LEARNing Landscapes

Journal

Transitions: The messiness of just being human



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Statement of Purpose

LEARNing Landscapes™ Journal is an open access, peer-reviewed, online education journal supported by LEARN (Leading English Education and Resource Network). Published in the spring of each year, it attempts to make links between theory and practice and is built upon the principles of partnership, collaboration, inclusion, and attention to multiple perspectives and voices. The material in each publication attempts to share and showcase leading educational ideas, research, and practices in Quebec, and beyond. We welcome articles, interviews, visual representations, arts-informed work, and multimedia texts to inspire teachers, administrators, and other educators to reflect upon and develop innovative possibilities within their own practices.

Review Board (Issue 29)

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Editorial

It is my pleasure to introduce you to the guest co-editors of the 29th issue of *LEARNing Landscapes* titled "Transitions: The messiness of just being human."



Mindy Carter is an associate professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University, Canada. Her research focuses on teacher identity, and on using the arts to foster culturally responsible and socially just pedagogies. She is the recent recipient of the American Association for Theatre Education's (AATE) Johnny Saldana Outstanding Professor of Theatre (2023) award and the AATE honorable mention publication award (2023) for her latest book, *Smallest Circles First: Exploring Teacher Reconciliatory Praxis through Drama Education*. Most recently, she was awarded the 2025 AERA Outstanding Achievement in Arts and Learning. Mindy is revered by students for her teaching of drama education and is an exceptional colleague.



Traci Klein is a PhD candidate in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. She was an assistant professor of dance at Texas A&M International University, a lecturer at UC Santa Cruz, and the program administrator and creative assistant for NYU's Future Dancers and Dancemakers program. She holds an MFA in dance from NYU Tisch, and a BFA in dance from Southern Methodist University. She is a published author, member of the International Somatic Movement Education & Therapy Association, the National Dance Education Organization, the American Education Research Association, and the Canadian Society for the Studies in Education. She is the recipient of the DISE Doctoral Award in Education, the Gretta Chambers Fellowship, and the P. Lantz Graduate Fellowship for Excellence in Education. Her doctoral research focuses on dance education and somatic-based pedagogies that foster creativity.

Traci has been a perfect fit to work with Mindy as a co-editor and to illustrate, as an excellent example, why *LEARNing Landscapes* supports the inclusion of graduate students in all aspects of the publishing process.

This marks the third time in 18 years that the journal has had guest editors, and you won't be disappointed. I invite you to enjoy their informative and engaging editorial and the authors' thoughtful submissions.

LBK

Mindy: Hey Traci! It was so great seeing you last week at the 5th bi-annual Artful Inquiry Research Group (AIRG) symposium (May 2025). I still can't believe you made it to Montreal for this event. It feels like working on this editorial is actually bringing us full circle since the McGill April 2023 symposium on the theme of Re/Emergence(s), which inspired the theme of transitions in this call.

Traci: Yes, I loved how this special issue has allowed us, and these authors, to explore what it means to embrace transitions as an acceptance of being, and how the complexities of human interaction inform every level of educational practice and their related policies. The articles we received really open possibilities for embodied, holistic, inclusive, equitable, and socially just spaces for transformation within artistic practices, teaching, and learning.

Mindy: Absolutely! And so many of the submissions also show, rather than just tell us what this work is about by including multiple forms of representation, reminding us that we are interconnected, relational beings. *Going into the messiness* and not trying to conceal it is really challenging … but acknowledging the emotions, thoughts and felt experiences that make up this human life are an important aspect of recognizing how we can be with one another and create new spaces within academic contexts for the benefit of our teaching, relationships, and lives.

Traci: Exactly! Attending the AIRG symposium was really good for me, in the sense that I was able to find support from my doctoral committee, peers, and other faculty in our department as I navigate a really challenging time in my thesis work. Participating in the collage workshop with Lynn Butler-Kisber was especially encouraging because it helped me find clarity with what I was feeling emotionally. During our "gallery walk" we were asked to write 2–3 adjectives to describe each other's collage. One word that surprised me about my own collage was "vast." I discussed that with my partner, who was working at the same table as me, and realized that it could represent how I have been "reaching out" to others for support in navigating these obstacles. Sometimes you have to realize that you can't do everything on your own, and leaning on others while you confront and dive into the messiness can give you the tools you need to break through certain barriers (see collage below). I love how some of the authors in this issue have brought their artistic practices into their articles, such as Venn diagrams, collage, drawing, narrative inquiry, and picture books. It makes this a really special issue.



Fig.1: Collage by Traci Klein

Mindy: I love this so, so much. I remember seeing your collage during the gallery walk and being struck by the balance of openness and softness but also questioning, wondering, and ambiguity. The mountain in the lower right corner of your piece also makes me think that when we begin in lots of institutional contexts, we tend to privilege the "mountaintop experiences" like graduation or awards or grants … but there is so much unheard, unsaid, and unexpressed when we move away from the linearity of any journey. I guess that is why the "messiness of being human" is important for our authors too. My collage, below, was unexpected for me. I reflected on the prompt: "Try to portray what it looks and feels like to be a teacher, or researcher, or student." This is what emerged. When I looked at the story it was telling after I finished, it read to me like a journey from what it has meant to be a part of a university institution as a student and then faculty member (pre- and post-tenure) and how over time this story has been painful and traumatic, but that eventually I have been able to find my own s/place within the emergence of the realities of academic life as well.

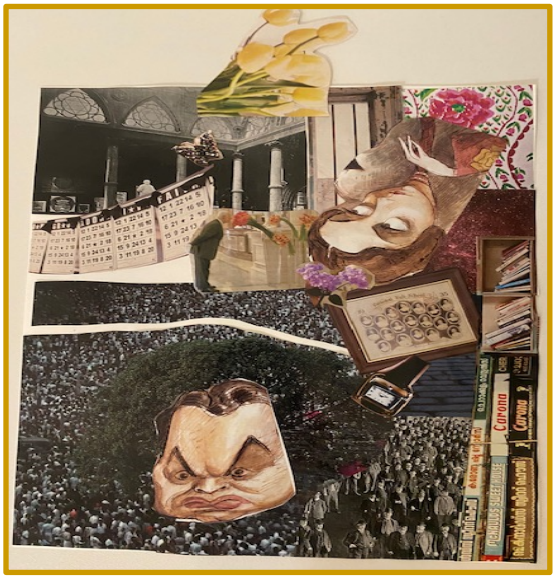


Fig. 2 Collage by Mindy Carter

Traci: I think I saw this piece and was surprised when I found out it was yours.

Mindy: Hmmm … I actually remember you mentioning that when we did the gallery walk to look at one another's pieces … did you write the word "done" on the back of mine? I think I suggested including our collages within this introduction to the themed issue because the collage form reminds me that there isn't just one story in this human life, and there are always surprises, new interpretations to what we think we are doing and (hopefully) also always room to play and explore.

Traci: Let's take a look at what some of the contributors wrote about in relation to *inclusivity* which was a theme in several pieces. **Melissa Daoust**'s (PhD Candidate, University of Ottawa) work explores a mother's (un)learning journey as she confronts settler colonial complicity and her responsibilities in raising a child on stolen Lands. Daoust writes, "the work continues and resists closure" and "It demands instead a continual asking of questions and a willingness to be changed—as we move through the tangled and

unfinished story of this shared existence." Isn't that beautiful? **Abdullah Najjar** (PhD student, McGill University) and **Anila Asghar** (Associate Professor, McGill University), in their article, discuss the intricate complexities of racism and Islamophobia in school settings and present effective pedagogical approaches that teachers can incorporate into their curricula, while **Brittany Ouellette** (PhD Candidate, University of Alberta) confronts her experiences through an autobiographical inquiry about her son's autism diagnosis and how it guides her as a mother, educator, friend, and family member.

Mindy: *Student-centered learning* is another theme, as seen the article by **Carolyn Clarke** (Assistant Professor, St. Francis Xavier University), **Evan Throop Robinson** (Curriculum Consultant in the Caribbean), **Ellen Carter** (Assistant Professor, St. Francis Xavier University), and **Jo Anne Broders**' (Secondary teacher, Smallwood Academy). In this piece, they explore spaces for transformation for teachers and learners using picture books, encouraging students to share their stories so that their voices are heard through multiple forms of representation. **Sakina Rizvi** (PhD Candidate, McGill University) and **Aleesha Noreen** (PhD Candidate, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) examine how educators can use knowledge building and holistic pedagogy to create learning spaces to help students develop a deep sense of personal and social accountability, and to create spaces where students feel their voices are valued. Their inquiry came from a rise in plagiarism and use of AI tools in their classrooms, and the text is supported artistically through digital collage. **Tara-Lynn Scheffel** (Associate Professor, Wilfrid Laurier University), **Sarah Driessens** (Education Specialist, public sector), and **Bethany Correia** (MEd, Wilfrid Laurier University) are K–3 educators who explore student engagement during literacy learning. They reflexively highlight the complex nature of literacy engagement and the importance of active educator engagement. Their focus is on moving beyond observable student behaviors to identify student engagement and valuing the empowerment of learners to take responsibility for their own education.

Traci: I really love how many of the authors weave their own personal stories into their research lives as an example of the messiness of being human. These *interconnections* and *collaborations* come through in **Jen Hinkkala**'s (PhD Candidate, McGill University) article about the importance of preparing arts educators like herself for work as self-employed artists. **Melanie Glaves** (Secondary school teacher, Ontario), **Sean Lessard** (Professor, University of Alberta), and **D. Jean Clandinin** (Professor Emeritus, University of Alberta) recount their teaching and learning experiences with students in a course entitled Girlhood, which carved a space for acknowledging, valuing, and amplifying female voices. In this article they explore the ways two girls' experiences of the course shaped the future practice of the teachers/authors. Through narrative inquiry they embark on remembering the past and courageously moving into the unknown and uncertain future. The article by **Margaret Macintyre Latta** (Professor, University of British Columbia), **Bill Cohen** (Assistant Professor, University of British Columbia), and **Danielle Lamb** (Project Manager and Research Facilitator, University of British Columbia) is about an un/decolonizing and Indigenizing partnership project in which students and their educators embark on a co-curricular making experience where curricula is not predetermined, but is a path that requires collective adaptation, change, and built understandings. **Maggie Rahill** (High school teacher, John Marshall School of Engineering), **Rosalinda Godínez** (Postdoctoral Fellow, Cleveland State University), **Adam M. Voight** (Associate Professor, Cleveland State University), and **Molly Buckley-Marudas** (Associate Professor, Cleveland State

University) highlight the transformative potential of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in fostering student agency. They present teaching experiences, student examples, and reflections on implementing art-based YPAR in classrooms, offering insights into reflective, action-oriented educational practices that empower youth. **Nathalie Reid** (Assistant Professor and Director of the Child Trauma Research Centre, University of Regina) and **Thi Thuy Hang Tran** (Lecturer, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education) discuss the development of a Saskatchewan microcertificate entitled Trauma-Informed/Sensitive Pedagogies and Practices which draws attention to the messiness of time, delivery, and beginning and becoming in relation to an understanding of curriculum as the dynamic interaction between teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu.

Mindy: I thought that the same theme (interconnections) could be seen in **Hana Shahin** (Assistant Professor, Zayed University), **Mazna Patka** (Associate Professor, Zayed University), **Mustafa Aydogan** (Assistant Professor, Zayed University), **Ayesha Al Ali** (Undergraduate student, Zayed University), **Meera Bin Thalith** (Undergraduate student, Zayed University) and **Saeed Mohamed Alhemeiri**'s (Undergraduate student, Zayed University) article as they examined the experiences of Emirati undergraduate student research assistants in the United Arab Emirates to understand their motivations, challenges, and the role of mentorship in their growth as emerging researchers. The students' perspectives focus on the necessity of culturally responsive mentorship that values the interplay between individuality and collaboration to foster agency and community equally. **Nicole Lee** (Assistant Professor, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), **Ken Morimoto** (Research Fellow, Tokyo Gakugei University), **Melissa Boucher-Guilbert** (Graduate student, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), **Fayrouz Ibrahim** (Assistant Professor, Damietta University), **Robin Jensen** (Graduate student, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), **Megan Macdonald** (Graduate student, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), and **Rebecca Zynomirski** (Graduate student, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), in their a/r/tographic study group, discuss how the concept of sustainable relationality is engaged within a community of practice. A/r/tography and propositional thinking opened a space for this gathering to become a messy yet nourishing place from which to envision different ways of working and being. Finally, **Nathalie Thibault** (Assistant Professor, Wonkwang University) provides a unique perspective on how Venn diagrams informed her transition from student to teacher, doctoral student to doctor, and how they have created a way to visualize and ideate various intersecting ideas throughout the research processes. Thibault writes, "While we are all striving for creativity, I am hoping to transition from thinking outside the box to thinking inside circles." I really love this! It seems like we have created an opportunity for playing with text and opening up space(s) for folks to not only engage with their ideas and research intellectually, but from the heart as well. This is essential work to me as in my own teaching, research, art making, and writing, I am continually noticing that the whole person has to be involved in all aspects of anything we remotely think about as educative.

Traci: Absolutely, this is something that I found was centered in the Commentaries as they all include some form of dialogic engagement as part of the learning process: Aggarwal's learning cycle model, Jenssen's imagined conversation with Braidotti, and Silverberg's text messages with his adult daughter. For example, **Swati Aggarwal** (Scholar, University of Delhi) brings a reflective exploration of the author's eight-year journey studying philosophy at a central university in India, with transformations in thinking and envisioning the "learning cycle" with peer interaction and inner dialogue being crucial to learning. **Runa Jenssen** (Associate Professor, Nord University), along with an illustrator, **Ingvild Blæsterdalen**, examines the complexities of embodying an academic voice, advocating for performative and embodied knowledge within academia. The author envisions a dialogue with Rosi Braidotti, discusses new materialism, inclusivity, belonging, and community. Jenssen writes, "By voicing transitions, whether through song, storytelling, or embodied research, we create academic spaces where knowledge is felt, experienced, and lived." Finally, **Mark Silverberg**'s (Associate Professor, Cape Breton University) playful exchange using texts and dialogue with his daughter **Aidyn Silverberg-Ceresne** capture some of the complexities of the parent–child relationship. You know, I never would have expected so many creative offerings when we set out to create this call! It has been such a pleasure to learn how everyone is making sense of "the messiness of just being human."

Mindy: Yeah, and you know it makes me feel connected to this bigger shared web of experiences to know we're all trying to figure things out in our own little corners, but that when we stitch them together in a special issue like this, we can see the overarching themes and ideas as well.

Traci: I think it's time to invite readers to take a deeper look! But before we do, there are a few *Acknowledgments!* Our deepest gratitude goes to Dr. Maija Liisa-Harju for her stellar support in editing this issue in its early stages. We couldn't have done this without you! Thank you to the authors for their interest and scholarship within this topic, and to the reviewers for their supportive and constructive feedback. We would also like to thank Eve Krakow, the *LEARNing Landscapes* copy editor, and of course, Dr. Lynn Butler-Kisber, for her continued support of the Artful Inquiry Research Group and for bringing this special issue to life.

MC & TK



Lynn Butler-Kisber (BEd, MEd, McGill; EdD Harvard) is a professor of education in the Department of Integrated Studies, Faculty of Education, and an associate member of the Department of Equity, Ethics and Policy, School of Population and Global Health, Faculty of Medicine, McGill University. She was recently selected to the Harvard Graduate School of Education Alumni Council (2205–28). She was the recipient of the Faculty of Education, Distinguished Teaching award in 2022, is past chair (2021–23) of the Elliot Eisner Special Interest Group at the American Educational Research Association, and is the McGill representative (2021–25) on the Advisory Board for English Education to the Ministry of Education of Quebec. Her teaching and research include qualitative research methodologies, leadership, multiliteracies, and professional development. She is particularly interested in arts-based methodologies, more specifically in visual inquiry (collage, photo/film, and visual narratives) and poetic inquiry, on which she has written and presented extensively. She focuses on issues of marginalization, equity, and social justice. Her upcoming book with Gail Prasad (York University) is a *Handbook on Arts-Based Research* (Routledge). She is the founding (2007) and continuing editor of *LEARNing Landscapes*, an online, open access, peer-reviewed journal that integrates theory and practice, encourages multimodal submissions, and promotes the inclusion of a variety of voices. Current projects include the NEXTschool Initiative and the Climigrant (climate migration) Project. She has done a range of international research and development projects in Dominican Republic, China, Indonesia, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, and in the UK and US.

Navigating Curiosity: Dialogic Practices and the Learning Cycle

Swati Aggarwal

Abstract

This paper presents a reflective exploration of my eight-year journey studying philosophy at a central university in India. I have found philosophy intriguing, challenging, and profound, though my interest has been inconsistent. This experiential account is not only about experiences I could identify but also about those that are more difficult to pinpoint and delineate. As a learner, I have always asked questions; however, school discouraged dialogue and inquiry, leading me to question my learning style. This tension between curiosity and conformity persisted until I encountered the Dialogic Method during my Master of Education (MEd) course, which provided a framework for curiosity and wonder, making dialogic practices fundamental to my understanding of dialogue, learning, and philosophy.

The Quest For Understanding

I have studied philosophy in various forms with different teachers on and off over the past eight years as part of my graduation, post-graduation, Bachelor of Education (BEd) course, and lastly, Master of Education (MEd) course. In addition to my formal courses, I have also engaged with philosophy through YouTube videos and lecture series on other websites. All these experiences form my often intriguing, intermingling, and conflicting perception of philosophy. It is also an ongoing journey in understanding myself as a learner—what my learning needs are and my ability to question and appreciate those who are and were in charge of my learning. I believe identity formation is "messy," a slow process filled with self-doubt, questioning, reflection, understanding, feedback, criticism, and appreciation, in which teachers play a substantial role. This note from the field reflects the attempt to understand my rights and responsibilities (not in a legal sense, rather a moral and philosophical sense) as a learner—what I can offer and what I can rightfully seek. This exploration of rights and responsibilities is crucial, as it empowers me to take ownership of my learning journey and engage meaningfully with philosophical discourses.

Through my academic experiences, I have identified a learning cycle that may prove useful for fostering an understanding of dialogue in a classroom. This cycle encompasses stages of exploration, reflection, and application, thereby encouraging an interactive environment where ideas can be exchanged freely. Embracing the learning cycle enhances engagement with philosophical concepts and reinforces the collaborative nature of inquiry, facilitating meaningful discussions among learners. I believe that the principles inherent in this cycle can serve as a valuable framework for educators, policy makers, teachers, and learners by promoting a deeper understanding of philosophical discourse and encouraging a culture of shared exploration and dialogue.

This note is an attempt to understand the often undefined, often indescribable experiences that are difficult to delineate, yet are an important part of the whole learning experience. These are the experiences that make us who we are and shape how we see the world around us. I see the complexity of these experiences as part of the "messiness of just being human." My educational experience at a central university of India can be seen as one example of the complexities of human interaction. The challenges I faced, along with the positive side of my experience, helped me to create a learning cycle to foster dialogue that can positively contribute to educational practices and policies.

