leiner et al., 2016).

Students' well-being impacts how they learn (Bücker et al., 2018; Geertshuis, 2019; Riva et al., 2020). If our students are experiencing mental and emotional turmoil, it will affect their classroom presence and, consequently, our teaching. Helping students through this turmoil requires us to be at our best. However, presently, the feelings that Mariam recalls noticing among her teachers as a child are very familiar to us. The world permeates our classrooms in many ways. We learn about current affairs from news outlets, from social media, and through family, friends, community, colleagues, and students. This amalgam of information causes our students' confusions, uncertainties, and lack of direction to be reflected in our lives. Understanding how to best address our students' thoughts and emotions requires that we first address our own. Therefore, we have come together as educators to reflect collaboratively on our experiences in navigating this challenge. Through poetry, we inquire into and explore our thoughts, emotions, actions, and experiences.

At the end of our 2025 school year, we decided to reflect on the academic year we had completed. For this collaboration, we met two to three times a week over the duration of a month via Zoom. These meetings began with discussions voicing our initial, raw reflections on our classroom experiences. These discussions led to the emergence of common themes that are reflected in all our poems. The section "Our Poetry" outlines the writing process for each poem and what prompted it. These poems were written collaboratively in live Zoom meetings in a shared Google Doc, with every author contributing equally. Upon completion, we edited and refined them together. The process ended with readings of each poem to assess whether they were authentic to our experiences and reflections.

To recognize that our students' schooling is not separate from their lives, we needed to accept that the same is true for ourselves. Our lived experiences and identities inform our view of education and our reflections on it. We are researchers and educators who come from immigrant families and parts of the world (South and West Asia) that have been involved in one conflict or another for as long as we can remember. Our classrooms also include students from diverse backgrounds, including those who have come from active conflict zones. Thus, our positionality impacts this reflection.

This work is a collection of three co-authored poems. We reflect on this process of writing poetry to draw valuable insights into educators' use of collaborative inquiry and reflection as a sense-making tool. We hope this work inspires educators and researchers to use such reflective practice as a tool of empowerment in times of uncertainty.

## The Importance of Collaborative Poetic Reflection

Our rapidly changing world requires teachers who are resilient in the face of the challenges that they and their students experience. Teacher resilience and growth are positively impacted by self-reflection (Petlák, 2021; Wosnitza et al., 2018). Self-reflection is the analysis of personal thoughts, emotions, and actions to better understand oneself and is necessary for teachers to analyze their teaching experiences (Petlák, 2021; Sammaknejad & Marzban, 2016). The habitual practice of self-reflection on one's own practices is called reflective practice (Earl & Ussher, 2016; Logan, 2012). Reflective practice helps educators recognize and understand the factors that make classrooms complex learning environments (Freese, 2006; Logan, 2012). Thus, we are inquiring by way of "questioning, seeking knowledge or information" into our thoughts, emotions, actions, and experiences (Marshall, 2006; Ogbuanya & Owodunni, 2015, p. 43). This inquiry can lead to an increased awareness, providing an avenue for necessary change in the face of evolving classroom landscapes.

We are educators, researchers, and students; however, another important aspect of our identity is that we are poets. In our personal lives, we use poetry for self-reflection and self-expression. Poetry can be used as a tool in academic and professional settings to explore diverse topics (Creely et al., 2022; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2008). Reflection through poetry can support the emergence of hidden themes and promote a deeper awareness of one's own thoughts and perspectives (Butler-Kisber, 2005; Simecek & Rumbold, 2016). In this inquiry, our reflective practice is facilitated by poetry. "Poetry clusters are an interesting way of producing a kaleidoscope of essential ideas around a narrative theme" (Butler-Kisber, 2005, p. 108). Thus, we use a cluster of poems to support the emergence of key insights from this work.