The Role of Educators and Barriers to Engagement

Philosophy is one subject that has always caught my attention and interest, but at the same time, I have found it daunting. The role of teachers was central to these experiences because the way teachers approached the course and their teaching styles greatly affected the way I studied philosophy. Different teachers follow different teaching methods (Tomlinson, 2001), which involve varying degrees of interaction. However, in my classes questions and discussions were, more than often not, discouraged. This is not to say that discussions were absolutely absent throughout my experience. However, even if the teachers allowed questions, they typically expected students to ask "intelligent questions," which means that the teachers expected certain questions to arise from a particular topic and they had expectations about students' intellect. First, the teachers already had a framework defining which questions were meaningful and relevant for a particular topic. And second, teachers had notions about the kind of knowledge students of a particular level of education should have had. However, the students were mostly unaware of this framework. If the questions asked by the students did not meet the teacher's expectations, then they usually received negative feedback. Receiving negative feedback discourages students from sharing or reflecting in the future, because the fear of being projected as "nonsensical" and "stupid" promotes a culture of silence that hinders dialogical engagement. Teachers discourage questioning through verbal and nonverbal cues, such as ignoring the questions asked or even snubbing the speaker.

My engagement and interest in philosophy greatly depended on whether or not the teacher allowed me to ask questions and appreciated my curiosity. Many times, I came to believe that my personal inadequacy was the sole reason for my inability to engage with the subject. I often blamed myself and thought I was the reason for being unable to learn. Now that I have experienced a more dialogic classroom teaching approach in my MEd course, which suits my learning style and gives space to my habit of asking questions, I have been able to understand myself and my learning needs better.

Cultivating Independent Thinking

Philosophy requires one to think independently and freely. It requires us to work through the barriers of the mind, such as self-doubt, prejudices, and preconceived ideas. However, the emphasis in philosophy classes has been on learning what the "great philosophers" have said. Students are often discouraged from presenting their independent views (Kumar, 2005; Sen, 1999), especially in the context of the Indian

education system, without attributing the argument to a great philosopher. For instance, throughout my higher education journey students were specifically told not to use their own thoughts while articulating and writing answers. In these situations, the education system systematically kills the child's natural propensities of curiosity, imagination, and creative thinking (Robinson, 2006; Kumar, 2005). Sadly, this culture of regimentation is present in universities as well. Teachers often expect students to listen and write what they are told (Freire, 2000; Kohn, 1999; Kumar, 2005; Nussbaum, 2010; Bain, 2004; Dewey, 1916; Illeris, 2007). There are hardly any opportunities for students to apply their independent thinking. The students who think independently or have non-conformist views are dubbed either troublemakers, attention seekers, non-serious learners, or just inept at learning and are frequently ostracized (Kohn, 1999). Students' constant inability to perform well, teachers ridicule and harsh regimentation, and an unjust system of rewards and punishment aimed to make students fall in line kill their will and ability to think independently. Surprisingly, a highly dialogical subject such as philosophy is taught rigidly and unimaginatively. This makes the teaching of philosophy soulless and dull.

What is the purpose of teaching philosophy but to generate intellectual curiosity and develop free will and independent thinking? Both of these goals can be reached through a dialogical pedagogy. Teachers must be able to relate to the students, respect their experiences and knowledge, and teach them by including and building on their existing knowledge. Teaching philosophy could benefit from tethering the philosophical ideas to contemporary issues or the students' lives. Dialogic practices are essential for the teacher to understand students' realities, contexts, and ideas. For many teachers, the current structure of time allocation for the classes forces them to follow a strict teaching pattern, leaving less space for student engagement. The time constraints automatically make student engagement undesirable and an unwelcome obstruction to their teaching goal. However, when the nature of the subject matter demands dialogue, it seems futile to teach it in a regimented manner. Such a system only demands intellectual servitude, which, in essence, is antithetical to philosophy.

Constructing Knowledge: The Learning Cycle in Philosophy

Through my experience of learning philosophy, I have identified some key factors that are detrimental to the quality of the learning experience and resonate with dialogic practices. Philosophy's subject matter is such that it encourages a lot of self-reflection, questions, and doubts and often sends one into a deep reflection. This inner monologue can also be interpreted as a dialogue with the self, where one tries to think over philosophical issues from different angles. This dialogue is also affected by ongoing classroom discussions, peers' reflections, and the teaching content. This dialogue of the self also prompts students to engage in discussion with their peers and the teacher. In this scenario, teachers should encourage the students' questions and reflections (Dewey, 1938). The inner dialogue is one of the major components of the Learning Cycle.

The next significant aspect of dialogue is related to pauses in conversation. Philosophy or philosophizing requires a great deal of thinking. During a class discussion, students are involved in both active (e.g., teachers pose questions) and passive thinking (e.g., a topic involuntarily invokes certain images and

memories in the students' minds). With passive thinking, students may become preoccupied by this information, which might lead to fragmentation in their thoughts, if they are not given enough time to process or formulate it. To facilitate this thinking, teachers can apply a strategy of introducing short pauses in-between the lectures. They may not be preplanned, but incorporated on the go by an experienced teacher. These pauses can only be effectively applied if complemented by nonverbal cues and visual stimulation that make it a powerful learning tool.

By visual stimulation, I refer to a student's awareness of the thinking faces of peers and the expectant face of the teacher. When students appear to be thinking, teachers believe they are reflecting on the topic and their minds have not wandered. Students' expressions and nonverbal cues can help the teacher understand if they are working through the question or not. This helps the teacher decide if there needs to be more input from their side. If there is a lack of appropriate response from the students, the teacher encourages the students in various ways, including nonverbal and verbal cues. Teachers may use gentle nudges through eye contact, a smile, a quick comment, or subtle hints. The expectant face of the teacher lets the students know that they are waiting for their reflections. This motivates the students to speak and engage in dialogue, and the shared synergy in the classroom enhances learning. Thus, the deliberate use of pauses complemented by visual stimulation becomes an incredibly powerful way of knowledge construction.

Another important feature related to the idea of dialogic classrooms is that of epistemic spaces and physical proximity. A space specially created for learning impacts the teaching–learning process by providing physical proximity between speakers to encourage dialogue. Physical proximity facilitates dialogue by providing students with additional visual and auditory data to help them engage in conversation. For some learners, such as myself, it is crucial to clearly see the face of the person speaking, particularly the lips moving in unison with the words being spoken. Without this visual data, it becomes hard for me to concentrate on the voice and decode the meanings. If the face of the teacher is not visible, it becomes a major source of irritation. Researchers have found that multiple sensory inputs combine into one unified whole and enhance word and sentence comprehension. Several researchers suggest that seeing the speaker's face, especially in reference to lip-reading (Kovačević & Isaković, 2024), can help better comprehend what is being spoken. This facilitates faster response time in the listener, which can be different for every individual. Every student might have a different learning style and look for a different set of visual and auditory data to make sense of what is being spoken, so it is best to provide opportunities for all.

Lastly, there is one more factor that can help classrooms become more dialogic. If there is a healthy, respectful relationship with the teacher, then it facilitates dialogue. A striking thing about learning philosophy at the MEd level was that it didn't reflect the traditional, distanced relationship with the teacher. Philosophy class at this level involved an informal setup that was less focused on routine. The early morning classes were mostly accompanied by snacks (chai, samosa), which, in my opinion, helped to make the class a little less daunting and form a strong interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the students. Socialization and bonding can happen over food, and in this case, it helped ease the social anxiety we were feeling. It can also help people to be free from inhibitions. Learning to philosophize and engage in philosophical discussions requires being free from inhibitions, and sharing food provides a platform. Through this approach to creating better dialogue, one can see a confluence of humans' two sets of needs—

first, the primary instinct or physiological need for food; and second, intellectual hunger. I observed this keenly during our classes. The experience changed my perspective on what a class should be like, and taught me that learning can happen without regimentation, strict lessons, and a fear of teachers and grades. On the contrary, it helped and complimented the teaching of philosophy.

Using the aforementioned elements, I envision the learning cycle in the following way (Figure 1).

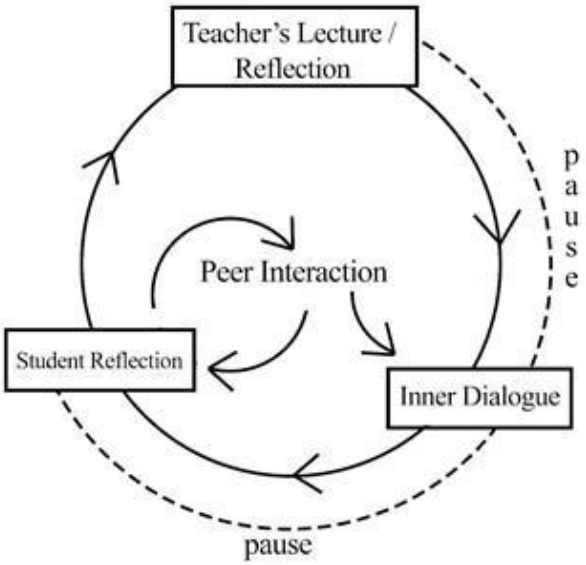


Fig. 1: The Learning Cycle

In this diagram, the learning cycle consists of three major elements: 1) teachers' inputs or reflection (input from the teacher); 2) students' reflections (input from the students), and 3) inner reflection. In the middle of the cycle, there is another critical component: peer interaction. Peer interaction provides inputs for students' reflections and inner reflection. All of these stages of thought can be better facilitated by the pauses a teacher takes between the lectures. These pauses are not silences but an opportunity to provide encouraging visual and auditory cues to engage students in dialogue. The epistemic space of the classroom must support this learning cycle and encourage the constant flow of dialogue. I suggest this learning cycle is at the heart of a dialogic classroom and can best facilitate philosophy learning.

Conclusion

In my exploration of dialogue in the teaching–learning process and its effect on philosophy learning, I have endeavored to illuminate the factors that have positively influenced my learning experience. A significant component of my journey was in the process of discovering my identity as a learner, and discovering that it is "messy" and not a straightforward path. Through this reflection, I have sought to pinpoint and elucidate the factors that encouraged philosophical thought and development within the framework of dialogic practice.

Dialogic approaches are crucial for creating a learning environment that is more democratic. They can be used to shift the classroom from being a place that encourages self-doubt to a space where students feel comfortable enough to speak their minds, discuss problems, and ask questions. Through dialogic practices, learners can come to terms with their needs and identify their negative and positive attributes. This process enables them to take ownership of their learning journey and fosters a sense of responsibility for their educational outcomes, which can foster a reciprocal relationship between students and teachers. Ultimately, dialogic practices through classroom experience can empower learners not only to recognize what they deserve as learners, but also to understand what they can contribute in return to the learning community.

I developed the learning cycle in this note from the field from my experiences in philosophical study to encourage better dialogic practices in the classroom. The cycle emphasizes the importance of reflection, dialogue, and action, and encourages learners to engage deeply with the material and with one another. By participating in a continuous cycle of inquiry and feedback, students can understand their learning processes and adapt their approaches as speakers accordingly. The learning cycle not only facilitates individual growth but also enriches the collaborative atmosphere of the classroom, making it a more dynamic and responsive learning environment. Stronger models for learning and dialogue can help to reinvent learning spaces as places of inclusion (of different learning styles and all voices), negotiation, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

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Swati Aggarwal is a researcher with a keen interest in philosophy, Indian knowledge systems, and politics. She has completed her education at the University of Delhi, India. Her academic journey is driven by a curiosity about how these fields intersect and influence education. She is passionate about researching educational practices and exploring innovative approaches that enhance learning experiences. She aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural and philosophical contexts that shape education, promoting critical thinking and inclusive dialogue.

Embracing the Messiness: A PhD Journey to an Embodied Academic Voice

Runa Hestad Jenssen; visuals by Ingvild Blæsterdalen

Abstract

To engage in academic work is to step into a space where transitions—between identities, ways of knowing, and academic expectations—are inevitable and necessary. This piece reflects my journey as a PhD candidate, singer, and educator, exploring the quest for an embodied academic voice. It examines how voice—both literal and metaphorical—shapes learning spaces and how performative and embodied knowledge contribute to inclusive academic environments and communities.

This work is a revised version of my PhD oral defense, completed in 2023. I share it to inspire other PhD candidates and scholars to explore alternative ways of creating knowledge where embodied ways of knowing are central. Drawing from new materialisms and feminist theory, I argue that academic voices are relational, porous, and in flux rather than static or singular. Through storytelling, I reflect on moments of struggle, discovery, and transformation, engaging in dialogues with both theory and personal experience to encourage holistic and inclusive learning spaces.

The Messiness of Becoming



On May 1st, I have the first draft of my trial lecture[1] ready and begin memorizing it. As a soprano, meticulous preparation is second nature to me. At 7 a.m., I sit at my kitchen computer; the house is unusually quiet since my husband and our four children are in Trondheim, giving me a peaceful weekend to write. Despite it being Labor Day in Norway—a day my mother insists should be work-free—I find myself compelled to work.

After raising the Norwegian flag, I return to my computer to practice. The lecture, titled "New Materialisms, Agency, and the Practice of Music Education: Connections and/or Disconnections?" feels lifeless; the words I've written seem dull and uninspired. If not for our kittens, Illi and Undine Jorden, playfully racing up the stairs, I might be dozing off.



Suddenly, a lullaby comes to mind, prompting me to reflect:

> Does anyone remember a lullaby being sung to them? Or maybe you have sung lullabies yourself? What kind of feeling does a lullaby give you? What kind of memories come back to you when you sing, listen to, or think of a lullaby?

As a mother of four, I've sung countless lullabies, often the same ones my grandmother sang to me. These songs serve as a therapeutic way to release the day's tensions and ease into sleep. I recognize that lullabies vary across cultures, each offering unique methods to disconnect from daily life and connect to the promise of a new day. This realization brings me back to my lecture's theme.

Specifically, the word "possibilities" brings me out of the world of lullabies and back to the topic for my trial lecture.



Why I Need New Materialisms

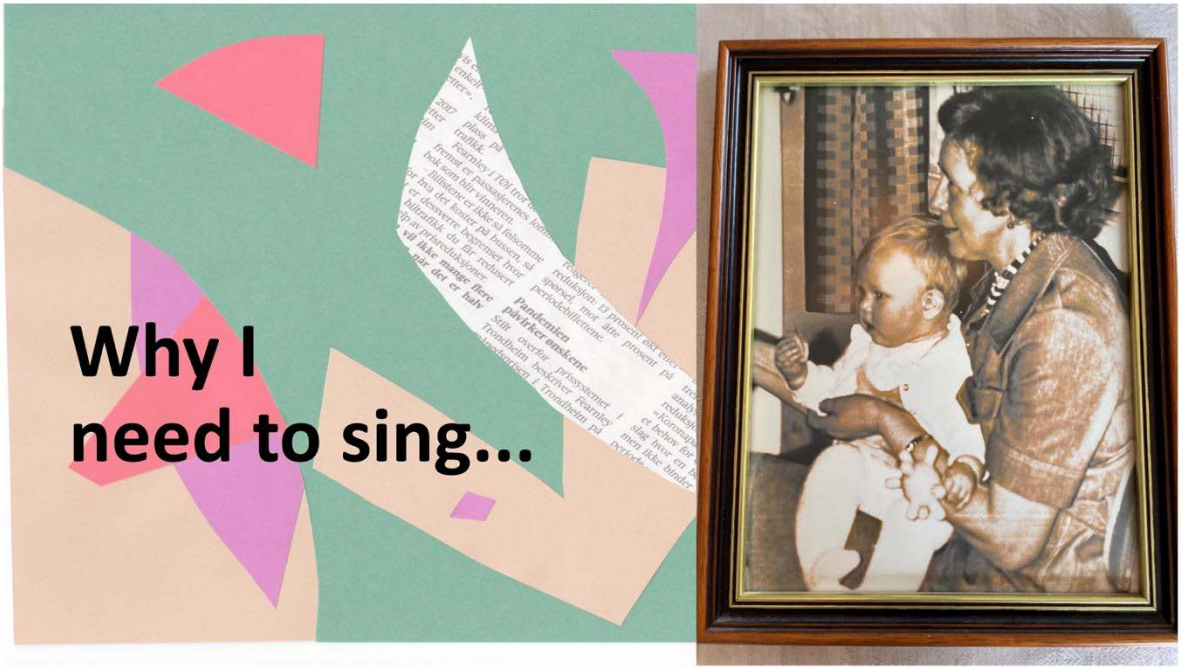
New materialism is a philosophical and theoretical field which is part of a larger movement of posthumanist theories that reject the idea that knowledge generation is bound only to verbal language (Barad, 2003, 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2012). Under the umbrella term "new materialisms," matter (all kinds of matter) is considered not only as something that gets to be formed by the forces of language, culture, and politics, but as something that is formative by itself.

"YES!" I am speaking aloud at the kitchen table now. The kittens suddenly stop running on the stairs as they wonder what on earth I am talking about. I say to them, "Yes, this involves you too" and continue reading. Feminist new materialisms is a specific strand of new materialisms I lean on. This feminist new materialist approach to philosophy rests on a holistic vision of matter in opposition to dichotomous and dualistic ways of thought. The body of every voice, human and non-human (nodding towards the kittens again), is self-organized and relational in its very structure.

New materialist scholarship is a growing field, but there seems to be limited engagement with posthuman philosophies and new materialist theories in music education research (Asplund, 2022; Ferm Almqvist & Hentschel, 2022; Fjeldstad et al., 2024; Jenssen, 2023; Zimmerman Nilsson et al., 2022). *So far!* I think to myself.

A little overwhelmed by my own writing of new materialisms, I am starting to think that the topic of my trial lecture might not be a question of what new materialisms are, but more about what they might become: How might new materialisms unfold when playing with this idea in music education? What might they offer?

I move from the kitchen into the living room while I sing the lullaby and look at photos hanging on the wall. These photos have been there forever, but on this day, May 1, I start to talk with them.



Why I Need to Sing

This is a photo of my grandma and I, from December 1977. I'm around 7 months old. I sit in my grandma's lap. She has black curly hair and a dress which was very modern for the 1970s.

My grandma and I are listening and singing at a concert in the "community house" (*Abelvær grendehus*) on the small island where I grew up. A place with approximately 200 inhabitants, surrounded by dangerous seas and bad weather. I still remember the feeling of being a small girl walking in the storm: the smell of salty water, which I could taste on my lips, and the triggering feeling of almost not being able to breath because of the strong wind.

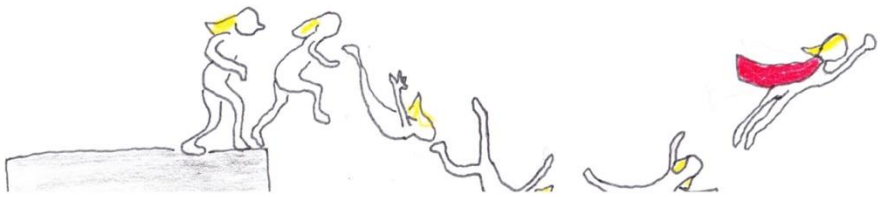
Although I can't remember the actual event that took place in this photo, my grandma told me about it. She often said, "You sang before you could talk." I can still remember the smell and sound of my grandma. Sitting on her lap, experiencing musical skin contact; listening to her dark alto voice, that so often sang and sang and made me sing with her. No wonder I sang before I could talk. The lyrics I quickly learned by heart. Then, the feeling of no longer sitting in her lap, but standing on the stage in the community house. Being a part of the school choir, playing in the school band, even being a soloist at the Christmas concert. How desperately nervous I was, but at the same time excited to perform together with my friends, family, and people of all ages in our community.

When I sing, I connect with my body. If I don't do that, my voice cracks—because the body is the support of the voice. Voice cracks are some of the most shameful things I can experience as a singer. Singing is material. Singing is powerful, yet vulnerable.