As teacher colleagues and fellow researchers who have had similar interactions with our students and conflicts, we decided to reflect collaboratively. Teacher collaboration not only leads to progression in teachers' learning but can also have positive impacts on students' learning (Lomos et al., 2011; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Collaborative reflection has been shown to diversify and significantly enhance teachers' reflection (Kamali & Javahery, 2025; Farrell, 2007). Hence, we collaborate to gain valuable insights into our shared experiences.

## Our Poetry

Poetry is a non-linear way of exploring emotions, which means that the writing process allows themes to emerge that may not otherwise be apparent (Prendergast et al., 2009; Simecek & Rumbold, 2016). This section of our work shares the poems that resulted from our reflective collaboration, inquiring into our experiences. We present a discussion of what prompted each poem and the themes that emerged from this writing process.

## Poem 1: Uncertainty–The Only Known

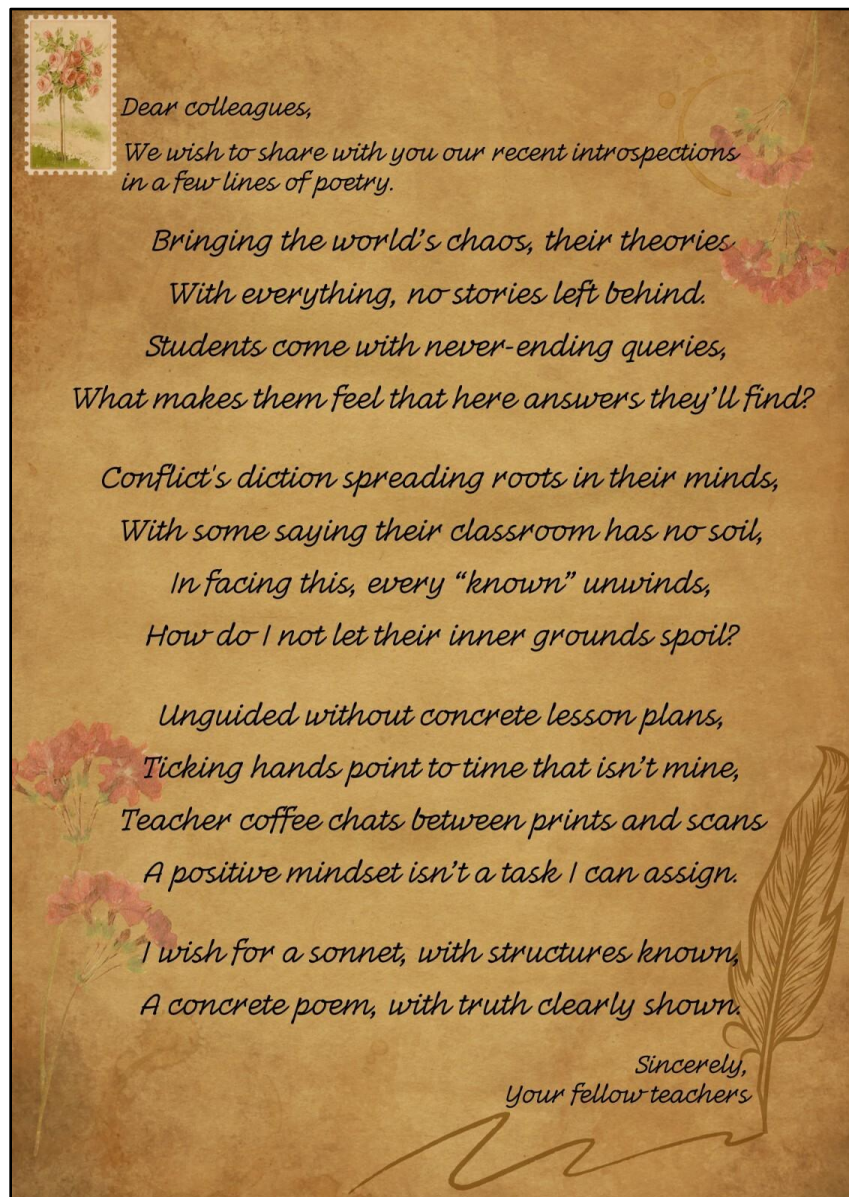


Fig. 1: Uncertainty –The Only Known

As teachers, we see that in recent years, our classrooms have been filled with conversations and dialogue about ongoing global conflicts. Through these conversations, we have seen that our students are burdened by feelings of uncertainty, hopelessness, and helplessness. This poem was prompted by our struggles in determining how best to help them process and make sense of this reality.

Individually, we felt confused about how to create a safe and positive environment for students who were bringing in all this information, along with their feelings and views. One of the insights that emerged from collaboration and discussion was that we questioned ourselves when other teachers did not allow such dialogue into their classrooms. We felt that perhaps we were doing a disservice to the students by

taking away the time that seemed to be set aside for teaching the course material. Though we agreed there is a need for such conversations, we were conflicted about how to accept such indifference from other teachers. Upon recognizing the need for teachers to listen to students' experiences, we chose to address this poem as a letter to our fellow educators.

This poem is a Shakespearean sonnet, composed of 14 lines with the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Each line of the poem is 10 syllables (Oliphant, 1932). Our choice of structure for this poem juxtaposes the lack of structure we experienced when exploring conflict with our students. We felt that a structured poem with limited syllables and lines would help us work through the unstructured amalgam of our feelings and thoughts. This writing process helped us move through shallow reflections to identify the defining moments of our experiences.

Another insight that emerged from this process was that, despite the confusion we felt, we currently have ideas for moving forward to address this situation, such as adopting a positive mindset. However, our dialogue revealed that implementing this within the complexities of the classroom involves many nuances. The act of putting pen to paper in a poem has created a space in our lives for working through this complex challenge. This reflective exercise has shown us that poetry creates space for expressing ideas that are otherwise too "messy" to articulate. Inquiring into ourselves, our thoughts, our emotions, our actions, and our experiences collectively was an endeavor that led to reflections on our teaching. These reflections will provide insights that guide our teaching practices toward greater authenticity.