This is a photo of me joining one of my father's voice lessons. My father studied opera at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria. The cradle of western classical music. I am standing by a grand piano. Little did I know that standing by a grand piano, singing, would be part of my future career, as a soprano. Very early on I was steeped in the sociocultural context of classical singing. I loved it. The pretty costumes I would wear while acting as the princess or chamber maid. The beautiful music I was part of, singing in an ensemble. Still, I was nervous and had shaking knees when I stood on the stage at the community house.

Why I need to fall...

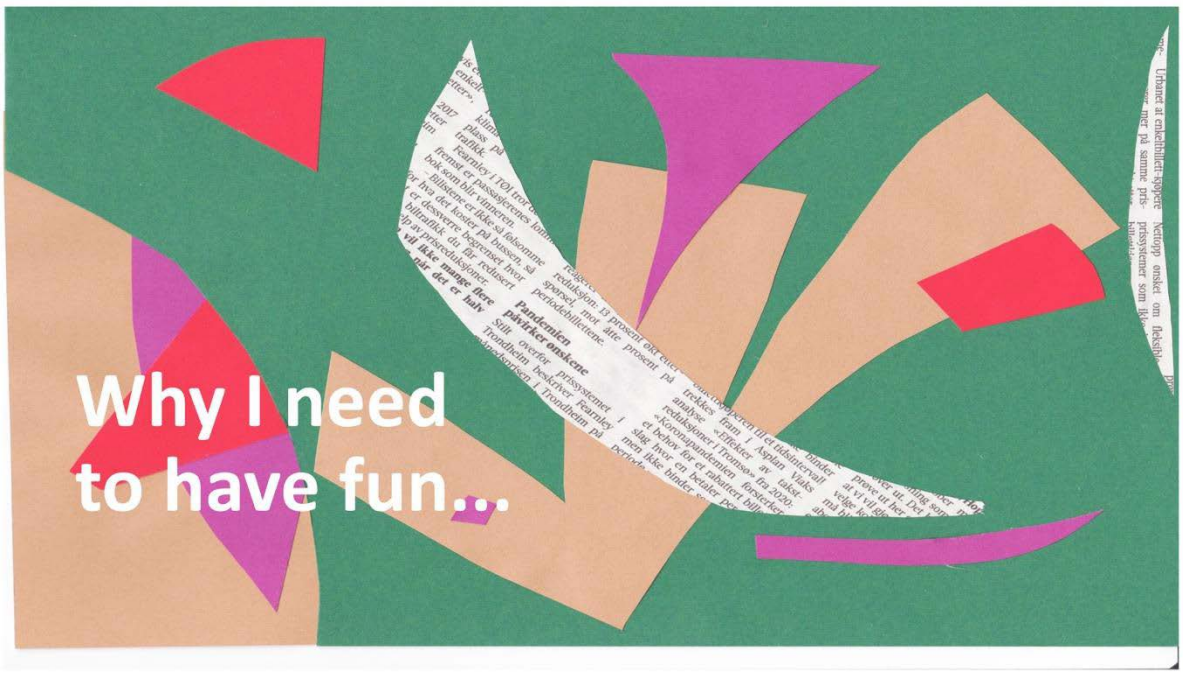


Why I Need to Fall

As a first soprano, you are often put in risky positions. Many voice teachers say it's like an extreme sport. You need a huge amount of control—and at the same time, you need to let go. To connect to disconnect. It's tricky. A way of keeping a firmness, holding my voice with the body—at the same time as opening up and letting go. It's like singing high notes. It's not the high notes that matter, it's where that high note is grounded in the body. I find support in the diaphragm—the vulnerable space in our body. A space we like to hide when we are insecure. It's a space of emotions. So, in one way, my training as a singer helped me take risks as a researcher, because when you first go, you must do it fully. Or you will fail. And the truth is, of course, that even when you go for it fully, you might fail. And that failure needs to be redone. Fail again. Fail better.

Dance scholar Emilyn Claid (Claid & Allsopp, 2013; Claid, 2016) writes about falling. She says that western culture resists falling, striving towards verticality, linearity, and steadfast uprightness. Political and economic successes depend on rising, not falling. A binary of positive/negative flourishes between the two terms *falling* and *rising*. In the practice of falling we face fear, a "here-and-now uncertainty and a realization that a sense of self emerges in relationship with the environment and that letting go (falling out) of a fixed identity taps into a potential for unknown possibilities" (Claid & Allsopp, 2013, p. 1). I LOVE this way of thinking about falling. Claid seeks an alternative and affirmative way of holding difference.

Claid reminds me to let go of voice or bodies, educational systems, pedagogies, theories, or methodologies as fixed or static identities—and fall into the unknown. Because then, *possibilities might be seen, connected to and felt*. Falling is fearfully dangerous and can be devastating, painful. I have experienced falling to offer opportunities for change, opening for creative pathways. What would happen if music education practices would dare to fall and fail? What stories would emerge then?



Why I Need to Have Fun

Our son, Emanuel, came home from school and asked, "Why does school have to be so boring? We just sit there while the teachers talk and talk. Why can't we have fun? I learn when I have fun." I was tempted to give him a grown-up answer about the necessity of hard work, but he made an excellent point. Reflecting on my PhD journey, I realized how much I enjoyed it because I had fun. Does that mean I didn't do a proper job?

Can a serious academic question like "New materialisms, agency, and the practice of music education: Connections and/or disconnections?" be approached with fun? For me, it starts with a song—a lullaby. It's how I engage my researcher body, how I teach, how I think. It's fun. Is that allowed in academia? This reminds me of Susan Stinson's (1997) article, "A Question of Fun."

Stinson asks why adults often consider fun to be childish and unimportant, something to engage in only after work is done. She wonders what the world might be like if more people focused on making work satisfying and pleasurable, rather than something to endure before leisure. What might school be like if we promoted learning for its intrinsic pleasure, as it seems to be for young children, rather than just to pass a test, get into university, or secure a job?

I had so much fun during my research. When I have fun, I'm engaged, connected; I feel alive. I think differently, focus better, take risks, open up, and dare to fall. I fail. I become honest, filled with humility. I listen and take time to breathe, to pause.

What if music education embraced this approach? Does having fun help answer serious questions? I believe it does. If this approach creates even a small change in how we approach music and education, then I'm happy. If not—well, at least I had fun.



Why I Need Agency

I often turn to imagination when grappling with complex theories or personal challenges. Imagining conversations helps me explore concepts deeply. For instance, pondering "agency," I envision a dialogue with philosopher Rosi Braidotti.

Imagined Conversation

Runa: Hi, Rosi. I need your insight. What is agency?

Imagined Rosi: That's a profound question. What do you think?

Runa: I believe agency is like voice: everyone should feel their voice matters and can choose to use it without fear of being marginalized or silenced.

Imagined Rosi: You're aiming high, Runa. Feminist theories might offer guidance. As Sara Ahmed notes, "Feminism needs to be everywhere because feminism is not everywhere" (2017, p. 4).

Runa: Do I need to be overtly activist to advocate for agency? My approach is more subtle.

Imagined Rosi: Subtle activism is valid. Recognizing how our lives are shaped involves analyzing power dynamics. Awareness of our bodies is a good starting point.

Runa: So, embracing new materialisms and focusing on the body can enhance agency.

Imagined Rosi: Exactly. Feminists think globally but act locally.

Reflecting on this, agency isn't something one possesses; rather, it emerges through relationships. Incorporating music into education can foster this relational agency. Perhaps advocating for music's place in education requires active efforts, even subtle forms of activism.

Entanglements

I recall a cherished photograph of my mother, taken in Oslo on May 17, 1977, just days before my birth. In that image, we are physically and metaphorically entangled—she, a second-wave feminist, proudly wearing an outfit she chose over traditional maternity clothes, embodying a spirit of resistance that I admire and share. I wonder about the lullabies she sang to me before I was born, as lullabies vary across cultures and evolve over time, accompanying us through life's changes.



This reflection leads me to consider how falling and flying, connection and disconnection, might be more intertwined than they appear. Perhaps it's our perception that defines these experiences.

Embracing new materialisms, singing, vulnerability, joy, and agency evokes emotions that foster belonging, inclusion, and community.

I need all of these things, you need all of these things, music education needs all of these things. We need these things because they make us feel. And when we feel, something happens. We might feel belonging. We might feel included. We might feel community.

By engaging in these practices, we might open space for more inclusive, equitable, and transformative learning environments.



As I write at the kitchen table on May 1, a marching band passes by, accompanied by red flags and music. I spot my parents at the end of the parade and feel relieved that I remembered to raise the flag earlier. Impulsively, I leave my laptop, put on my shoes, coat, and scarf, and join the parade.

"What are you doing here? Aren't you working? We didn't want to disturb your preparations," my mom says. "Oh, well, it's Labor Day," I reply, and she smiles proudly. "By the way," I continue, "what slogan are we marching under?" My dad's strong baritone voice responds, "Care, solidarity, community."

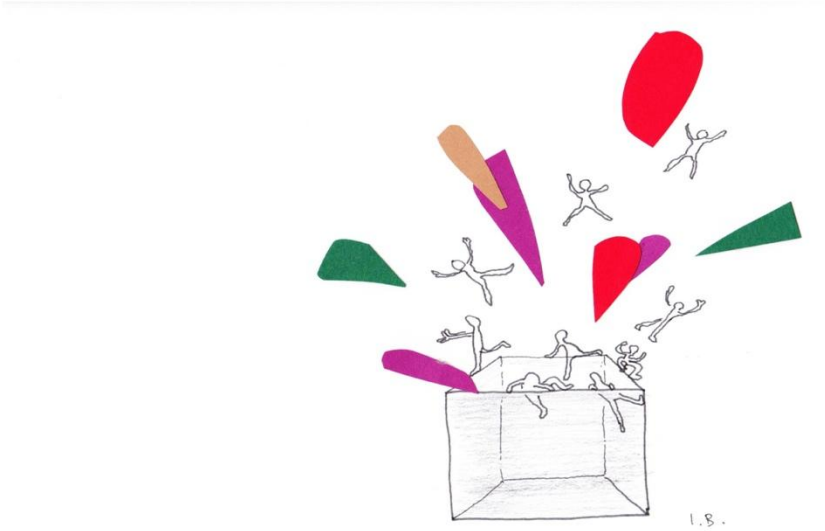
Reflecting on this, I see my reflective note as a way to initiate or continue a dialogue rooted in care, fostering communities in solidarity. All of this is possible through voicing dialogues.



The Transformative Power of Voicing Transitions

The transitions we navigate—whether in academia, artistic practice, or personal growth—are never isolated. They are entangled in the material, the relational, the messy interactions of experience. The breath, the sound waves, the shared space—all these shape learning. We are never alone in our transitions; we are always in dialogue with our environments, our histories, and our communities.

By voicing transitions, whether through song, storytelling, or embodied research, we create academic spaces where knowledge is felt, experienced, and lived. In doing so, we might foster a socially just and equitable education—one that values diverse ways of knowing, creating, and being in the world.



Notes

1. In Norway, a trial lecture is an integral part of the public doctoral defense, serving as a preliminary assessment of the candidate's ability to communicate research knowledge effectively. Typically lasting 45 minutes, the trial lecture is scheduled on the same day as the doctoral defense, and the candidate receives a topic—usually unrelated to their specific PhD research—approximately ten days prior. The purpose is to evaluate the candidate's ability to critically analyze, synthesize, and present complex, research-based knowledge in an accessible manner. Approval of the trial lecture is mandatory for proceeding with the defense, which includes the thesis presentation and a formal discussion with external opponents. For more information, see the Universities Norway (UHR) guidelines (2018), *Veiledende retningslinjer for gradene philosopiae doctor (ph.d)* og *philosophiae doctor (ph.d.) i kunstnerisk utviklingsarbeid*. (https://www.uhr.no/_f/p1/i149decff-3943-4df6-a6ec-d54c20f9bd59/versjon-a-felles-veiledende-retningslinjer-for-phd-gradene.pdf)

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Runa Hestad Jenssen (PhD) is an associate professor in music education at Nord University, Faculty of Education, Arts and Culture, in Norway. Runa is a singer, teacher, and researcher who is passionate about voices. Her background comes from the performing field as a classically trained soprano, where she works with a repertoire that ranges from Norwegian folk music to opera and contemporary music. Her research focuses on voice, gender, difference, embodiment, and the sociocultural aspects of singing. Currently, Runa is the project manager and researcher in the Horizon Europe project dialoguing@rts.



Ingvild Blæsterdalen is a Norwegian cartoon painter, musician, and violin teacher. Her work often engages with humor, exploring daily encounters of everyday life while also seeking a deeper understanding of people and being in the world.

The Messiness of Being Human: A Father-Daughter Performative Dialogue

Mark Silverberg and Aidyn Silverberg-Ceresne

Abstract

The following conversation was enacted by email and text message (with the occasional inner monologue by Mark). Mark had been invited to reflect on this issue's theme and thought a dialogue with his daughter Aidyn, an aspiring writer, would be apropos. Given separation, given all the complications of the parent–child dynamic (guilt, resentment, longing, umbrage, etc.) what better way to dive into "the messiness of being human"? Aidyn was travelling in Central America; Mark was at home in Sydney, Nova Scotia, anxiously trying to prompt her comments, while also trying to wrap up his time at Cape Breton University, with plans to move at the end of the term.

A Father-Daughter Performative Dialogue

[Email thread]

Mark: The invitation to write a commentary on "the messiness of being human" came to me, came *at* me, at the exact moment I felt least capable of answering it. The messy voices of depression and anxiety saying no, you can't. A messy-child, id voice saying *I won't*. The unallied anxieties saying, *if you can't answer the phone, cook an egg, change out of your sleep-shirt, how do you think you can write this*?

So, I'm looking for an adult voice, for some perspective here—and of course it's totally unfair of me as a father to look to my daughter for it—but here I am, wanting and wishing uncertainly. There may be cause for this; maybe I can find something adult, something fatherly, just in this invitation, just by reaching out. This is for my daughter—or for any of you as daughters, sons, children. Something is needed in this messiness they call being human… can we take a step forward?

Aidyn: It's interesting because there's a popular song right now by Lola Young called "Messy" (check out the song here) [Young, 2024] and it sounds like it is written about a relationship, to a partner. But I heard apparently it's about her relationship with her parents. Which is funny to me. And it makes sense. Probably one of the messiest parts of being human is our relationships and our relationships with our parents. Which I guess therapy and everything would say is our most important, most foundational relationship. And as I start to navigate my adult relationships more, I think about how those relationships have been impacted by my relationship with you. And with Mom, I guess.

Mark: Yes, these parental relationships are the messiest. Young's song seems to be about her angst at what they (her parents, let's say) expect from her. Her belief and rage is the heart of the song: she thinks that they think she's too messy, too clean, too smoky, too perfect… "A thousand people I could be for you and you hate the f[***]ing lot" (Young).

> Is that part of the messiness for you with me and Mom? Our expectations… or your story of our expectations (maybe or maybe not the same thing)? What are they? What is that story? What do you "get that we're sayin'"?
>
> Expectations never felt like the issue for me with my parents. I didn't know what they wanted from me. I just knew what I didn't want from them—which was to be like them. In other words, and I guess it's happened regardless of my aversion, I didn't want to take on their suffering, their woundedness.
>
> For me the dread is becoming like them in their messiness, their not being able to get it together. Am I saying I didn't want them to be human? Maybe. I wanted them to put me before themselves. I can see now what a tall order that was, and yet it doesn't soften the need nor the disappointment that it didn't happen.

(While Mark is mulling over his hurts and wondering how much of it to share with Aidyn and with readers, there follows a messy little texting interlude between Mark and Aidyn outside of the main script. Here readers are invited to read between the lines for what's said and not said, what's implied, interpreted, paused over…)

> [Text message, March 15, 12:37 p.m.]
>
> **Mark**: Hey, can you send a response to my last entry? Do you think this is going to work? Do you feel up to keeping it going? I need to confirm with them that we're going to complete it.
>
> [Text message, March 16, 6:54 p.m.]
>
> **Mark**: Do you think we can try to do one or more response per day?
>
> [Text message, March 18, 3:51 p.m.]
>
> **Mark**: I really want to keep going on the piece. Can we please try for one response per day?… I'm having a lot of anxiety about it…

[Mark, inner monologue] The messiness of writing together… the waiting, the multiple badgering texts… the knowing that Aidyn has lots of stuff to do and this might not be a priority for her.

> [Text message, March 20, 8:12 p.m.]
>
> **Aidyn**: Ok yeah i'll do it sometime today when I have time, but i'm very busy and trying to figure out how to take like 3 chicken busses to the next place i need to go

[Mark, inner monologue] But there's the commitment: perfect parental word, impeccable recipe for nagging. Yes, I know I'm doing it. But what choice is there? To let the project go? To try reigning in my anxiety, the messy way that time addresses me daily and nightly with its reminders, its message that this is not the way it's supposed to be. To stop the story under the story: if she cared about me… (back to Young's song: "It's taking you ages / You still don't get the hint I'm not asking for pages").

Not getting a response right away raises all the stuff about parenting an adult daughter: the profound desire for connection and uncertainty about what that connection should be… how to perform the role of father… how to speak wisely… not too much… how to be intimate and not over-demanding… how to know what's wanted.

[Email thread continued]

Aidyn: Turning back to "Messy," I can see that the whole little game I'm playing in my head is a model for child/parent relationships that the song performs: parent dissatisfied with child (in)action (Young: "I've been out working my ass off all day"); child fed up with the story (Young: "Can you shut up for like once in your life?"). Mess on mess.

Yes. And no. I know that you expect me to be great, use my brain and my heart for some kind of excellence. I know there isn't too much of an expectation beyond that. Which is fair. I think that's what everyone wants for their kids. And I also think it's sometimes too much.

For me the messiness is the same, I guess. I want you to put me before everything and I don't think you know how. And the things that I really want to be excellent at… I feel like I haven't learned them yet. How to have a healthy relationship, how to find joy and fulfilment in my own life.

I guess the messiness is that we have to learn those things on our own. No matter how great or deficient our parents are. And usually we're carrying that mess that we didn't create. That you also didn't really create but didn't clean up very well either. And then we have to try to put ourselves together, as new whole people, mess and all.

Mark: Honestly, I want you to use your brain and heart to find some peace and comfort, "excellence" has nothing to do with it. I don't want to put this expectation on you: finding joy your own way is perfect.

It's interesting that we see the parental messiness the same way: both of us wanting our parents to put us before all else. This is how I always felt about my mother. Even at her death, I was insisting that she put me first, and I can just now (at almost 60) see how harmful that was for both of us. I'm not saying this so you'll give me a break. It's part of my own attempted clean-up—taking stock of what happened in the past, letting it all in, sitting with it. "Healing" seems to be the word people use for this, but it feels inadequate to account for all that goes into the process. I wish there was another word for what I've been working on the past few years: trying to do some of that clean-up. My dream is that the process might help us both feel a little less messy about us, our relationship.

[Mark, inner monologue] Next, there's a part that I should probably cut or maybe leave under erasure… readers can decide if this passage is too much… and what it means that the too much is still here…

There's still this nagging voice, telling me I should be offering some fatherly advice… though I have none better than her observation that we need to carry and learn these things on our own. I think this is why I've gravitated towards Buddhism: the idea that the search, that healing or spirituality, must be worked out on our own, not accepted as doctrine or faith. Buddhists have a single word for this: *Ehipassiko*: "See for yourself."

Buddhism calls the messiness *dukkha*, suffering, or more appropriately "unsatisfactoriness"—the seemingly unending desire for things to be other than the way they are. The haunting "not this" feeling. This feels like a root definition of my anxiety. I'm sorry to come back to this, but it won't leave me alone these days and I think it's something we share. But I also know that maybe this voice is just the anxiety, obsessing about itself, not able to let anyone else in, not seeing her through all my talk.

Aidyn: I stepped on a dead bird yesterday. It was in the central square, already dead and partially decomposing. Just a baby, neck twisted sickly to the side, a bit flattened into the sidewalk, maybe already previously stepped on by someone. I walked by it carefully at first, even thought for a split second that maybe I should move it, have a little birdy funeral for it. Then decided against it; birds carry diseases after all. Later, I was in a rush and walked back in that direction over it, smushing its soft body under my sandal. At first I thought it was dog shit I stepped on but then I remembered the bird. I walked away quickly, hoping no one saw me step on it.

Mark: This is a great image and metaphor. I'm so proud of you for being out in the world, travelling the central square of so many places, just being and noticing. That's all you need to do. But at the same time, I know from experience how hard solo travel can be; how hard to just stay with it. While it might sound trite, really all you need to do is be yourself. It's like the paragraph you just wrote—simple and unworked, but it says so much: no matter how hard we try to be perfect, or just do right, there will be mess. We're gonna smush birds and be smushed.

Aidyn: My anxiety isn't all that bad these days. It's mostly simple things: where will I eat dinner, how do I ask for this thing in Spanish, will my laptop be stolen if I leave it in the hostel room instead of in a locker? And people looking at me. I don't care what they're thinking really or I try not to. I just want the freedom to exist without being constantly observed and perceived. I guess that's the mess too. People are always watching, but they also don't care. Or they do care, but not in the way we think. If they weren't watching, I'd be alone, which I don't want either. So I just live with those things, all this mess, whatever happens happens.

Right now the future seems exciting. I guess that's because I have a plan; I know what the next bit will look like. I'm lucky. I like to be spontaneous, but my body likes it when things are planned out. My anxiety wants me to stay still, so I try to keep moving. I guess I just force myself to move and to do something, even if it's messy. Even if I don't know exactly where I'm going.

Mark: I love this image of you, flying wobbly through the world, darting in and out of hostels, letting what happens happen. This says so much more about "the messiness of being human" than all my anxious ruminations. I've managed to cut some of those from this dialogue—trying to tone myself down so I can hear you. I know I'm not great at doing that: really listening to you instead of myself.

Maybe deep listening itself is a little image or microcosm for that impossible thing we're both seeking from our parents: to be heard first.

Deep listening also brings me back to your bird, lets me see it in the sky, long before being smushed. It's flying through that foreign morning deep blue light, filtering through the mess, saying "I'm here… let's talk for a few minutes."

[Text message, April 3, 10:03 a.m.]

Mark: Do you want to try to write one more response? It would be great to end on your voice, not mine

Aidyn has notifications silenced

References

Young, L. (2024, May 30). *Messy* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-k2_Liofy8



Mark Silverberg is a professor of American literature at Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia. His current work focuses on Buddhist mindfulness, pedagogy, and poetry. He is the father of two daughters.

Aidyn Silverberg-Ceresne is a tree planter and a philosophy and English graduate from McGill University. While writing this dialogue she was travelling in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Using Picture Books to Enhance Meaningful, Inclusive, and Socially Just Relationships

Carolyn Clarke, Evan Throop Robinson, Ellen Carter, and Jo Anne Broders

Abstract

This article explores spaces for transformation for teachers and learners using picture books, encouraging them to share their stories and have their voices heard through multiple forms of representation. We describe one teacher's journey with her secondary school students. Classroom data show how reading and creating picture books provoke holistic and comprehensive discussions about topics of societal and personal importance such as equity and inclusion. Benefits for students to create and share their stories include (a) participating in meaningful, inclusive, and socially just discussions that promote interconnectedness and diversity; and (b) becoming positive role models through interactions and relationships with younger students.

Introduction

As part of a secondary school classroom project, 13-year-old Jane (names of students are pseudonyms) wrote and illustrated an original picture book about finding peace in nature to help cope with the stresses of everyday life. Jane chose this topic because for her, when she is having a difficult day, she actively embraces well-being by connecting with nature. In her picture book, *The Enchanted Forest*, she writes, "In the forest you see all the trees, along with a low and calming breeze… the Enchanted Forest is full of power." She concludes her picture book with: "In the Enchanted Forest I get to be me. My favorite place to be. Where is your favorite place to be?" (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1: Where all the animals feel they belong

Jane's book sparked an engaging classroom discussion about what teenagers do when they feel stressed and where they find their happy place (Spector et al., 2024). When reflecting on the experience of the creative process, Jane said, "I would definitely recommend it [writing and illustrating a picture book] to other grades. You get to do art and writing together. I personally really enjoyed it." Creating a space within the classroom for learners to discuss important topics and safe places beyond the walls of the school encourages a transformative connection between the classroom and the world students experience outside.

Jane, a student in Jo Anne's secondary classroom, highlights for us the value of creativity and the importance of understanding differences in how all individuals deal with challenges in their lives. Rich experiences, reflection, and discussion help teenagers develop empathy to become compassionate, interconnected citizens who build relational understandings between themselves and the world around them. Jane's response to reading and writing picture books as part of the secondary school curriculum reveals the positive impact of using picture books with all learners.

The combination of one teacher of secondary school English and social studies and three university teacher educators brought diversity to this study. Jo Anne teaches grades 8–12 at a Kindergarten to Grade 12 school located in a rural area on the island portion of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. The three teacher educators all teach in the same teacher education program in a small rural university on Canada's east coast. In this article, we describe Jo Anne's process of creating picture books, using multiple forms of representation, with secondary students. This process also emphasized how artistic practices within secondary classrooms can be transformative for learners when art is valued.

In our classrooms, we seek positive actions with teenagers and adults to address issues of inclusion, race, culture, gender, and identity by choosing picture books that speak to such diversity. (See "List of Picture Books for Secondary Students" at the end of this article.) For example, in our work with students, Carolyn reads *Up Home* (Grant, 2023), a book written by an African Nova Scotian about growing up in a rural town in Nova Scotia. The illustrations capture the warmth and beauty of one of Canada's most important Black communities. This beautiful book allows individuals who are often marginalized and not visible in stories to see themselves in picture books. Carolyn also reads *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 2003) and *Room on Our Rock* (Temple & Temple, 2021) to discuss implicit bias. Evan reads *The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity: A Tale of the Genius Ramanujan* (Alznauer, 2020) and *Maryam's Magic: The Story of Mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani* (Reid, 2021) to introduce non-Eurocentric mathematicians, and Ellen reads *We Move Together* (Fritsch & MacGuire, 2021) to illustrate disability and accessibility across students. One picture book Ellen reads with her secondary students is *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2009) because it stresses the importance of accepting gender diversity.

As current trends in public discussions, social media, and online sites show an increase in the banning of books and certain topics in schools, we believe it is critical that educators promote picture books that address these issues at a young and formative age. Even public libraries face scrutiny of their holdings, and appeals to remove picture books dealing with human sexuality—particularly those showing

representation of LGBTQIA2S+ communities (Logan, 2023)—are becoming increasingly common. This movement makes it difficult for teachers to use their professional judgment and choose books they deem to be the best teaching resources. As Routman (2023) explained, "Such a move denigrates our faith in children, teachers, and our public schools" (p. 62). Appleman (2022) had a similar view, claiming that "perhaps, most importantly, we need to trust our students to be able to learn to read words and worlds through a critical eye" (p. 140) and cautioning against reactionary attempts "to paint a broad brush and eliminate any material that is possibly offensive in any way to anyone" (p. 78). Appleman continues by challenging those in power to disrupt and reread texts rather than simply ban them. Given these current trends, opening socially just spaces where all voices are valued becomes more important than ever for young learners to feel safe and connected.

When referring to picture books, we are talking about illustrated children's literature written for young children. We use the term *picture book* intentionally, as *children's literature* often infers books that are written for children alone. We believe that picture books have a broader appeal with deep messages and are effective learning tools for all levels of education. While picture books are often stereotyped as appropriate for younger age groups and underused in higher grades (Clarke & Broders, 2022), our classroom experiences with secondary students through the creation and sharing of picture books indicate that they improve student engagement in literacy and help grow students' understandings of many societal issues. By referring to the books we use as *picture books*, we hope to appeal to a wider audience, specifically secondary school educators, who will recognize the benefits of using picture books as pedagogy.

In this article we share the experiences of using and creating picture books with secondary school students. For teenagers, it is necessary to have easy access to books that allow them to interact with the relationship they have with themselves and others (Mesa Morales & Zapata, 2024). Carefully selected picture books inspire students to think about how they might envision a more equitable world by reading, writing, and expressing themselves creatively. Within socially just, safe spaces, we show how picture books generate meaningful conversations about societal issues of importance to students in their lives.

Setting the Context

Participants

As previously referenced, our project involved a team of researchers at a university and a secondary school in Atlantic Canada. Prior to commencing, the team received approval from the university research ethics board and the public school board to use and share students' original words and images. Informed consent was also obtained from all participants. We acknowledge that researcher subjectivity plays a role in this study, as Jo Anne was on the inside conducting research in her own classroom. It is impossible not to bring personal perspectives, biases, and experiences to the research process. However, through researchers' reflexivity and their ability to critically examine their own influence on the research, they are accountable to the integrity of the research process. Also, as a group of researchers in the data collection and analysis process, we provide diversity in perspectives which helps reduce individual bias.

The researchers investigated their classroom libraries to determine representation of diverse individuals and ethnicities (Tate et al., 2022). Subsequently, through self-study and critical friendship (Schuck & Russell, 2005), we each examined our pedagogical practices (teaching methods, learning activities, instructional strategies, etc.) in using and creating picture books with secondary students. This included Jo Anne's use of picture books as pedagogy for her English Language Arts class of 20 secondary students. It is a rural school where most of the students are from similar cultural backgrounds. The majority of students are of European ancestry, with a few of Indigenous heritage.

Background

This research project involved Jo Anne creating picture books with secondary students, providing an opportunity to tap into their interests, think about what was important to them, and elaborate on those topics. To begin, students initialized and activated their thoughts on writing a picture book; they reflected on picture books that were familiar to them and books that may have been favorites. As those conversations unfolded, students shared many of the picture books they liked through listening to classroom read alouds, sharing physical books, or reading independently. In re-familiarizing themselves with picture books, students collected and shared a library of approximately 40 picture books. This crucial exposure increased their understanding of what a picture book is and sparked their creativity with thoughts of characters, plot, and what their illustrated picture book might look like. Students then created their own original picture books, which became our primary data source.

When introducing picture books in the classroom, Jo Anne invited students to read books from their home collections, the classroom library, the school library, as well as books online. After exploring picture books alongside Jo Anne, students began to plan for writing and illustrating their own picture books. They used available class time (five 60-minute classes per week) to discuss potential topics before beginning to write and illustrate their own books. Many students wanted to be told what to write about and were reluctant to choose their own topics. Jo Anne chatted with students but did not give them a topic because she recognized the importance of providing students with choice in their work. She encouraged students to discover independently what they would like to write about and illustrate, making their work more personally meaningful and often more enjoyable. The students explored and brainstormed what they thought would be of interest to their intended audiences. As previously stated, students aligned their cultural values and expressed themselves both through visuals and writing (Jones et al., 2022). Students knew from the onset that their audience would be their classmates and elementary students (Kindergarten to Grade 6). We believed that would be where secondary students would initially feel more comfortable in sharing their self-created books. Consequently, the chosen topics for the secondary students' picture books included acceptance, cultural identities, equity, respect, an understanding of the different aspects of bullying, safe spaces and places, and the stereotyping of appearances. These topics provided opportunities for students to engage in socially just conversations as they composed their own books.

Spencer and Pierce (2023) suggest personal stories provide a means "to express emotions and report adverse experiences" (p. 528). Through discussion in Jo Anne's classroom, students determined two specific areas they felt were important to broaden the appeal of their writing: (i) conflict and (ii) characterization. They recognized that conflict creates interest and builds dramatic tension in stories. Examples of conflict that students chose to resolve included learning to love who you are, finding a place that brings you happiness while dealing with stress, and realizing that there are consequences to actions.

We continue to elaborate on this classroom context as we present our findings below.

Data Sources and Analysis

Together with the students' picture books, we used Jo Anne's reflective notes on the pedagogical practice of using picture books with secondary students, student reflections on the writing process, and interview transcripts for analysis. First, Jo Anne shared student-created picture books in our self-study and provided the students' reflections. Jo Anne then shared transcripts of the conversations. Each researcher read the data transcripts independently to identify themes such as social issues, identity, equity, and inclusion, as well as multiple forms of representation. Through Jo Anne's observations and student self-reflection, researchers examined how the process enhanced students' literacy learning and determined whether students gained confidence as readers and writers. During follow-up meetings, insights and perspectives were shared to determine recurring and common themes. This process using multiple data sources between four researchers supported the triangulation of the data and helped reduce individual bias.

Reading and Writing Picture Books in the Secondary Classroom

In the following section we share the learning from secondary students engaging with picture books in the context of their literacy classroom. We narrate our learnings in step with the teacher's pedagogical moves that first re-introduced secondary students to picture books, which are typically viewed as resources in elementary classrooms. This helped transform the secondary classroom to allow all students' voices to be heard in safe spaces, as picture books are easily accessible for all learners. We share how the teacher encouraged students to draft, revise, and edit original stories from their unique experiences, how they were prompted to illustrate their picture books, and finally how secondary students shared their achievements with younger learners.

Character Development

As students read a variety of picture books, Jo Anne noticed how these books inspired students to become engrossed in deep whole-class and small-group discussions about gender, identity, culture, place, race, community, etc. Jane said, "These books are short, but they are powerful. Lots of interesting topics." Students found ways to embed their cultural values through visual and written expression (Jones et al., 2022). "You can celebrate and explore your culture in picture books through basic words and images for the reader to understand," explained Cali, another student. Beyond these rich conversations, Jo Anne

also noticed how the picture books became, for her, resources to teach literary elements (e.g., theme, imagery, symbolism, conflict), topics usually taught in secondary school classrooms using more complex novels. Students found themes of diversity and inclusion among characters in current picture books as they wanted their books to reflect the importance of diversity and inclusion in their own lives and the world around them. Jesse shared, "We learn a lot in class about the importance of characters in writing for any reader at any stage or age." Thus, students began to think about characters and topics of interest to them and their readers, including identity, culture, mental health, humor, hobbies, friendships, and families. They discussed how hearing stories about diverse characters struggling with very personal concerns such as acceptance, love, identity, family, and culture allowed readers to connect with and relate to the writing and drawings. For example, in Figures 2 and 3, a student celebrates their cultural recognition and identities. In the past, both adults and children have been often reluctant to share their Indigenous roots. These images depict the deep connection to heritage. In addition, what educators view as sometimes complex literary elements appear simplified through picture books.



Fig. 2: Culture and identity



Fig. 3: Culture and identity

Many students developed their characters in relation to their own lives and identities; others opted for anonymity, creating fictional characters from out of this world—talking animals, ordinary people disguised as superheroes. Most of these students had developed their characters through the use of illustrations (e.g., drawings, computer-generated images, photographs) before exploring plot in detail, an indication of their desire to explore multimodal forms of expression.

Students realized that they could not have too many characters because picture books are usually short, recognizing as well that it would be difficult to fully develop an excess of characters, and likely cause reader confusion.

Drafting Ideas

When students are encouraged to share their ways of engaging with and seeing the world, they are exposed to a wider array of ideas that are diverse, inclusive, and equitable (Spector & Murray, 2023). Writing picture books allows students to express themselves in multiple creative ways. They are able to take on new identities they find challenging and entertaining. For example, James explained, "I was a

duck in my story, not a human." Once students had developed character sketches for their picture book, they began drafting ideas for the story. Students discussed the importance of conflict within plot development. Jane described that her "conflict was figuring out where was the best place to go when I am stressed out and just need a calm place." Jo Anne's previous lessons in narrative writing underscored the necessity of conflict in its many forms to build and sustain reader interest. During the pre-writing stage, students recorded and organized initial ideas in class using strategies they chose themselves, including discussing, listing, freewriting, and pre-drafting. In this pre-writing stage, when creativity often explodes, students preserved ideas in draft form using the strategy that best suited their needs and writing style. Students used graphic organizers such as concept webs to capture the basic structure of plot and character. Using this foundational structure, students began writing the first draft. Jo Anne noticed that for some students, this stage flowed freely, and the feel of the story was smooth with no big changes coming afterwards. For others, the initial story draft would evolve with Jo Anne facilitating word changes, story edits, and grammatical conventions. Students decided on the essential elements they wanted to incorporate and develop in their storytelling including themes, settings, conflicts, and resolutions. Some students were certain that they wanted to include humor in their stories; others were focused on issues such as rhyming, dialogue, and word choice.

Revising and Editing Writing

It is important for students to be participants in the authoring cycle and to see themselves as authors (Lewison et al., 2014; Short et al., 1996). In the revising and editing stages, students revisited many areas of their writing to optimize interest in their story. They achieved this by analyzing writing conventions such as vocabulary choices, sentence structures, plot details, and conflict resolutions. Jo Anne remarked that at this stage, students began identifying as writers. Sarah claimed that her "story didn't have to have a lot of words or follow a particular structure" and Corey explained, "I loved that I could be creative and have more words than pictures or more pictures than words." Through previous discussion and analysis of picture books, students realized there were no restrictions on word count. They could create simple sentences or longer, more complex paragraphs with various sentence styles. Jo Anne observed that students knew their words did not have to rhyme, although some students chose rhyming because they felt it would be more entertaining for readers, and they appeared to enjoy the structure and challenge that rhyming afforded (see Figure 4). Sometimes students shared their wording and sentences with peers for feedback and suggestions, including vocabulary, spelling and punctuation. This peer editing process accentuated the academic and emotional learning within the story (Lewison et al., 2014). The goal was always to make their story flow as smoothly as possible before they reached the publishing stage. Students were reminded that after the final publishing stage, they would read their stories in public—in this case to elementary students at the school—and receive a different level of feedback.

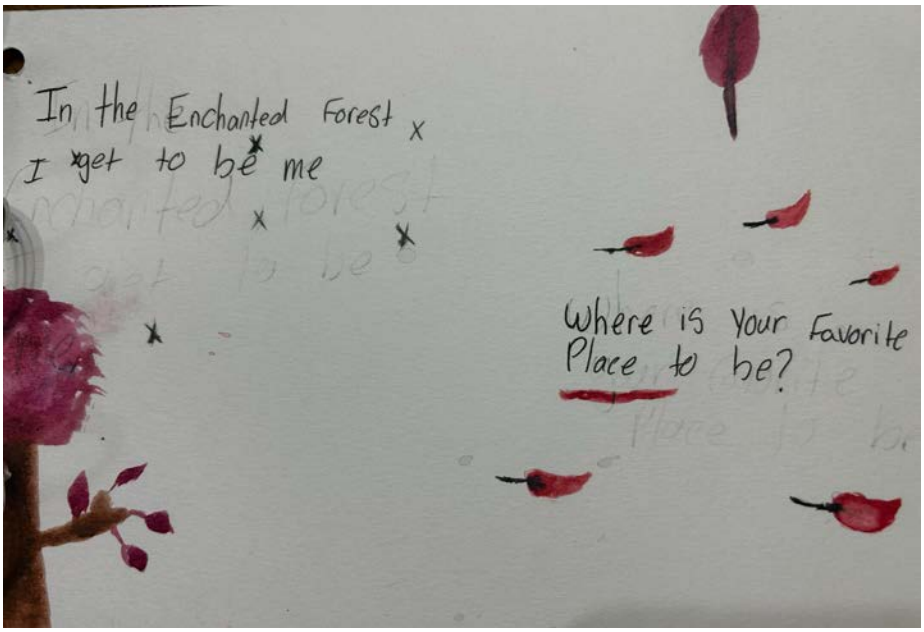


Fig. 4: Example of rhyme

Illustrating Stories

The process of creating original picture books provided opportunities to disrupt students' regular literacy classroom experiences and focus on literacy as a vehicle for personal growth and well-being (Spector et al., 2024). Jones and Woglom (2013) demonstrated the value of using pictures and illustrations as alternative means of communication where even research studies can be documented through illustrations in graphic novels. Students, in addition to writing their stories, enjoyed creating and fine-tuning the details of their illustrations because they knew that illustrations were critical to supporting the unfolding of their story. Students decided through class discussions that they wanted illustrations on every page or at least every second page because they noticed this pattern in most picture books they had read. Jo Anne and peers in the class assured and re-assured each student that by exploring different styles they would discover an illustration style that worked best for their ability and their storyline. Many students first wrote their story and then created the illustrations; others spent more time drawing their pictures than writing their story, choosing to draw and write one page at a time.