## Poem 2: Education is Lifesaving

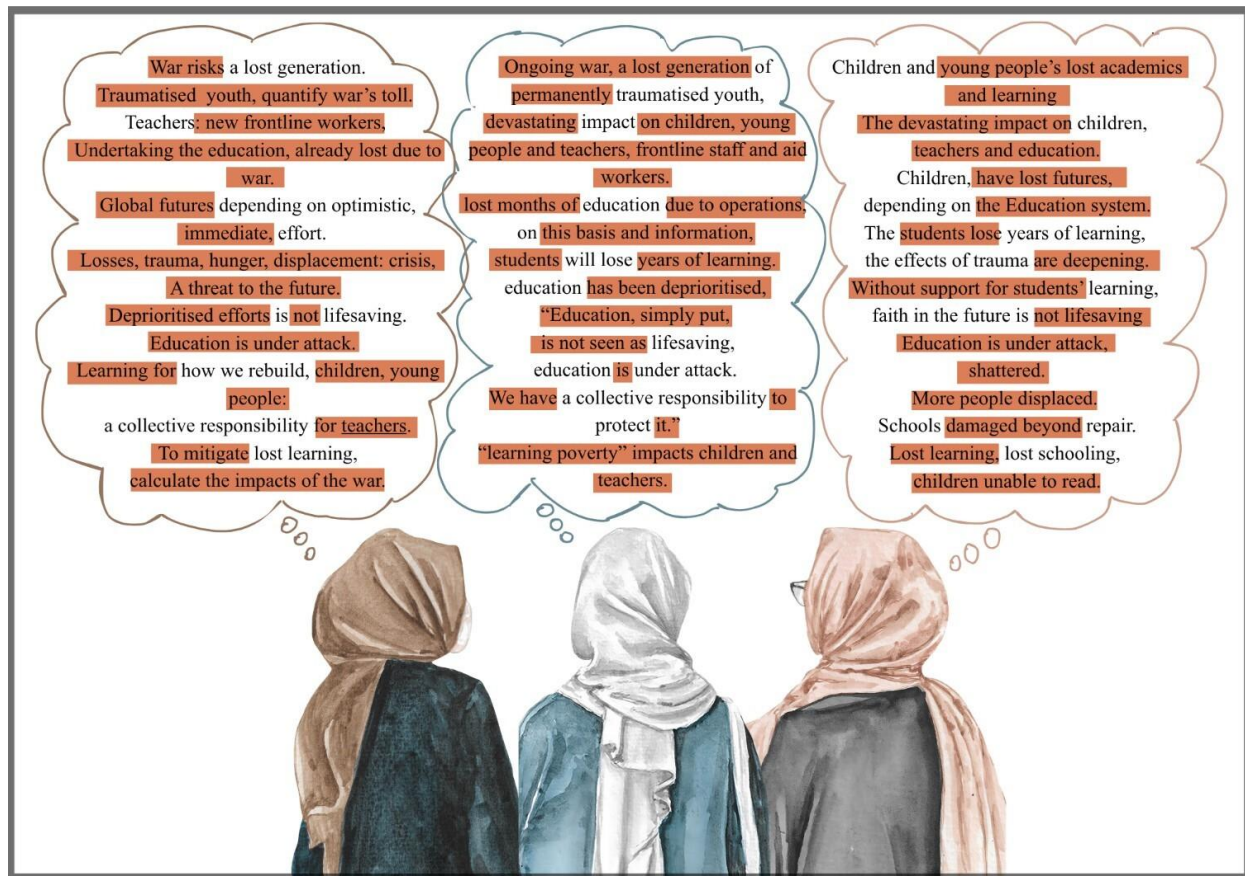


Fig. 2: Education Is Lifesaving

A lost generation of children and traumatised youth.  
Teachers impact children.  
Children, depending on optimistic education,  
Depending on effort, on the years of learning,  
Will lose the effects of trauma.  
Education, learning, is lifesaving.  
Faith in the future is lifesaving.  
How we rebuild education under attack:  
A collective responsibility.  
A collective responsibility:  
Protect schools,  
Repair lost learning, lost schooling.

The above poem is a found poem composed of the unblocked text in Figure 2. This figure contains individual found poems that we wrote using an article from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency

for Palestine Refugees in the Near East about a recent conflict (2024). These individual found poems are in Appendix A and in the thought bubbles in Figure 2.

Our students use media and news outlets as recurring sources of information for learning about conflict in different parts of the world. In our classrooms, we struggled to help students make sense of the reality of conflict because of the diverse and often contradicting media portrayals of it. When discussing this aspect of our experience, we found that how each of us interprets media shapes our beliefs. Thus, to see how we individually analyze the news, we decided to use the text of a news piece to write a found poem. Found poetry is a reconstruction from texts that already exist. Its purpose is to evoke emotions and poetically express lived experiences (Chisanga et al., 2014; Wiggins, 2011).

The process of individually writing the three poems revealed thematic similarities and subtle differences across them. Each poem highlights the impact of conflict on education and on learners. They all express that education is being attacked. Aleesha's poem focuses on the role of teachers in rebuilding education for learners impacted by conflict. Mariam's poem focuses on the role of individuals in society in protecting education, whether or not they are directly connected to the education system. Kashaf's poem focuses on the loss of children's education in a conflict. Once we understood how our beliefs differed, we wrote a collective found poem using the individual poems to see what insights would arise through collaboration.