Most students chose to draw and color their images on paper (see Figure 5) while some students chose to draw and color their images digitally (see Figure 6 and Figure 7). Digital media offers transformational implications for pedagogical practices in classrooms (Hobbs & Coiro, 2018) and offers multimodal expression (Leland et al., 2022). Experienced artists chose to incorporate more complex images in their picture books, adding background and supporting details. Other students, challenged with their drawing abilities, chose less detailed but no less effective illustrations for their pages. Students expressed to Jo Anne that being a great illustrator was not a necessity; it was more about achieving balance and pairing between the words and illustrations. Many students chose simple and colorful images they felt were their best illustrations, images that would complement and accentuate their stories most effectively.

James explained that "even simple pictures can have powerful meaning." As in the writing, the illustrations represented their personal choices, reflecting what they believed was most important.



Fig. 5: Hand-drawn illustration

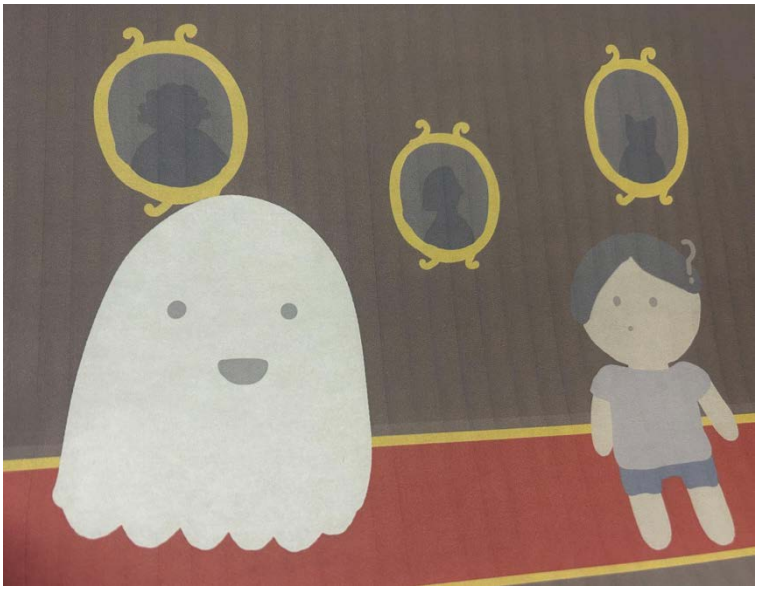


Fig. 6: Digitally created image



Fig. 7: Digitally created image

Sharing Stories Beyond Their Classroom

Reading to others, in this case elementary students, was a celebratory stage for the secondary students. For them, sharing their original picture book also meant sharing a part of their imagination and, without this experience, the writing would have felt incomplete. Akhmetova et al. (2022) claim that attitudes towards reading "can change due to environmental influence, conditions, interests and peers' motivation" (p. 2). Jo Anne's willingness to embrace a project where students shared stories beyond the classroom had a positive influence on secondary students' attitudes toward reading and writing. Students first presented to their classmates as practice before reading to the elementary students, which Jo Anne noted was a great boost to their confidence as actual writers and illustrators. Following Jo Anne's creative writing process with wonderings, jot notes, first drafts, edits, and final drafts, students knew they would be sharing their stories with an elementary class. They expressed interest and enthusiasm about this sharing, and this remained consistent throughout the writing process, especially on the day of the class visit. As Jane said, "I would recommend creating picture books to other grades as I loved both writing and illustrating."

Upon entering the elementary classroom of young eager learners, Jo Anne introduced herself and explained what the secondary students had been doing. The elementary students were visibly enthusiastic and excited to hear the stories.

Each of the secondary school students introduced themselves by name and by story title. In a voluntary order, each student read their story out loud, at the same time showing each page to the class to showcase their illustrations, as the younger students were eager to see their drawings. The secondary students read with confidence and projected their sometimes animated voices to ensure the elementary students could easily hear them. The young students were attentive and appeared genuinely interested. Some of the secondary school students showed how they illustrated their stories, explaining that even if you do not consider yourself to be a great artist, you can still draw great characters by choosing simple strategies. John said, "I chose animals because they were easier to draw than people." Sarah demonstrated to the younger students how she drew the character of a turtle in her story (see Figure 8). Jason explained the details of how he drew a rabbit (see Figure 9). This was engaging for both groups of students as it provided opportunities to build relationships and feel a sense of interconnectedness among them.

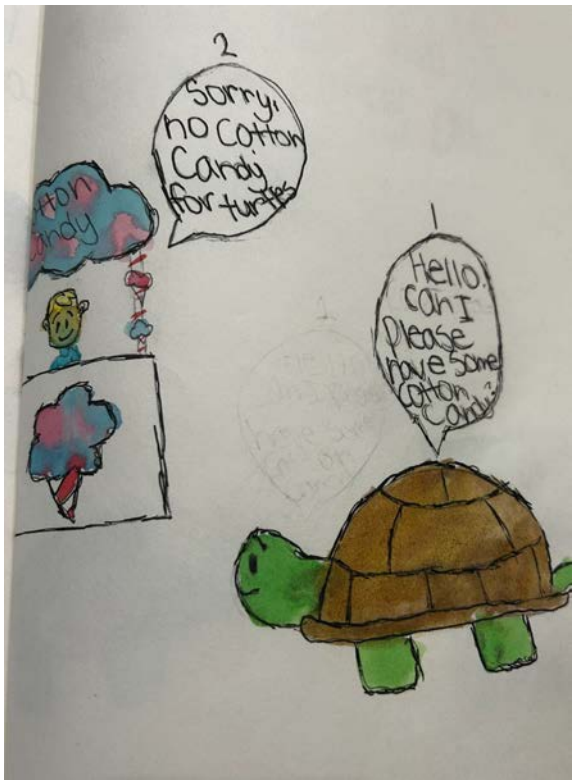


Fig. 8: Turtle character



Fig. 9: Rabbit character

The secondary school students indicated that they felt confident and comfortable reading their picture books to small and large groups for several reasons. Jane explained that she enjoyed writing picture books because "you don't need a lot of words on a page." Jason claimed that he "liked reading to young children because the younger ones don't judge us." The audience provided a safe space for the secondary students' read alouds. The secondary students recognized as well that they were reading role models for the younger students. Additionally, the secondary school students encouraged the elementary students to ask questions and provide verbal feedback on any of the stories. Most of the feedback was about the characters and some aspects of the plot. One critical aspect of this learning experience was that secondary students saw themselves as writers and illustrators (Lewison et al., 2014; Short et al., 1996) as well as readers and role models for the elementary students.

Student Reflections

To follow up with the experiences of reading, composing picture books, and sharing their own stories, Jo Anne asked her students three reflective questions:

1. Did you enjoy reading picture books on your own, with your friends, and with your teacher? Why or why not?
2. What was the best part of reading/making picture books?
3. What did you learn from the experience of reading picture books on your own, with your friends and with your teacher?

Secondary school students overwhelmingly reported that they enjoyed the process of telling their own stories and creating their own books. As Julia explained, "Anyone can write a book if they really want to and I also learned that picture books don't really have an age." Julia's insight confirmed that students did see themselves as authors. James said that you "get a lot of meaning from the pictures" and it can help you "understand it [the story] more." James continued by saying that illustrations do not "have to have simple meaning, they can hold power." Cali confirmed our claim that picture books can be used to teach rich literary elements when she stated, "From picture books I learned that just because it may be a children's book doesn't mean it doesn't have a strong theme." Jesse said that they "enjoyed reading picture books alone and with others because it is a fun experience. You get to share the joy of a picture book together."

Jayna described the "best part of making my picture book was creating the illustrations" and when "reading it [the picture book] was probably seeing the children's faces. I knew I was making an impact." Jayna's comment clearly describes the empowering experience for secondary school students of writing, illustrating, and sharing their books with younger students. Corey also confirmed the joy of making books when stating, "You can learn while having fun. Making picture books started with great conversations." Corey continued, "When we read our books to the younger children, I loved seeing their reaction and seeing how they loved our books." This comment reiterated, for the secondary students, the positive impact of reading their self-created picture books to younger students.

In a debriefing session with Jo Anne, students described picture books as journeys through words and illustrations that lure readers by connecting them with memories of their past experiences of reading picture books, even reminding them of events that may have happened in their own lives. The secondary students' stories told simply and powerfully drew smiles, laughter, and even tears from listeners of all ages. Generally, most people enjoy a great story that can evoke emotional responses while also being easy to comprehend. Picture books can not only do that, but they can do it differently and sometimes more efficiently and effectively than other styles of writing or art. Creating these picture books with secondary school students was a joyful and valuable learning process that Jo Anne will happily continue into future school years.

Discussion: Picture Books and Transformative Spaces

We concur with Luke and Woods (2009): integrating students' lived experiences within educational settings is crucial for teaching and learning. Luke (2012) described one aspect of critical literacy and social justice as a pragmatic curricular approach that intertwines "social, political, and cultural debate and discussion with the analysis of how texts and discourses work where, with what consequences, and in whose interests" (p. 5). Transformative practices extend beyond written texts and into multiple forms of representation. Leland et al. (2022) talk about multimodality as an important means to expand meaning, as well as deepen creativity and imagination beyond expectations. Looking at "texts and illustrations in all books lend themselves to further study" (Leland et al., 2022, p. 135) and promotes critical literacy in socially just spaces.

As Kelly et al. (2020) indicate, all children need access to "books that reflect their identities and expand their perspectives" (p. 297). From our collective experiences in schools, we have found that educators use picture books predominantly in elementary school classrooms; we recognized the need for the use of picture books with secondary students. Reiker (2011) indicated that secondary school teachers who incorporate picture books into their teaching claimed success.

While we agree with Gómez & Saal's (2022) comment that "as literacy leaders, we know that printed words carry great meaning and power" (p. 339), we also recognize the power of illustrations and multiple forms of representations, especially for reluctant and emerging readers. As students engaged more frequently with picture books, Jo Anne remarked that they became more aware of the illustrations, more aware of the messages they carried, and more aware of the stories they told. They also recognized the parallel relationship between the words and the illustrations. Leland et al. (2022) discuss how the arts, in multimodal forms (painting, drawing, drama, dance, music), can be used to support students' access to literacy and how they might extend and deepen learning. We discovered that students were eager to create using multimodal representations in their illustrations. For example, their artistic practices included drawing, painting, digital representations, and photographs.

Students also agreed that characters added great dimension and diversity to their stories through dialogue, plot, appearance, and entertainment. Picture books provide opportunities for readers to develop empathy and social conscience (Callow, 2017) by putting themselves in the characters' shoes. The variety of characters created by the students included ducks, rabbits, turtles, dogs, ghosts, and humans. Tomé-Fernández et al. (2019) claimed that "bringing intercultural experiences and their underlying values to globalized classes through the use of picture books can be a powerful contribution to intercultural education" (p. 205). Such cultural and intercultural connections were evident in the stories that Jo Anne's students chose to share. Interconnections included understanding differences between and within cultures, as well as how all cultures should be equally valued. The stories students read in class along with their personal experiences influenced the stories they chose to write. This aligned with Przymus et al.'s (2022) claim that "stories help us understand our lives" (p. 299) and it was critical for the teaching team to recognize the value of choice, inclusion, equity, and autonomy in reading and writing.

One of the greatest learnings that occurred throughout this study was how fluidly critical literacy can be woven into the everyday fabric of the classroom. Leland et al. (2022) describe that teachers not only need to know the correct books to put into students' hands but must also "put in place the social practice needed to unpack any text that ends up in their hands" (p.13). The discussions that Jo Anne had with her students, as described in this paper, enhanced their ability to view the world in a more socially just manner. Empowering young people is a main goal of education, and picture books offer fresh perspectives to help create critically compassionate citizens, who can help transform spaces inside and outside of the school. The action phase of this project, where students created their own books, allowed time for them to reflect thoughtfully on issues of importance to them and on common societal concerns. Through book composing and critically viewing their world, they learned to reposition themselves and figure out "how to talk and walk differently in the world" (Leland et al., 2022, p.13). Is that not the ultimate goal of transformation within socially just spaces?

Concluding Thoughts

When Jo Anne started the picture book project in class, students recalled through discussion many great memories and connections they had with picture books from their younger years. There were many conversations about the power of picture books to create memorable and emotional experiences for the readers. For them, the best memories were the positive emotions evoked when thinking about reading together with family. Many students talked about having some of their favorite picture books at home as keepsakes. Other students spoke confidently about the need for picture books to be more diverse and inclusive to represent our society more accurately.

This project, while a small step in a longer journey to promote transformation and interconnectedness through literacy, pointed to the value of using picture books in secondary school classrooms. The student feedback from Jo Anne's class demonstrated the benefits of teachers and secondary students actively engaged in reading picture books together and creating their own original books. Our project showed that writing and illustrating picture books was a valuable learning experience and aligns with Clarke and Broders' (2022) study that shows the possibility and positivity of using picture books with all students at all levels of development. It demonstrated that reading those books to younger children was a necessary stage in the writing process that allowed secondary students to share their inspiration and imagination for creating picture books as well as strengthen relationships among learners. Student feedback emphasized that emotions can be powerfully revealed through a few words and compelling illustrations. Student voices confirmed that picture books belong in elementary and secondary classrooms to promote equity, inclusion, and diversity within transformative spaces—spaces where all students feel seen and heard.

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Dear Sam, With Love: In Search of a Better Way to Live, Teach, and Parent on Stolen Lands

Melissa Daoust

Abstract

Framed as a letter to the author's daughter, this essay explores what it means to live, parent, and teach as a Settler Canadian on stolen Indigenous Land. Through personal reflections and Indigenous scholarship, the author considers how love, accountability, and relational learning can guide us toward decolonial and reconciliatory futures. This essay invites readers into the ongoing work of (un)learning and imagining more just and joyful ways of being in relation.

Dear Sam

November 15, 2022

Dear bébé,

You have been in our life for about 16 months now, excluding the whole 9 months you were kicking, turning, and burping in my belly. October 18, 2020, was the day that I found out I was going to be a mom, your mom. Since then, you have changed our world, our lives, our identities. You have made us selfless, loving, kind. I am a mother because of you, and I thank you for this. As I am looking at you, admiring your eyes and witnessing your smile, I know that I was meant to be your mom, and you were meant to be my daughter. Your eyes are filled with gentleness. Passion. Calmness. You have this thirst to learn. To be curious. To be adventurous. The gift of hearing your first words (it was mama, even if daddy will say it was papa), your first steps, and hopefully all of your "firsts" is such an honor.

I am not sure what this letter will lead to nor how or if it will end; I only know that it must be written and that I am afraid to write it. As Chambers (1994) so beautifully wrote, "Writing will be a kind of healing and I am on the road to healing. Writing will be a tool, a spiritual tool, a political tool with which I will clear my path" (p. 23). This letter is written for my daughter, Sam. However, the writing itself is rather a kind of quest, in search of a better way to live. In search of a better way to live in a "multiplicity of subjectivities that cannot be captured by any one single identity" (p. 25). In search of a better way to live as a partner, teacher, daughter, sister, auntie, learner, and a newly becoming mother—to become a mother is a transformation of self. As Grumet (1988) shared with us more than 30 years ago:

> The child is mine. The child is me. The woman who bears a child first experiences its existence through the transformations of time and space in her own body… The pressure of labour and the wrenching expulsion of the infant (the term "delivery" must have been created by those who receive the child, not those who release it) physically recapitulate the terrors of coming apart, of losing a part of oneself. The symbiosis continues. (p. 10)

This child, whose body is now separate from mine, somehow is still me. Writing this letter to my daughter Sam is also writing this letter to me, from me, in search of a better way to *live*.

In the following pages, I weave together the wisdom of scholars whose work has been and continues to be instrumental in my unlearning journey—navigating the complexities of my many roles and, as the call of this issue highlights, the messiness of simply being human. This letter acts as an invitation to other parents, sisters, aunties, teachers, scholars, and students alike, to join me as I navigate spaces between mothering, teaching and being in relation.

> *Sam, you were born on the stolen, unceded, and unsurrendered Land of the Anishinaabe peoples. An Elder from Kahnawá:ke Mohawk territory once told me that we should always know where the closest First Nations, Métis, or Inuit communities are from where we ground ourselves. Hence, Sam, the closest community from the place you were born is Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation. It is situated near the confluence of the Désert and Gatineau Rivers, and borders south-west on the Town of Maniwaki in the Outaouais region of what is known as the province of Québec.*[1]

Territorial acknowledgements are a longstanding practice among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. They are grounded in the recognition of each other's clans, languages, and connection to the Land (Zinga & Styres, 2011). According to many Indigenous scholars, these acknowledgements serve as both political and cultural acts that fundamentally position Land as the cornerstone of Indigenous knowledge systems (Alfred, 1999; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Snelgrove et al., 2014; Wilkes et al., 2017). As Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) stated:

> Like governance, leadership, and every other aspect of reciprocated life, education comes from the roots up. It comes from being enveloped by Land. An individual's intimate relationship with the spiritual and physical elements of creation is at the centre of a learning journey that is life-long. (p. 9)

The profound connections between Indigenous peoples and the Land embody extraordinary power and immense responsibility. These connections encompass the maintenance of balance, respect for the agency of all elements of place, and stewardship of sacred sites.

Land acknowledgements have become increasingly common across Canada, particularly in governmental and institutional contexts. While they aim to raise awareness among non-Indigenous peoples about the ongoing realities of colonization and displacement, they should also serve to honor the strength, resistance, and resilience of Indigenous communities. However, this practice often leads to ritualistic gestures that echo like a eulogy (Dei et al., 2022). As Dei et al. (2022) note, "Indigenous nations that still live and thrive on their Lands are relegated to a 'traditional' past, and it is implied that they willingly shared/gave their Lands to the white settlers who are the 'modern-day' inhabitants of said Land" (p. 3). This pervasive ritual serves to rid Settlers of the intergenerational guilt associated with colonization. The Eurocentric framing of Land acknowledgements reinforces the construction of the Canadian nation-state identity, often supported by curricular myths of multiculturalism, peacekeeping, socially progressive politics, and hard-earned prosperity (Davis et al., 2017). This act exemplifies what Tuck (a Unangax̂ scholar) and Yang (a Settler scholar) describe as a "settler move to innocence" (2012, p. 22). This

phenomenon illustrates how Settlers, whether consciously or unconsciously, may seek to distance themselves from the realities of their complicity in ongoing colonial structures (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

While there are legitimate criticisms, I believe that for some, Land acknowledgements serve as a vital opportunity for self-reflection. When there are Land acknowledgements at the faculty where I study, I take this time to think through my complicities, responsibilities, and implications for the ongoing colonialism of this Land and its peoples. I also take this opportunity to express my gratitude for the relations I have with Indigenous friends, teachers, and writers. I am so fortunate to learn alongside their teachings, stories, and wisdom.