A key insight for us from the process of writing these poems was that found poems can surface previously unidentified themes. This process revealed that the theme we wanted to focus on was hope for the future of education. Upon completing our collective poem, we uncovered several shared beliefs that we were not actively aware of before the writing process: (1) the belief that optimism is crucial to rebuilding education, (2) the belief that saving education is a collective responsibility not limited to teachers, and (3) the belief that education is lifesaving.

### Poem 3: To Walk In Another's Shoes

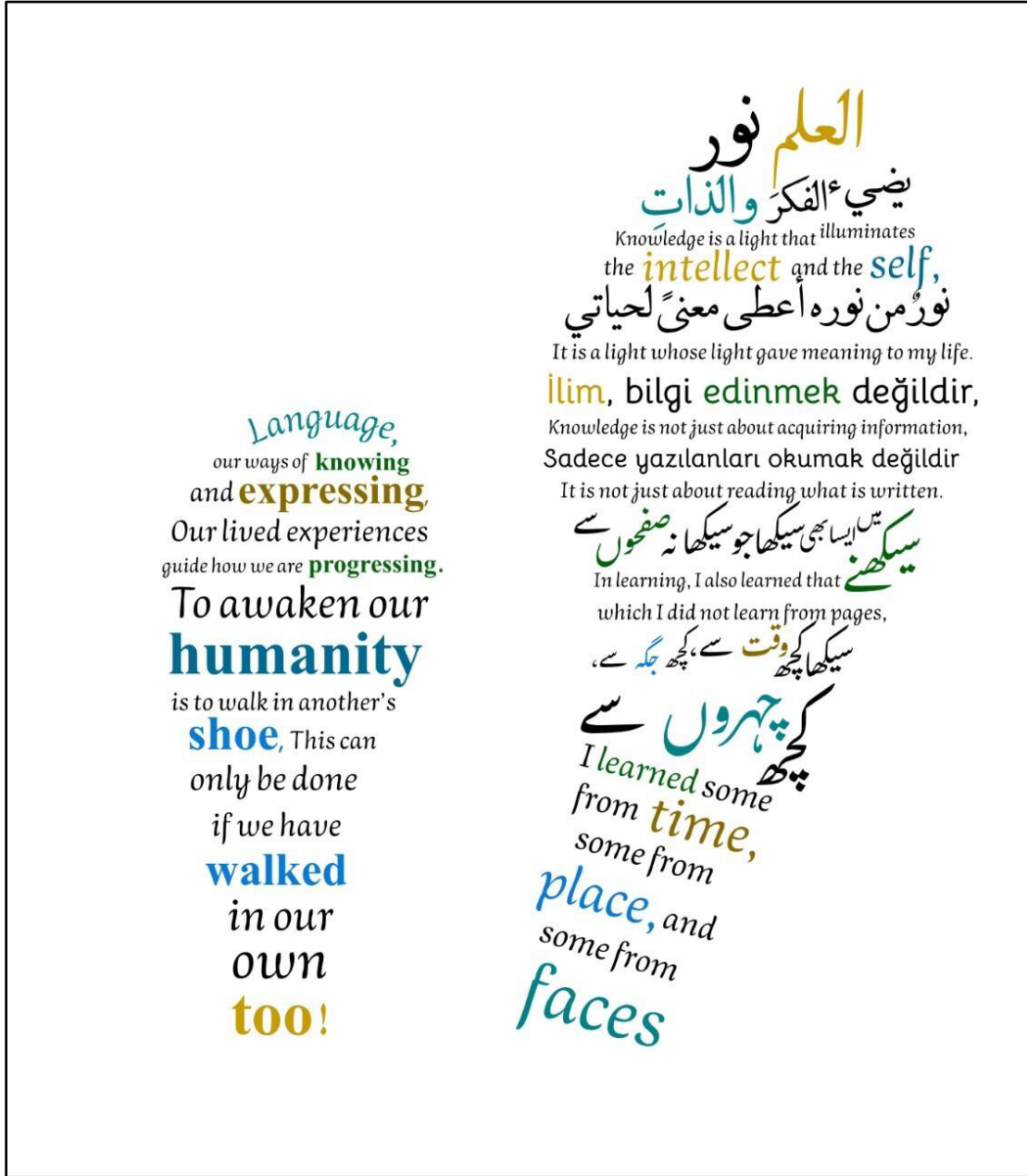


Fig. 3: To Walk In Another's Shoes

Having explored our dilemmas and beliefs about what it means to save education, we wondered which direction to take. As we began writing this third poem, our dialogue led us to decide to look inward for the answer, since we all have valuable individual insights to offer. When we examined what is unique to each of us, we concluded that language was a difference which we valued deeply. We started by writing about what education means to us in our native languages or in languages in which we think most deeply, as they represent our most raw thoughts. Mariam wrote in Arabic, Kashaf wrote in Turkish, and Aleesha wrote in Urdu. We then translated these into English. The translations are also poetic.

The visual for the poem shows a pair of footsteps meant to represent lived experiences. The larger step represents the teacher figure and includes reflections on our experiences in our languages. The smaller step represents a student figure and includes our shared view that lived experiences inform one's learning and education. The two steps are paired and can move together only if each holds on to their individual experiences confidently.

Writing these showed us that we believe terms like knowledge, intellect, information, reading, and learning all connect to the topic of education. Another theme that became apparent was our shared belief that education is not restricted to the curriculum or the classroom; rather, it is identity-making and meaning-making, both rooted in one's lived experiences. Through this, we found the insight that we believe the ability to step into someone else's shoes, to understand, empathize with, and respect their life experiences, is an important aspect of being human. Drawing on this, we realized that for teachers to teach well, they must be able to step into their students' shoes and see the challenges they face through their eyes. However, this can only be achieved when one is aware of and at peace with one's own stories.