> *Sam, we are Settler Canadians.*[2] *We are uninvited guests on Mikinaakominis, Turtle Island. Our lineage traces back to a family of predominantly French, Italian, German, and Irish ancestry. They arrived in the northeastern coast of what is now known as Canada, moving west and north, eventually arriving, at different times and in various locations, on Anishinaabeg, Eeyou Cree, Mi'gmaq, and Haudenosaunee homelands along the St. Lawrence River. We recognize ourselves as outsiders, living on this Land occupied by Indigenous peoples, yet we often claim it as our own. We are part of a legacy of white Settlers; we, too, are white Settler colonialists. As I write this letter to you, I am making a promise—one for myself, for you, and for the generations to come—that I will continue to unlearn the inherited stories of our ancestors and the stories they left behind.*

The words we use to introduce ourselves carry significant weight. As a child traveling with my parents, I would proudly declare, "I am Canadian," blissfully ignoring what that identity entailed. As I am growing up and becoming interested in learning about this "Canadianness," I am finding that it is a notoriously hard-to-pin-down concept that defies clear definition. Reminiscing about those adventures with my family and my youthful affirmations of national pride, I am compelled to consider how I want my daughter to understand her identity as a Canadian. Today, when I hear others identify themselves as being Canadian, I experience a troubling mix of guilt, disappointment, and a fraction of pride. This pride, explained by Anishinaabe scholar from Couchiching First Nation Professor Aaron Mills (Waabishki Ma'iingan, Baatwetang) (2017), is intricately woven into a carefully constructed narrative about our nation and what this membership signifies. This grand narrative, with its imposing settler colonial parade, obscures the uncomfortable truths about how many of us have come to identify as Canadians. So-called Canadians proud to belong to a nation, a nation that continues to "violently displace others for its own wants and desires, a state that breaks treaties and uses police and starvation to clear the land" (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 1). To this day, many Canadians remain not only unaware of their roles as agents and beneficiaries of colonialism but also unwilling to confront their personal connections to this ongoing legacy. This includes the entangled forces of capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and state power that continue to uphold colonial structures (Coulthard, 2014). As Bishop (2015) asserts, "ignorance is part of the oppression" (p. 82).

In taking up the words of these scholars, I find myself wondering how I want Sam to approach the questions she will inevitably encounter: How should she respond when asked about her origins or the Land she inhabits? Can one feel pride—or perhaps honor—for the place we call home after learning the stories of our ancestors and the history of what came to be Canada? Watching my daughter take her first steps, utter her first words, and begin to trust others, I am struck by the profound responsibility I bear

to guide her on this journey of understanding her identity as a Settler Canadian born on stolen Indigenous Lands. At the same time, as a teacher, I have a responsibility to invite students to co-create spaces where we critically reflect on how we introduce ourselves—and, more importantly, on what our identities truly entail and implicate.

Kwey, Aani, Boozhoo, Welliegsitpu'g, Hi, Bonjour. My name is Melissa. I identify as a Francophone Settler Canadian, a label I embrace not only to introduce myself but also to engage in unlearning the history of the place I now call home. By identifying as a Settler Canadian, I aim to denaturalize and politicize the presence of non-Indigenous peoples, including myself, on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Lands. The Hul'qumi'num[3] term for Settler, *hwulunitum*, translates to "the hungry people" (Flowers, 2015, p. 24). For hwuhwilmuhw Coast Salish scholar Flowers (2015), hwulunitum reflects both the Settlers' disconnection from the Land and their insatiable greed for resources, Land, and wealth. Accordingly, the term Settler should serve to "disrupt the comfort of non-Indigenous people by bringing ongoing colonial power relations into their consciousness" (p. 33). By confronting my complicity in my roles as both mother and teacher, I seek to create opportunities for critical dialogue, reflection, and introspection. In my elementary classroom, I introduce myself in this way—to provoke a reaction, spark curiosity, and gently guide others toward becoming familiar with the language and with the layered stories embedded in each identity.

> *Sam, we must resist becoming like other zombie Settlers—numb to the ongoing impacts of colonialism—and confront the reality that our relationship with Indigenous peoples has never been predominantly peaceful or reconciliatory. As Dr. Dwayne Donald, descendent of the Amiskwaciwiyiniwak (Beaver Hills people) and the Papaschase Cree, reminds us, colonialism is an extended practice of denied relationship. Repairing these relationships begins with a commitment to learning the truth, so that we might take meaningful steps toward renewal. It is our obligation to learn about the true stories. The pieces that make up our life story. These pieces are not unconnected but neither do they easily interlock. It is the connection between the pieces—not the pieces themselves—that is the real story, the story that needs to be voiced. But it is the story that remains defiantly silent (Chambers, 1994).*
>
> *Indigenous nations continue to face the erosion of their sovereignty, as control over their Lands is stripped away. They navigate policies that entrench economic underdevelopment, grapple with poverty, mass surveillance, and even military confrontation. All while striving for self-determination, for self-governance, for resurgence. The fight for the revitalization of language and culture remains deeply urgent.*
>
> *Together, we will learn about the broken treaties, the unresolved Land claims, and the ongoing struggles over traditional territories and resource rights.*
>
> *At the heart of these struggles lies a haunting logic: that Indigenous Peoples are to be monitored, managed, and marginalized. But my hope is that you will stand beside me, that we will raise our voices together against the persistent racism and violence that echoes through this Land. From the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIW), to systemic discrimination within social services and the education system, to police brutality.*
>
> *Because for Indigenous Peoples, colonialism is not a chapter in history books: it is a present and daily reality.*

In *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Regan (2010) urges Settler Canadians to relinquish the myth of ourselves as peacemakers and confront the destructive legacy that has historically marginalized Indigenous peoples. As Regan (2010) learns to listen to the stories of Residential School Survivors,[4] she describes how she engaged with these stories through an ethical act of bearing witness. While she reflects on the burden these stories can present, she understands that they are often perceived as gifts we struggle to accept. She suggests, "Perhaps we do not recognize it as a gift because it feels like a burden, like a heavy responsibility that we don't quite know how to carry, and we are afraid that we will do so poorly" (p. 18). Regan's (2010) insights compel me to ask, how can we learn to listen with humility and vulnerability to the narratives of dispossession, racism, and oppression still being lived and told to this present day? How might we cultivate mindfulness in our relationships with both people and the more-than-human world?

According to Davis et al. (2017),

> Settlers' anti-colonial learning, and unlearning, does not simply precede action; it occurs through action, through meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples and with other engaged settlers, and through experimentations with activism of various sorts. The Nehiyawak Cree refer to this relational and iterative process as Kisahkiwewin: love in action. (p. 394)

As these stories are told and shared, Regan (2010) and Davis et al. (2017) suggest grasping the weight of historical and contemporary injustices and, in turn, recognizing their implications for our relationships with these stories and alongside Indigenous communities. It is this concept of *Kisahkiwewin*—love in action—that will guide this decolonizing journey as interconnected beings.

In September 2023, I had the privilege of being invited into a sharing circle to honor the stories of Residential School Survivors. During this gathering, a Survivor invited us to reflect on the notion of safety in relation to the stories we were told. Safety, for me, evokes thoughts of home and my daughter. Each time I drop her off at daycare and kiss her forehead, I find tranquility in knowing that I will be able to hug her and bring her to the playground later that day. Yet, the more I contemplate safety, the more I become aware of its ties to privilege. Moving back and forth with Regan's (2010) teachings, I see the importance of how to engage with these stories of dispossession, colonialism, and violence, to see them as gifts that I accept with Kisahkiwewin.

In my classroom as a teacher, I try to hold space for the tensions and responsibilities that come with hearing these stories. I have learned that teaching about Residential Schools, colonial violence, and Indigenous resistance cannot be done from a place of abstraction. It must be grounded in Kisahkiwewin, love, relationships, and a willingness to be transformed by what we learn together. I try to foster a learning environment where my students understand that truth-telling is not only about uncovering facts; it is also about engaging ethically with those truths. As such, we read poetry by Indigenous youth, study testimonies from Survivors, and discuss why these stories matter—not only to foster accountability but also to hold space for the courage and brilliance of Indigenous resistance. As a Settler teacher I ask, how can I prepare my students not just to "know" about colonialism, but to love differently, to respond differently, and to live differently? How do I move from theoretical questions to pedagogical imperatives?

As Hunt (2016) asserts, "Decolonization requires a transformation in our relationships," not only with Indigenous peoples but also with these systems, institutions, and ourselves.

> *As I will likely remind you throughout your life, one cannot build a bridge by beginning at its center; rather, one must establish unshakable foundations on both shores before reaching toward the middle. Only when these foundations stand resilient and true can the structure invite others to walk across it.*
>
> *Yet, I continue to contemplate the delicate architecture of this collective bridge-building. The blueprint of its design and the essence of its function must emerge from Indigenous wisdom and direction. We will stand as companions in this path toward authentic Settler allyship. These relationships are to be nurtured, honored, and strengthened through time. Allyship exists not as a static identity to claim, but as a dynamic journey of action. It should stand as a sacred responsibility that unfolds through perpetual commitment. Our allyship manifests through the patient rhythm of consistent action and profound reflection.*[5]
>
> *Once you are a bit older, I promise to introduce you to my cherished friends and mentors from Listuguj First Nation. Though the pandemic has created a physical distance between us and this sacred place, the bonds I share with these brilliant matriarchs remain deeply rooted in my heart. These relationships reflect the kind of connections I am committed to building. Where we learn from each other, honor cultural wisdom, and create bonds that span across generations.*

In *On Being Here to Stay* (2014), Michael Asch retells the story of Canada by centering the relationship between First Nations and Settlers. He argues that Canada, to this day, lacks a legal foundation for its sovereignty, and that there is no justification in law for why this Land should be governed by the Canadian state. Asch challenges us to consider what—beyond sheer numbers and political power—legitimizes Canada's claim to sovereignty and jurisdiction over this territory. In light of this, and as we reflect on Epp's (2008) provocative question, "How do we solve the Settler problem?" we must move beyond the discomfort and fear that too often paralyze meaningful efforts toward truth and then, reconciliation. This fear manifests in several forms: fear that acknowledging Indigenous peoples as *actual* peoples requires recognizing their existence since time immemorial and that the Land was not free for colonizers' taking (Mills, 2017); fear of losing privileges within colonial hierarchies; and fear that acknowledging past injustices might lead to retribution or forceful reclamation of unresolved grievances (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015).

This statement from Flowers (2015)—"You will never have my forgiveness as long as land dispossession, domination, and violence are present in the lives of Indigenous people" (p. 47)—highlights the fundamental barrier to reconciliation. The defensive emotional reactions this statement often triggers among Settlers impedes constructive dialogue about the complex relationships between Indigenous and Settler communities, further entrenching the disconnection that characterizes our current social reality. Until we can move beyond these reactive responses and genuinely address the ongoing injustices, meaningful progress toward healing these relationships remains elusive.

The reality, as Mills (2017) notes, is that "although we are distinct, unique peoples, we are not and have never been autonomous peoples … we're always-already in relationship" (p. 210). Both sides are here to stay, making it essential to confront and resolve underlying tensions. As Elder Fred emphasized, "we share space in a common land" (p. 210), necessitating coexistence that embraces our differences

while acknowledging shared history. This coexistence must be grounded in Indigenous governance through mutual aid, which Mills (2017) describes as "the sharing of our gifts to meet each other's needs" (p. 233). Mutual aid acknowledges our interdependence and the need for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to support and embrace one another through differences. It requires understanding our complex, shifting responsibilities as we "move through each four hills of life" (p. 236). Likewise, achieving harmony in this context means embracing a logic that may contradict Canadian ways of knowing and being. Here, harmony means "the grounded state of interdependent selves engaged with each other in personal practices of mutual aid" (Mills, 2017, p. 236). Living in right relation means fostering this harmony in our interactions.

By moving beyond Settler colonial fear, we create opportunities for respectful relationships that honor Indigenous knowledge of living in harmony with the Land—knowledge developed over generations of stewardship. Settler approaches to Land often reflect short-sighted, exploitative views that fundamentally conflict with Indigenous ways of knowing, perpetuating what Tuck & Yang (2012) call a "settler future" (p. 35). Continuing this extractive relationship with Land threatens our collective existence, especially when climate action failure stands as one of colonialism's most pressing consequences. Ironically, the most educated countries, including Canada, rank among the worst contributors to climate change (UNESCO, 2022).

As UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures* acknowledges (2022), "Indigenous women own knowledge that contributes to the mitigation and adaptation to climate change … but their contributions are often ignored" (p. 33). This pattern persists as Settlers frequently control decisions about Land that Indigenous peoples have stewarded since time immemorial. Okanagan author Jeanette Armstrong challenges non-Indigenous peoples to critically examine the "imperial garden we have cultivated" (as cited in Regan, 2010, p. 203). This reflection requires genuine listening and learning about the Land with and from Indigenous peoples. Simpson (2014) defines this approach as true education, as it emerges from being "enveloped by Land," a relationship central to Indigenous knowledge systems. Through this relationship with Land, Indigenous sovereignty can move from the margins to the center and become a powerful source of resurgence.

> *Sam, Indigenous peoples are not only survivors of colonization and ongoing colonialism—they are visionaries, knowledge keepers, artists, and fierce protectors of the Land. Their stories are not confined to pain; they pulse with brilliance, courage, and joy. We will learn to listen with reverence, to dance when invited, to sing in solidarity, and to create in relation. We will honor not only the grief, but the fire—the love, the leadership, the laughter, and the liberation that continues to rise, unshaken.*

This transformation of our systems and relationships demands more than merely refusing "to collaborate in maintaining injustice" (Irlbacher-Fox, 2014, p. 156); it calls for the deliberate, ongoing work of valuing Indigenous worldviews and *walking alongside* Indigenous peoples in their efforts of resurgence and revitalization. Resurgence is not only about resistance—it is about renewal. It is not a return to a past, but the active and forward-facing revitalization of Indigenous lifeways, Lands, and governance systems, deeply rooted in relationships, Land, and spiritual consciousness (in conversation with McGuire-Adams).

It is all about the "everyday acts of resurgence," as they represent continuity, care, and most importantly, the refusal to disappear (Corntassel, 2012). We must commit ourselves to a future where, as Mills (2017) envisions, Indigenous peoples live freely within treaty confederacies that honor their own constitutional orders. In this way, resurgence is not something for Settlers to "support" from the sidelines, but something that fundamentally reorients our relationships, responsibilities, and ways of living.

Kanien'kehá:ka professor Taiaiake Alfred (2005) describes resurgence as a vital and spiritual reconnection between individuals and their communities through both material and ceremonial acts. This resurgence insists that we reject colonial control and redefine what is socially and spiritually valuable. "Without our spiritual consciousness," Alfred (2009) writes, "we have no identity, no real values, and no solid foundation upon which to build a decolonized reality" (p. 180). This is not a metaphorical revolution—it is one that speaks to this regeneration. As Simpson (2014) affirms, this spiritual and political transformation breathes life back into relationships and practices that were deliberately attacked by colonial violence (with this refusal to forget).

Indigenous resurgence scholars do not merely invite Settlers to listen; call on us to reimagine the very terms of sovereignty, knowledge, and relationality. As Simpson (2011) teaches through *biskaabiiyang*, decolonization begins not only in policy or protest but in the full recalibration of mind, body, and heart; it is a return to Indigenous processes and ceremonial relationships. Similarly, Simpson and Klein (2017) describe resurgence as "dancing the world into being," asserting it as a creative, embodied act of nationhood, kinship, and care. This lens moves us beyond the understanding that resistance must always be heavy; it is also joyful, artful, musical, and fiercely loving. In addition, Dene-Canadian scholar Coulthard (2014) further reminds us that Indigenous freedom cannot be located in state recognition or reconciliation alone. He writes that resurgence "seeks to practice decolonial, gender-emancipatory, and economically nonexploitative alternative structures of law and sovereign authority" (p. 179). In other words, it is not simply what Settler governments *allow*—it is what Indigenous peoples *build*, all of it being grounded in self-determination.

Yet, there is an urgency to begin this work with care and Kisahkiwewin (love in action). As Tuck (2009) argues, we must shift away from damage-centered narratives that reduce Indigenous communities to sites of suffering and victimization. Instead, Tuck (2009) offers "desire-based frameworks" that affirm Indigenous presence, creativity, futurity, and agency. These frameworks invite us to focus not only on what has been lost, but on what is possible—and already alive. Anishinaabe scholar McGuire-Adams (McGuire-Adams & Giles, 2018) echoes this shift by describing resurgence through Indigenous *dibaajimowinan* (stories) embedded in the everyday: through physical activity such as running, ceremony, language, and kinship. These acts nourish a resurgent Indigenous body–mind–spirit, which is necessarily political and embodied and enveloped in Land and place. When we center Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and teaching—as Anishinaabe scholar Styres (2017) puts it, when we recognize the Land as pedagogy—we begin to co-create an ethical future that honors the wisdom of those who have stewarded this Land since time immemorial.

As a teacher reflecting with and from the words of these Indigenous scholars, I wonder how to take up these desire-based frameworks in my classroom. How do I go beyond token inclusion to genuine transformation in how we teach and learn? As Mi'kmaw professor from Potlotek First Nation Dr. Marie Battiste (2013) asserts, "educational institutions must acknowledge the existence of multiple knowledge systems and find room to integrate Indigenous knowledge into their policies, programs, and practices" (p. 102). This begins by genuinely inviting Indigenous peoples to co-create spaces for dialogue—not as consultants but as collaborators with inherent authority. Styres (2017) calls us to embrace Land as pedagogy—where learning is not just about place, but about relational accountability. "Land is not the backdrop for learning," Styres (2017) reminds us, "it is the teacher" (p. 36). This perspective shifts education from content-based to connection, or from instruction to interrelation.

The concept of ethical relationality in curriculum theory, developed by Papaschase Cree scholar Dwayne Donald, further supports this shift. Ethical relationality, as Donald (2012) defines, is "an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other" (p. 43). Rather than being a theoretical stance, it stands as a pedagogical invitation. Donald (2009) reminds us that decolonizing education means a willingness to "confront the fort walls of knowledge and identity that block us from recognizing how deeply we are interconnected" (p. 6). Providing a decolonial reframing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, ethical relationality places differing philosophies and worldviews in productive tension, creating possibilities for meaningful dialogue about shared educational interests and initiatives (Donald, 2012).

> *Baby, I promise to continue reading to you bedtime stories written by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis authors—tales rich with wonder, wisdom, and the rhythms of the Land.*
> *You will learn, with love, from my Mi'gmaq sisters about the medicines blooming in our own backyard, and why the scent of sage sometimes lingers in the corners of our home.*
>
> *I promise we will come to know the stories of the Land we call home—its treaties, its truths, its struggles for Land and water.*
> *We will walk gently into ceremonies, powwows, and sharing circles, when invited, our hearts open to listen and to learn.*
> *And there, hand in hand, or with you on my shoulders, we will make new friends.*
>
> *When we travel, I promise to teach you whose Land we are standing on, to honor its stories, past and present.*
> *We will visit the communities across this country, learning the histories I was never taught in school, and learning to walk with love, following the protocols of each place.*
>
> *I promise to surround you with Indigenous beauty—*
> *to bring you to art exhibitions where colors and textures and voices sing the songs of generations,*
> *to fill our home with the sounds of Indigenous musicians,*
> *and to make our Friday movie nights a celebration of Indigenous filmmakers and their stories.*
>
> *We will cook together too—I'll show you how to make* lusqniqn*, just the way Auntie Naomi taught me.*

As I drive you to your future school, our car will be filled with the voices of Indigenous podcasters, storytellers, and thinkers.

I promise to stand beside you at gatherings and rallies that speak truth to power as we raise our voices for justice,
and to walk gently together as we learn—and unlearn—how to care for this Land.

And most importantly,
I promise this list will never be finished.
As we grow, we will keep adding to it—together.
Forever learning, forever listening, forever loving.

In this essay, I have interwoven my autobiographical reflections with the wisdom of others to interrogate what it means to be a Canadian Settler on stolen Indigenous lands. I delved into how I saw my responsibilities tied to this identity and our obligations to addressing historical and contemporary injustices. Although this letter reaches a momentary pause, it will remain unfinished. Its gaps will continue to echo the complexity of the questions it seeks to answer. I know I still have so much more to learn—so many writings to read, voices to listen to, stories to sit with, and relationships to nurture. I am just beginning to grasp the depth and beauty of what Indigenous scholars, artists, and knowledge keepers are generously offering. And I know that this learning will not come from texts alone; it will come from being in relation with and living alongside others.

As a mother, I imagine my role as a co-learner. I am looking forward to walking beside my daughter as we ask difficult questions, make mistakes, and practice doing better. As a teacher, my responsibility is one of deep care: to create spaces of ethical engagement, to center Indigenous knowledge without appropriation, and to hold space for joy, discomfort, and transformation.

It is important to show the starting point, to make visible the footprint of what my work is to become—as I wrestle with the weight of being a Settler mother, teacher, and curriculum scholar on Lands that are not mine. What does it mean to carry this identity, to inherit both its privileges and its responsibilities? How do we take responsibility for the ongoing impacts of colonization and build genuine and accountable relationships with Indigenous communities and the Land? This essay, like the letter, resists closure. It demands instead a continual asking of questions and a willingness to be changed—as we move through the tangled and unfinished story of this shared existence.

Notes

1. Information on Kitigàn Zibi in: https://www.gvhs.ca/digital/lowdown/history-display.php?search=&row=12&kind=like and http://www.ubcpress.ca/resistance-and-recognition-at-kitigan-zibi

2. I have chosen to use the term "Settler Canadian," with "Settler" capitalized; this is based on the work of Settler scholars such as Battell Lowman & Barker (2015). They understand that the term "Settler" draws attention to the collective identity of people who arrived and stayed on the lands of Indigenous peoples.

3. Hul'qumi'num is a language of various First Nations people of the British Columbia coast.

4. The Canadian Residential School system was jointly established by the federal government and various churches. Its aim was to educate and forcibly assimilate Indigenous children into mainstream society "for their own good" (Regan, 2010). Many children were removed from their families, often violently, by Indian agents or police, to completely erase their connection to their heritage and Land (Battiste, 2013; Miller, 2017; Regan, 2010). The process of assimilation involved Indigenous children being forbidden to speak their language or practice their cultural and spiritual traditions, or punished for doing so. They experienced devastating cultural, psychological, and emotional harms and traumatic abuses. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) found at least 4,130 confirmed names (and still counting today) of children who died at these schools. This has resulted in an intergenerational history of dispossession, violence, abuse, and racism—and a fundamental denial of the human dignity and rights of Indigenous peoples.

   At the time, Indigenous peoples were also facing significant losses: territory and resources, catastrophic disease, forced dislocation, and the imposition of foreign governance structures (Napoleon & Friedland, 2016, p. 6). The government had clear intentions: to control Indigenous lives. They attempted to "civilize" Indigenous peoples while cutting their ties to traditional Lands. The Land—which provides physical and spiritual strength for Indigenous peoples (Alfred, 2005). Additionally, the government repeatedly violated Treaty agreements with Indigenous Nations (Dickason, 2009; Saul, 2009; King, 2012). While I acknowledge that I have only scratched the surface of this history, Tuck and Yang's (2012) assertion that "Indigenous peoples must be erased, must be made into ghosts" (p. 6) strikes a chord within me. As Tuck and Yang (2012) explain further, the complete erasure or assimilation of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples would render the Land "empty," allowing it to be appropriated by white Settlers without resistance.

5. Ideas and concepts were influenced by many readings, including McGuire-Adams (2021), Regan (2010), Steinman (2020), and Smith et al. (2015).

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Beginning Again

Melanie Glaves, Sean Lessard, and D. Jean Clandinin

Abstract

Drawing on a narrative inquiry with students in an English course entitled Girlhood, this paper explores the ways in which the experiences of teaching the course, and inquiring into two girls' experiences of the course, shaped the future practice of the teacher/author. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's writings on natality, we inquire into how the teacher's stories have shifted and changed over time and place, and how they reveal the uncertainty and possibility that exists in all new beginnings. Being reborn is a messy business, filled with unexpectedness as we untangle old and new identities.

Introduction

Nothing feels like it did and everything has changed…

I (Melanie Glaves) left behind a big city, a great school, an amazing feminist English class and good friends to be closer to family. I am grateful my husband and I made the move with our two kids. I don't regret it. But I also do not deny that everything is different here. This move uprooted so many things. The trees are different here; my life is different here; teaching is different here.

I'm 41 years old, and I feel like I am starting my teaching career over: no contract, students who don't know me, new staff. I am unsure about what I am doing, and who I am here. I know I have to grow in order to live here. I am in a new space and changing is both difficult and necessary. Arendt wrote about new spaces as spaces of "natality," spaces that ask me to understand that beginning anew requires me to act, to do something (Arendt, 1958, p. 9). As I act, as I begin again, I need to recognize the "startling unexpectedness [that] is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins" (Arendt, 1958, p. 178). Thinking with this idea of natality helps me be awake to possibilities that open when I begin again, or perhaps anew.

I am back in Ontario in the town of my childhood and youth. I am teaching two sections of a Grade 11 English course (Contemporary First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives). The school's history and traditions are well-known to those who live here. One class is streamed as "college-bound," the other as "workplace-bound." Most of the students in my classes are boys; they are kind and funny and a little hesitant about English class.

Four days into my 17th September of teaching, we sit together in a circle. At my request, the students have brought in an "All About Me" page filled with images and words, color and quotes. The students have thought about their stories: who stands/lives behind them, their words to live by, their goals,

interests, and qualities. I start to talk about how circles are continuous, and when people sit together in a circle to share, hierarchy vanishes, and interconnectedness emerges. I haven't shared her work with them yet, but I think about bell hooks (2001) as I tell them this. I think about her vision of a reciprocal and relational classroom, where all voices are empowered to engage in "sustained conversation" (p. 146) as a "community of learners together" (p. 153).

I talk about how Indigenous communities have always used circles for discussions, for decision-making, and for healing. The circle invites everyone to speak and respects the relationships between speakers and listeners. Richard Wagamese (2016) reminds me that holding discussions in this circular way creates space for listening, hearing, and feeling that awakens our heads, our hearts, and our spirits; they help us listen "with [our] whole being. That's how [we] learn" (p.113). I talk about listening when we share in a circle and about remembering that we have all been invited to tell each other something from our pages.

"We're connected here too now," I say. "We are each hearing each other's story and we're recognizing the stories that everybody is bringing in with them. This process kind of honors that."

I tell them I was thinking about this sharing circle the night before. I do not tell them that I have been thinking of it for years.



Fig. 1: Crochet bowl with ball of yarn and hook attached

"I brought something to show you."

I take a small white crochet bowl, the ball of yarn and hook still attached, out of my bag. "Does anyone know what this is?"

"It looks like something old people do," a student says. I laugh.

"Yeah, well, I'll try not to take that personally, and it kind of is. My grandma taught me how to do this. It is called crochet. Us sharing our stories today is a little bit like this," I tell them, as I begin to create more stitches. "We are carrying our stories with us—so we're telling each other about ourselves, but behind that story are many other people and stories that brought us here to this room. The stories wind out and out and out. As we share and listen to each other, a little bit of each other gets woven into our own stories, weaving out and out and out… it is continuous."

Even as I talk, I have no idea if this is going to work here. I hold the bowl out for them to see. I am acting, living out a new beginning, beginning anew.

It takes bravery to be uncertain.

Sliding Back in Time: Another Beginning With My Grandmother

Crocheting doesn't sound elegant or glamorous, and, really, it isn't any of those things. It is an old, humble form of art making. My grandmother Bernice was a kind, loving woman, who grew up on a farm, the oldest of eight children, and left home and started working at age 13. She taught me how to crochet when I was a child. She let me use one of her crochet hooks and a burnt orange ball of yarn; just as her mother taught her, she showed me how to make a slip knot, the first stitch, and then practice pulling loops through, over and over again. Before she passed away last year, we talked about me learning to crochet. I told her my memories, and she laughed.

These conversations helped us weave a family story—one that helped shape me, and one I carry into my new beginnings.

Crocheting, in its purest and simplest form, is the act of creating fabric from one thread; each stitch looped into a stitch that already exists, each stitch needing the one before it in order to exist. Crocheted fabrics like a baby blanket, a doily, or even a high school feminist English Language Arts (ELA) course make it possible to pull back loops and trace back to experiences that came before, experiences that are all distinct but linked to a single thread.

Beginning a New Course and a Story of Research: Pulling Threads of the Personal Into Teaching

Girlhood is a course that I created, developed, and taught from 2015 to 2022. A combination of experiences stitched together made me want to co-create a space that allowed us to talk about moments of our experiences, and to use female authors, poets, and our stories, to empower us. Telling our stories, and reading each other's stories, in the light of each other, was powerful.

Acknowledging, valuing, and amplifying female voices was one of my objectives in the course. Another was to provide a space that invited students to lay their experiences alongside the experiences of authors, characters, their classmates, and myself. We read and talked about the works of diverse female authors,

poets, filmmakers, essayists, artists, musicians, and athletes. These stories helped us all turn inward and consider the stories of our own lives, linking together the personal with larger social systems.

The course was offered in a large public urban high school, in Alberta, Canada. The school itself had nearly 3,000 students who came from diverse racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The school had evolved from its design in 1961, now containing additional wings stitched onto its original footprint. The Girlhood course followed the Alberta ELA curriculum and taught the required skills of reading, speaking, writing, representing, and collaborating, through a feminist lens. Students received their ELA credits needed to graduate with the added benefit of being able to engage with and develop their understanding of feminism before graduating from high school.

In the midst of teaching Girlhood, I enrolled in a master's program in 2020. I knew right away what I wanted to study: the experiences of students who had taken the course over the years I had offered it. In my research, I inquired into the experiences of two young women, Alison and Maria, who had taken the Girlhood class (Glaves, 2023). My research was a Narrative Inquiry, a relational inquiry, which meant that I, too, was under study (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Alongside Alison and Maria, I also inquired into my experiences of teaching and living alongside the students in the class within a large urban high school. By inquiring into and noticing threads woven across three people's stories of their experiences —Alison's, Maria's, and my own—I aimed to more clearly understand how the Girlhood class had shaped both me and the two students. In our research conversations, Alison described Girlhood as

> a stepping stone … that change[d] the trajectory for us, and what we chose to study after high school. It wasn't just a class where we were like, okay I'm done. I'm moving on. It was like, "Okay, this was important, I learned a lot, what else can I keep doing to keep educating myself and educating others after and long term."

When I read Alison's words now, I notice how Girlhood was also a stepping stone for me, as it made me think more deeply about feminist teaching and encouraged me to enroll in graduate school. Girlhood led me into a new beginning. In the next sections, I will share three stories of the course that I uncovered as a part of my graduate research.

Moments of Tensions: Co-creating Spaces of Appearance With Students

One day in 2022, seven years into teaching Girlhood, I was approached by a female colleague regarding her concern with how female students were dressing. In her view, some students were dressing inappropriately. She had taken her concerns to the principal, who agreed to a meeting, but insisted students be included in a review of the school's policies around appropriate dress. Because of the nature of Girlhood, the teacher asked me to invite any interested students to attend the meeting.

When I broached this with the class, the students were at first hesitant about the request, assuming it was performative and that nothing would change. When I asked them about this, a wave of stories emerged, filling the room with the students' experiences with dress codes and peers, friends, strangers, teachers, and administrators who monitored their bodies. Many experiences were given space, what Arendt would

call *a space of public appearance* (Caine et al., 2022), and I felt the power of recognizing they had many stories to share. It was powerful to witness students' willingness, and vulnerability, as they told their stories in this space of appearance. As I listened, I felt my own stories reverberate and begin to evolve: I saw differences and sameness in their experiences, and hearing their stories changed my own stories of experience. We were standing in the light of each other's stories. The students' tellings called to my own, and a kind of resonance occurred, bringing to mind forgotten moments and a new perspective (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000; Clandinin, 2006). I began to see the loops crocheted into my experience with different eyes, and as I shared some of these experiences with the class, we looped our stories together.



Fig. 2: The final design for the Girlhood shirts

I was also pulling out threads of stories, unweaving stitches that had been tightly hooked into the way I viewed my life and experience. This unravelling of the stories I told myself was unsettling, and I decided not to share some of these stories. I began to be aware of the silent stories (Blix et al, 2021) in the room that day, both in the students who spoke only some of their stories, and the ones who shared no stories at all. I continue to think about those silent stories and their "thereness" and importance.

My graduate supervisor, Dr. Sean Lessard, who was also teaching another class within the school, was in the classroom that day. He sometimes stopped by the Girlhood classroom to connect with the students and to listen to what we were talking about. The students got to know him and, over time, accepted him as a member of the class. When I asked the class what we might do with these stories concerning the dress code meeting, the students offered ideas, and then Sean suggested we think about making t-shirts as a form of expression and activism. The students were immediately on board, invested in designing what would be on our bodies, and what message(s) we would present to the world. Over the next few weeks, the students brainstormed designs, colors, and words, working to capture their experiences of the course and what it meant to be in it. We talked and voted before settling on bluebell flowers to represent us—flowers that symbolize truth, gratitude, and love, and that also served as an homage to bell hooks, who the students admired and wanted to recognize. One student, an artist, turned our sketches into something beautiful, creating three versions before the class voted on a single image. The shirts were printed, and each of the students in the class wore theirs proudly in the hallways, to the dress code meeting, and in their worlds beyond the school.

Beginning Again: A Narrative Inquiry Into Experiences of the Course

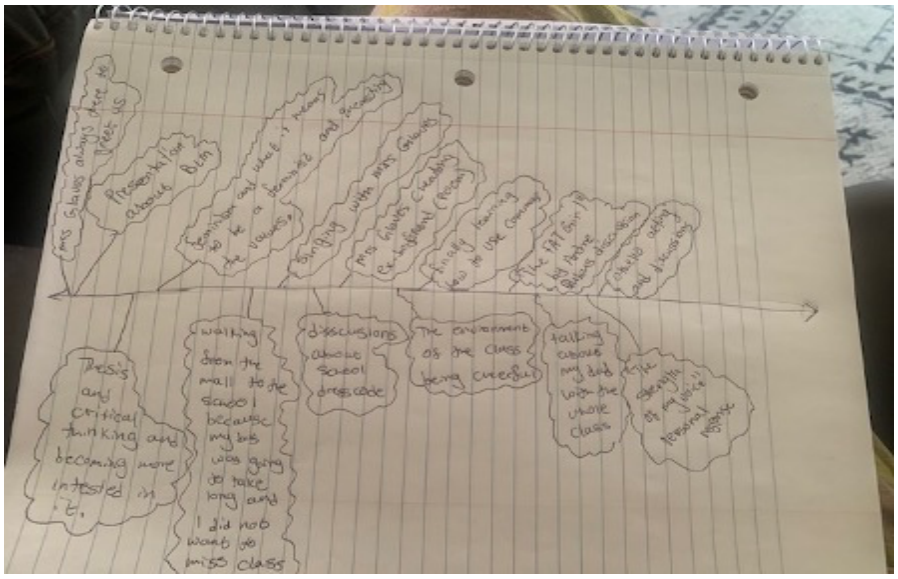


Fig. 3: Maria's timeline capturing memories of her Girlhood course experience

As part of my research, Maria and I had been meeting and revisiting her stories of the course. During one conversation, she created a timeline outlining her memories of the course and laid it on the desk in front of her. One of her memories was "Discussions on the school dress code." When I saw this marked on Maria's timeline, I made assumptions about what she would say about it: I expected one discussion, but a different one unfolded. I had assumed that Maria would identify the same way I did with that day.

> **Maria**: Everybody was talking about how they were getting dress-coded and stuff. And I was thinking, hmm, I have never really been dress-coded. I had the polar opposite experience. It made me wonder, "How come I have never been dress-coded?" And it's because of my religion. I cover up. I have been covering up since I was a child. I haven't been sexualized in that way, I guess. I can't believe that anyone would sexualize a child based on what they wear. My mom always covered me up because of my religion, so no one even took a second glance at me.
>
> Even now with the hijab and everything, sometimes, I do go out without it, and there is a whole difference in how people view me with it on and without it. When I wear the hijab, nobody cares about me. Men don't look at me. If I take it off and show my hair, and do my hair, all of a sudden men approach me. The two different experiences show the ways in which women get sexualized and [our discussion in class showed] it starts even when you're a child…
>
> I don't even think I spoke that day. I was like, "Woah!" All the girls were talking about how male teachers would come up to them, specifically male teachers, and tell them "You shouldn't be wearing this," and some of the students were in Grade 4! … It was just really sad.
>
> I also had discussions about this with my aunt, we talked about this and the beauty standards … the ways women are supposed to look, completely shaven. It just shows how these standards start when you're a kid, and go on when you grow older. Women are still striving to achieve the standard.

Mel: So then what was it about that day and that discussion that stood out to you?

Maria: I think it was that I initially felt that I couldn't relate to [the other students' experiences]. It made me stop a minute, and think about why I hadn't been dress-coded… Children dress in all kinds of ways, it doesn't matter. I just couldn't believe that just because I covered up, people viewed me in a certain way. They viewed me differently. It ties into so many things in society. These girls in my class are talking about getting dress-coded in Grade 4 and I was in Grade 12 and had never had that happen—except for hats, that was the only thing.

Mel: Well, but even hats are an interesting thing to think about.

Maria: Yeah. That one guy, I forgot his name… he was your professor and teacher?

Mel: Oh, Sean. Yeah.

Maria: He had come in that day and talked about how it was all about power and control … and it did make me think. Like, we were wearing masks at school, and you can't see my face, so you're going to worry about a hat or what someone is wearing? The thing is, what I learnt about it is when I am wearing a hijab, I am looked at as a woman who should be respected. When men look at me, they don't go, "Hey yo, can I get your number?" I don't get catcalled, or anything. I don't have bad experiences with it unless someone is Islamophobic. . . . When I wear the hijab, it is different. . . . The hijab has protected me from the male gaze, I guess. . . .

Some of my friends started to not wear their hijab and dress differently, and I thought they looked cute. And I started to wonder, why aren't my crushes liking me back? Why aren't I getting their attention? I didn't realize the power of the hijab. I didn't really start to get it until I started taking it off and I could feel the difference. I noticed a difference in myself. When I didn't wear it I pandered to the male gaze, I would say. And then when I had it on, I didn't at all.