## Dialogue as a Companion to Reflection

The collaborative writing process was an engaging and reflective experience. Each of us uses poetry as a form of self-expression; hence, we have used it to present our thoughts and reflections authentically. The overall process of writing poetry was emergent; we wanted to start somewhere and let the writing guide us. For instance, in the third poem, we began with phrases in our own languages that led us toward a collective theme of confidence in our identities and experiences. This was also reflected in the found poem. We were able to derive a positive direction from a context in which we individually only identified problems, conveying a message of hope and optimism.

This collaborative reflection and inquiry led us to examine our real teaching contexts. Through this, we recognized the impact teachers have on one another's decisions. Our first poem showed us that there is a need for teacher solidarity in giving confidence to teachers who feel lost and overwhelmed. Our second poem showed that we believe it is everyone's responsibility to protect education. This means that teachers must work collaboratively with administrators, parents, and students to create learning spaces that foster student growth. Our third poem revealed that self-reflection empowers educators to teach authentically. However, collaborative reflection serves as a sense-making tool, providing direction in times of uncertainty. Collaboration allowed us to reflect in ways that we did not think of individually, and propelled our thoughts manifold. We were able to co-create and develop ideas we might otherwise have neither identified nor explored.

The depth of reflection and analysis helped us connect ideas and formulate coherent thought patterns, providing an opportunity to present our ideas in authentic ways. In this process, writing was accompanied by conversation. As we wrote, we realized the importance of creating spaces for dialogue. Dialogue allowed us to express, voice, question, and find meaning in our lived experiences. Engaging our students in dialogue can help them make sense of their experiences and empower them to feel confident about their futures. Therefore, this process has revealed that every educator has the potential to create equitable

educational spaces by providing opportunities for discussion and dialogue, where diverse student opinions and perspectives can coexist.

We have also realized the value of dialogue amongst teachers. Although the three of us have shared the same teaching space for multiple years and are now enrolled at the same institution for higher education, no previous discussions on this topic ever brought forth the insights this work offers. We may experience similar challenges in our classrooms; however, we are exposed to different aspects of students' lives, and thus, we each have a different set of experiences. Dialogue as a companion to our collaborative reflection allowed us to explore and value the diversity of student experiences. Such dialogue has the power to create an inclusive and safe space for educators to support each other when they need to find a way forward.

## The Power of Our Stories

Our students are growing up in a world where conflicts around the globe are at the forefront; they are exposed to them either directly or indirectly. This causes students to harbor thoughts and emotions that stem from feelings of uncertainty, hopelessness, and helplessness. To nurture students who will become confident and productive members of society, we need to teach them how to address these thoughts and emotions. This work illustrates that to do so, we must first address our own response to conflict. We have demonstrated that the practice of collaboratively writing reflective poetry can help us achieve this.

The key insights we gained from this practice were the importance of: (1) creating a safe space for voicing one's vulnerabilities and uncertainties, (2) recognizing that students' experiences are not independent of their learning, (3) collaborating with fellow educators to recognize crucial unidentified insights, and (4) accepting and valuing one's own journey to model confidence for our students.

As poets, we chose the best way we know in which to express what seems inexpressible: poetry. It became a raw, authentic medium that created a space for us to voice, express, question, and comprehend. It has also become a point of connection with the realities of our students' lives. Our experiences as teachers, the focus of our exploratory poetry, have enriched our reflections, and we aspire for this to enhance our practice of teaching. We hope that this work inspires educators to unite in response to every obstacle that comes in the way of their students' well-being and their future.

To our colleagues and students who have come from different paths of life, we encourage you to always reflect on your experiences. Know that there is value in the stories you carry. Never underestimate the power of collaborating with your peers. When minds come together, there remains no unsolvable problem, only inquiries waiting to be explored.

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## Appendix A: Individual Found Poems

### Mariam's Found Poem

The ongoing war, in Gaza will set children and young people's education back by up to five years and risks creating a lost generation of permanently traumatised Palestinian youth, a new study warns.

The report, by a team of academics working in partnership with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), is the first to comprehensively quantify the war's toll on learning since it began in October 2023. It also details the devastating impact on children, young people and teachers, supported by new accounts from frontline staff and aid workers.

The study was a joint undertaking involving UNRWA and researchers at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge and the Centre for Lebanese Studies. It shows that Gaza's children have already lost 14 months of education since 2019 due to COVID-19, earlier Israeli military operations, and the current war.

On this basis and using information such as global post-COVID-19 education recovery data, the researchers model several potential futures for Gaza's younger generation, depending on when the war ends and how quickly the education system is restored.

The most optimistic prediction – assuming an immediate ceasefire and rapid international effort to rebuild the education system – is that students will lose two years of learning. If the fighting continues until 2026, the losses could stretch to five years. This does not account for the additional effects of trauma, hunger and forcible displacement, all of which are deepening Gaza's education crisis.

Without urgent, large-scale international support for education, the researchers suggest that there is a significant threat not just to students' learning, but their overall faith in the future and in concepts such as human rights. Despite this, the study shows that education has been deprioritised, in international aid efforts, in favour of other areas. "Education, simply put, is not seen as lifesaving," the report warns.

Professor Pauline Rose, Director of the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre, University of Cambridge, said: "Palestinian education is under attack. In Gaza. Israeli military operations have had a significant effect on learning."

"As well as planning for how we rebuild Gaza's shattered education system, there is an urgent need to get educational support for children now. Education is a right for all young people. We have a collective responsibility to protect it."

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 10,600 children and 400 teachers had been killed in Israeli military operations by August 2024, and more than 15,300 students and 2,400 teachers injured. Hundreds of thousands of young people have been displaced and are living in shelters.

Satellite images analysed by the Occupied Palestinian Territory Education Cluster have verified that over 90 per cent of schools have been damaged, many beyond repair. Since August, UNRWA has provided education in the shelters, reaching about 8,000 children, but the study warns that much more is needed to mitigate lost learning, which was already considerable following COVID-19.

The researchers calculate that 14 months of lost schooling so far have increased "learning poverty" – the proportion of children unable to read a basic text by age 10 – by at least 20 percentage points. The accurate figure may be even higher, as the calculation does not account for the wider impacts of the war on children and teachers.

Fig. A1: Mariam Al Ramadhan's found poem

## Kashaf's Found Poem

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Professor Pauline Rose, Director of the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre, University of Cambridge, said: "Palestinian education is under attack in Gaza. Israeli military operations have had a significant effect on learning."

"As well as planning for how we rebuild Gaza's shattered education system, there is an urgent need to get educational support for children now. Education is a right for all young people. We have a collective responsibility to protect it."

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 10,600 children and 400 teachers had been killed in Israeli military operations by August 2024, and more than 15,300 students and 2,400 teachers injured. Hundreds of thousands of young people have been displaced and are living in shelters.

Satellite images analysed by the Occupied Palestinian Territory Education Cluster have verified that over 90 per cent of schools have been damaged, many beyond repair. Since August, UNRWA has provided education in the shelters, reaching about 8,000 children, but the study warns that much more is needed to mitigate lost learning, which was already considerable following COVID-19.

The researchers calculate that 14 months of lost schooling so far have increased "learning poverty" – the proportion of children unable to read a basic text by age 10 – by at least 20 percentage points. The accurate figure may be even higher, as the calculation does not account for the wider impacts of the war on children and teachers.

Fig. A2: Kashaf Noreen's found poem

## Aleesha's Found Poem

The ongoing war in Gaza will set children and young people's education back by up to five years and risks creating a lost generation of permanently traumatised Palestinian youth, a new study warns.

The report, by a team of academics working in partnership with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), is the first to comprehensively quantify the war's toll on learning since it began in October 2023. It also details the devastating impact on children, young people and teachers, supported by new accounts from frontline staff and aid workers.

The study was a joint undertaking involving UNRWA and researchers at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge and the Centre for Lebanese Studies. It shows that Gaza's children have already lost 14 months of education since 2019 due to COVID-19, earlier Israeli military operations, and the current war.

On this basis and using information such as global post-COVID-19 education recovery data, the researchers model several potential futures for Gaza's younger generation, depending on when the war ends and how quickly the education system is restored.

The most optimistic prediction – assuming an immediate ceasefire and rapid international effort to rebuild the education system – is that students will lose two years of learning. If the fighting continues until 2026, the losses could stretch to five years. This does not account for the additional effects of trauma, hunger and forcible displacement, all of which are deepening Gaza's education crisis.

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Fig. A3: Aleesha Noreen's found poem



**Aleesha Noreen** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. Her research focuses on investigating how formative assessments contribute to the development of epistemic agency within knowledge-building communities. In addition to being an enthusiastic educator, she has served as a curriculum developer and school coordinator. She is also a poet and a writer.



**Kashaf Noreen** is a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. With a Master's in Education and over three years of teaching experience in chemistry, biology, and science, she is passionate about fostering inclusive and engaging learning environments. Her research explores how AI integration can support student engagement and agency in knowledge-building classrooms. She integrates creativity, collaboration, and digital tools into her teaching practice. Outside of her academic work, Kashaf enjoys learning new languages, exploring art, and engaging in lifelong learning.



**Mariam Al Ramadhan** is an educator currently pursuing a Master's in Curriculum and Pedagogy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. She works as a curriculum developer, mentor, and instructional designer. Mariam's work focuses on creating inclusive, flexible, and equitable learning experiences that empower both teachers and students. Her interests lie at the intersection of curriculum innovation, educational design, and collaborative professional learning. Beyond the classroom, Mariam is a poet and a visual artist who expresses her creativity through graphic design and painting, including vibrant large-scale murals that bring spaces to life.