This conversation showed me something I did not know and revealed how our class discussion in Girlhood had settled in our memories so differently. The dress-coding conversation resonated with me deeply and evoked my memories of being dress-coded in high school, which helped me relate to the many stories unfolding. I told myself we all related to the stories in the same way. And while I was aware of silent stories that day, I had not considered that one of the silent students, like Maria, might be connecting to this conversation in a very different way, having never been dress-coded.

My research conversation with Maria about this day brought me up against the view of someone whose perspective was very different from my own. It caused me to puzzle about the course and recognize new uncertainties within it. This inward turn pushed me towards new understandings; I began to see that each day of the course was filled with unknowns, and that it was our willingness to step into these discussions and inquire into those uncertainties that made change possible. My conversations with Maria were not just important, but vital. These were the conversations that helped me enact the feminism I had learned about.

Untangling Another Story: Maria Steps Into Uncertainty

Maria also talked about another experience. The students had been writing 100-word stories and were invited to share what they had written with the class if they wanted to. Maria sat at her desk where she always did, three seats back from the front, along the side wall, her binder open and a piece of looseleaf in her hand. The class was always a chatty and vibrant one; however, as Maria raised her hand, and read her story on this day, the room settled into total silence. It was that special quiet that comes with absolute attention and listening, when everyone is sharply attuned to what someone is telling them. Maria later shared with me that this was something that, until this point, she had not yet done in a school place. It was a brave moment in the course that we all witnessed.

In one of our research conversations, Maria told me that that day was a powerful one for her as well. She had saved the story, and even sent me a picture of it (Figure 4).

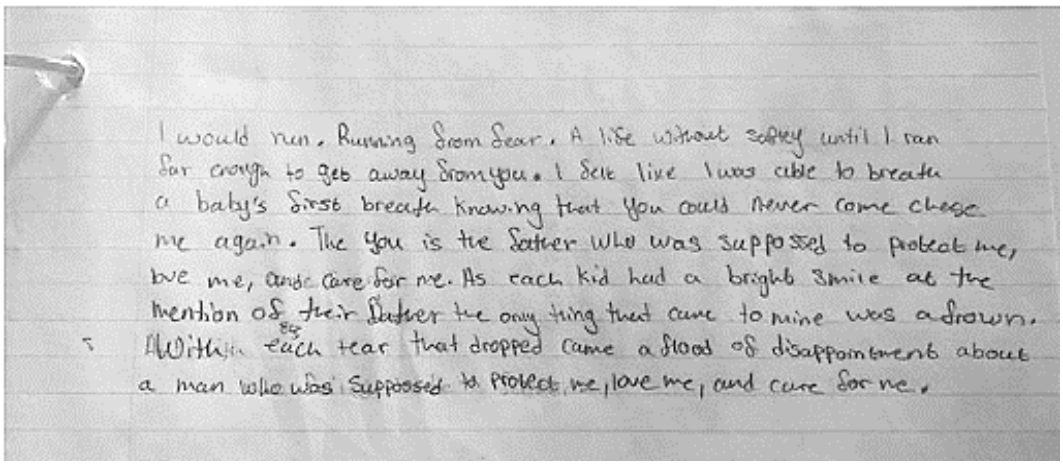

I would run. Running from fear. A life without safety until I ran far enough to get away from you. I felt like I was able to breathe a baby's first breath knowing that you could never come close me again. The you is the father who was supposed to protect me, love me, and care for me. As each kid had a bright smile at the mention of their father the only thing that came to mine was a frown. With each tear that dropped came a flood of disappointment about a man who was supposed to protect me, love me, and care for me.

Fig. 4: Maria's 100-word story that was shared with her classmates

Mel: Okay, do you have any big memories that right off the top, stand out to you about the class?

Maria: My biggest one was when I cried in class talking about my dad. That was a really big one for me. Because I don't get emotional easily. I know how to suppress my emotions. I learned that as a kid. To just start suppressing my emotions.

Mel: Mm-hmm.

Maria: So then when I read it, I just started crying and I was like, "What is happening?" My voice started breaking, and I was like, "Well, I'm going to have to continue," and I just let myself cry and continue.

Mel: That was 100 percent a moment I have written down. We did 100-word stories as poems and you could choose if you wanted to share, and when you shared yours, it was one of those moments where everybody was quiet, just listening to you read. It was so powerful and I will never forget it. And I was like… you don't always get to see everyone's face when you're reading something, but from where I was sitting, I could see, and it was amazing to see [your classmates'] faces and how you commanded everyone's attention. It was an honor to hear you read that.

> **Maria**: You know, Ada [name has been changed] came up to me after and was like, "Girl, I love your poem. I actually understand where you're coming from." She was like, "I got daddy issues too," and I was like [nods].
>
> **Mel**: Did she really come up to you after? Awww.
>
> **Maria**: Yeah, and she was like, "I was tearing up and everything." I was trying to hide myself a little bit and for a minute I couldn't read the paper. The tears were covering the paper.
>
> **Mel**: I know. That is so cool. I know that feeling: writing it is one thing, but taking that step and sharing it, reading it out loud to people, especially if it's something painful or something you haven't totally made sense of, or is difficult to talk about, that is when it is hard.
>
> **Maria**: Yeah, and with my dad, he is a complicated subject. He is a complicated person in my life. No one else is as complicated as that man to be honest. But I was thinking about it the day before, and the day before I was like, "Should I share this in class? Would I share this in class?" And then I just knew I would share it. And when you asked, I just [slowly raises hand], it was a really safe space. Like, I felt if I said something, I wouldn't be judged for it. I felt that people would just accept me there.

In this moment, Maria moved into an uncertain place. But as she said, "It was a really safe space. Like, I felt if I said something, I wouldn't be judged for it. I felt that people would just accept me there." She had never read her work in front of a class in this way and was not someone who openly shared her emotions. She did not know what would happen to her. It was a place of uncertainty, unpredictable and unknown. However, by stepping forward into it, Maria grew. She experienced solidarity with her classmates and began to see herself in a new way, that is, as a writer. This moment helps me see the potential that lies within running toward uncertainty rather than running away from it, or sticking with what we know. I am noticing that this act, stepping into the unknown, is what helps us to grow and change. We can only see the world and ourselves differently by engaging with these new beginnings, or moments of uncertainty.

Seeing Uncertainty and Potential in Narrative Threads

After co-composing narrative accounts with Maria and Alison, I searched for narrative threads (Clandinin, 2022) that cut across them. A narrative thread is a resonance or weaving within and across different stories of participants' experiences. While acknowledging the particularity and uniqueness of each account, narrative inquirers look into experiences that lift and carry within them the capacity to create new meaning. This may mean noticing similarities, tensions, and differences within and across experiences as they are lived and told within diverse places, times, and relationships.

In my master's thesis (Glaves, 2023), I wrote about four narrative threads that became evident. These emerged from my conversations with Alison and Maria, and with Sean and Jean. The first visible thread was an intergenerational familial thread for myself, Alison, and Maria. This thread was already crocheted into our lives before we entered the class. This was an important realization for me—that the course was a place where existing ideas, rooted in family culture and traditions, were refined, nurtured, developed,

challenged, and deepened. All three of us entered the course with families that made space for feminism, although not always named as feminism. This familial feminism shaped the course and, over time, the course also shaped our understanding of these family experiences as well.

The second thread is related to the first. Because feminism was already being lived in our families, the experience of Girlhood helped to strengthen and deepen their/our understandings of feminist language and concepts as we all learned specific terminology to name the worlds we/they lived in. For example, Maria told me about often talking to her aunt about things. During Girlhood, she went home and spoke to her aunt about what she read, discussed, or wrote in class. Although these conversations did not start with Girlhood, they were deepened by Maria's experiences within it. As Maria learned specific terms in class, she brought feminist language home, weaving it into her conversations with her aunt. This refinement of language allowed them to explore stories, ideas, moments, and experiences with more specificity. Learning feminist language is something that Alison and Maria both mentioned and valued. For all three of us, feminist terminology and ideas helped us refine our understanding of our experiences, helping us loop in new understandings of ourselves and our places in the world.

I awakened slowly to the third thread as I came to understand that institutional schooling tends to happen in boxes. There are boundaries around everything: the grades students are in, units of study explored, books read, themes we are supposed to see, ways we write essays or solve math, and even report cards tracking progress. I began to understand that these shapes echo institutional borders around what, and how, we know. These are strong borders and I can now see how they have impacted me, how they have shaped what I see and how I see. My inquiries with Alison and Maria showed me how difficult it is to unlearn the boundaries outlined by these boxes. It is difficult to move outside the boundaries. It takes bravery. As Maria shared her 100-word poem, she began breaking out of the box that school had been for her. In Grade 12, Maria helped change the shape of school. The story she told pushed against the boundaries, broke them down and created a new space, a new shape, a new beginning. It takes bravery to enroll in a feminist class; it takes bravery to create and sustain the class; it takes bravery to seek and celebrate sisterhood; it takes bravery to write personally and be vulnerable in a class. The course pushed against the boundaries of school.

Attending to boundary-breaking stories helped a fourth thread emerge for me as Alison and Maria spoke about the opportunities they were given in the Girlhood course to write and tell their personal stories, or stories about their friendships and families. The freedom to explore their personal experiences invited them to also attend to who they were in dominant social narratives (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Alison and Maria shared that they felt supported in storytelling, and they felt "good at it." These storied experiences, open-ended, looping, and explorative, resonated and created bonds among all of us who experienced them. I see the way Maria's experience sharing her 100-word story with the class meant something to her. It meant something to her that her peers approached her after she read her story, letting her know that her story resonated with them. It meant something to her to look at a relationship that was, as she put it, "complicated," and begin to observe the ways the story was changing just by telling it. Inviting in experiential stories opened up the willingness of Maria, Alison, and myself, to write. Seeing writing as explorative, conversational, evolving, and worth sharing was an important element of the

course. It was important that Maria sent me a picture of her 100-word story, months after the course was finished, and was still thinking about her story of her relationship with her dad.

Moving Forward Into the Unknown

Arendt describes natality as the

> condition for continued human existence, it is the miracle of birth, it is the new beginning inherent in each birth that makes action possible, it is spontaneous and it is unpredictable. Natality means we always have the ability to break with the current situation and begin something new. But what that is cannot be said (Hill, 2021, p. 6)

I can see now that my research points to many uncertainties and new beginnings and helps me recognize that the course itself was a break from the norms of the institutional narrative of schooling.

I am thinking about Arendt, who writes that rebirth brings with it unpredictability; for me, uncertainty is difficult. It stretches me and challenges me, especially now as I enter a new teaching experience that I find disorienting. Sometimes it can feel like my journey in Girlhood was comfortable and easy, especially as I look back from a new teaching position, where I feel especially unsteady. However, through writing this paper, I see that there was uncertainty and unpredictability there too. Along with Alison and Maria, I, too, went through rebirth in my experiences of Girlhood and grew as a result of the unpredictability. Our family stories, engagement with feminist language, personal writing, and our connections to larger social systems helped us pull in former experiences as we pushed, and were pushed, into new experiences and knowledge. I see that tensions existed in Girlhood between the "old" knowing we carried in, and the "new" knowing we embarked upon. Each moment these forces met revealed a new beginning. Unpredictability was present there in each new beginning.

I also recognize that the threads I became aware of in my research contain unpredictability *and* great potential. To be in a liminal space (Heilbrun, 1988), to be uncertain, and to face the abyss of uncertainty and not knowing is the only way to grow and evolve. To remind myself through the stories of Girlhood that this tension existed in a course I loved helps me as I navigate a new course and new beginning.

Continuing Forward: A New Beginning

Remembering these stories and writing this paper helps me as I walk into this new beginning in my hometown. Both of these intertwine in a way that helps me see that to grow and to evolve requires stepping forward. It brings me comfort to look back and see that even in the Girlhood course, there lived many unknowns and uncertainties. It helps to realize that there will always be uncertainty each time we begin again. Being reborn is a messy business, filled with unexpectedness as I untangle the old and new identities found there. The simple act of stepping into a new space means I can't know how it will unfold. And here I am doing it, carrying a crochet bowl, knowing some of the stitches that led me here, but unable to know how the next stitches will take shape.

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D. Jean Clandinin is a professor emeritus at the University of Alberta. A former teacher, counsellor, and psychologist, she is author or co-author of many books including *Narrative Inquiry*, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, and *Philosophical Roots of Narrative Inquiry*. Within the field of education, Dr. Clandinin's research has had a profound impact on the related areas of teacher knowledge, teacher education, and narrative inquiry. Her research on teachers' personal practical knowledge has altered our understanding of the role that teachers play in curriculum-making in their classrooms and of the need for incorporating this knowledge into teacher education programs. She has been instrumental in the development of narrative inquiry as a methodology for conducting research in the social sciences.

An Exploration of Self-Employed Arts Educators' Work Patterns and Social Relationships

Jen Hinkkala

Abstract

Many arts teachers are self-employed due to the lack of traditional forms of employment available. The purpose of this study was to understand the messiness of employment patterns of self-employed music, drama, dance, and visual arts teachers to support current and future educators. The overarching question that informed this study was: What is the nature of self-employed arts educators' work and relationships? Elder's life course perspective was used to analyze diverse lives in connection with social interconnectedness and transitions (Elder et al., 2003). Results of this study suggest that business training and social connections are vital to self-employed arts teachers' success.

Introduction

> [I was] putting my everything into the school. It was a struggle for me to support myself with the school. There were times I had to do without. I had to beg, borrow, and steal. I worked on baptism by fire. (Joy, drama teacher participant)

Engagement in the arts is associated with feelings of purpose/happiness and reduced anxiety and depression (Ryff, 2019; Seligman, 2011). Yet, arts educators have poor or unpredictable health, overwork themselves, work in employment situations in which they may resemble employees without benefits or career stability, and experience financial anxiety (Chafe & Kaida, 2020; Reid, 2019; Renshaw, 1997). The messiness of being human in self-employment can be viewed through the lens of complicated working arrangements, human imperfection, and the act of learning by making mistakes, coupled with the transformative power of positive social relationships that nurture professional growth (Gholipour et al., 2022; Nikolaev et al., 2023). This study explores the work patterns of self-employed arts educators in the fields of music, drama, dance, and visual arts in Canada to understand the needs of these educators. On a micro level, complexities of self-employment can be defined as working for multiple employers simultaneously by engaging in a combination of teaching/performing and unrelated work to obtain financial resources to survive (Bridgstock, 2013; Canadian Counsel for the Arts, 2024; de Peuter et al., 2022). On a macro/social structural level, messy self-employment patterns in the arts result from competition due to a limited number of standard employment positions, often forcing arts educators to become self-employed to continue to work in their art form (Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Menger, 1999). A discussion about the prevalence of gig and self-employment has been included within the literature review because it is relevant to all working adults.

This study seeks to answer the following research question: What is the nature of self-employed arts educators' work and social relationships? Social relationships mitigate the complexities of being human within self-employment by providing teachers with support to reduce stress, and they promote professional growth (Gholipour et al., 2022; Seligman, 2011). There is a limited body of literature pertaining to the work of self-employed arts educators. Thus, a constructivist grounded theory qualitative design was used to augment existing literature and expand our knowledge of self-employed arts educators' work and social relationships. Elder's life course perspective and Seligman's well-being theory were used to answer the research question and interrogate what it means to be human as a dynamic interplay between social relationships and self-employment. Twenty-six self-employed music, dance, drama, and visual arts teachers were recruited through art school web pages and invited to participate in this study, because this number is a rough guideline to reach a point at which no new insights can be generated in constructivist grounded theory (Creswell, 2018). For the purposes of this research, a self-employed music, drama, dance, or visual arts educator can be defined as a teacher who earns all or part of their wages through self-employment. Results of this study indicate that participants experienced financial anxiety and struggled to run their business, but social relationships mitigated these stressors. This research is part of a larger study pertaining to self-employed arts educators' work and wellness.

Literature Review

Limited research exists on employment patterns in the arts and the types of employment options available to artists and arts educators compared to other professions within North America (Alper & Wassall, 2002; Hill Strategies Research Inc., 2020; Woronkowicz & Noonan, 2019). Research from other countries such as the United Kingdom and parts of Europe is only somewhat relevant to the employment patterns of arts educators in North America because these countries place a higher value on the arts and provide more funding (Atkinson & Easthope, 2009; Polèse, 2012). In comparison to other Canadian provinces, Quebec places a higher emphasis on the arts than Ontario (Atkinson & Easthope, 2009; Polèse, 2012). Thus, these provinces can be used for comparison purposes. Studies in the arts have negated work patterns of artists and arts educators to explore concepts such as economic development in the arts, the impact of an arts education on entrepreneurial skills, the oversupply of artists, policies to support artists/educators in self-employment, the health benefits of engaging in the arts, and artists'/educators' reliance on non-arts-related employment (Alper & Wassall, 2000, 2002; Hill Strategies Research Inc., 2020; Paulsen et al., 2021; Polèse, 2012).

The use of the term "artist" compounds work pattern confusion because it is used to refer to musicians, actors, dancers, choreographers, visual artists, radio announcers, voice actors, writers, television, radio and film producers, directors, animators, photographers, architects recording engineers, sculptors, illustrators, fashion designers, craftspeople, artisans, comedians, composers and conductors, and arts educators (Hill Strategies Research Inc., 2014, 2020; Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Toronto Artscape Inc., 2015; Work in Culture, 2014). This categorization comprises 24 distinct professions with different incomes and levels of education which may be due to the fact that arts employment is not valued enough

to provide distinct categorization based on employment type. Thus, it is impossible to determine the employment patterns of self-employed arts teachers in Canada through provincial and federal government reporting. Some research and census data do differentiate between teachers and artists, based on the number of hours an individual engages in teaching/creating/performing (Alper & Wassall, 2002; Filer, 1990). However, Statistics Canada classifies teachers under the subcategories of musician or artist or includes these individuals under the category of teacher, which creates further confusion (Work in Culture, 2014). Employment categorization has a profound effect on an artist's earnings and their ability to qualify for employment insurance and other benefits.

Categorization based on art form or employment type is problematic in the arts because employment in the arts is marked by transitions, fluidity, and the messiness of working for multiple employers simultaneously. Arts employment is characterized by portfolio careers, defined as several different forms of employment centering around a skill set (Bridgstock, 2013). Arts-related employment may be supplemented by a "day job" to enable individuals to be active within the arts while earning a stable income (Hinkkala, 2021). My own employment struggles as a self-employed music educator prompted me to become a school bus driver to supplement my income (Hinkkala, 2021).

Arts organizations have few standard employment positions available for artists or arts teachers, which results in high levels of competition. However, these arts organizations tend to hire self-employed independent contractors (Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Menger, 1999). Artists and arts teachers in Canada are much more likely to be self-employed, representing an estimated 51% to 41% of the total artist population (Hill Strategies Research Inc., 2014; Paulsen, 2021). Paulsen (2021) asserts that arts majors may be more intrinsically motivated to pursue entrepreneurial careers than other college graduates. Interestingly, self-employment in the arts dates back to the Middle Ages; thus, the lack of research is somewhat surprising (Woronkowicz & Noonan, 2019).

Two forms of self-employment are prevalent within arts education in Canada today: solo self-employed teachers, and self-employed independent contractors. Solo self-employed arts teachers have even less job security than employees, do not receive benefits, are not permitted to join unions, and "receive [business] profits, in contrast to wages" (Canadian Revenue Agency, 2016; Vosko, 2006, p. 68). Self-employed arts teachers are personally accountable for obtaining their own employment (Canadian Revenue Agency, 2016; Vosko, 2006). Independent contract workers are self-employed individuals who pay their own taxes, do not earn wages, and are cheaper for employers to hire because they are not required to provide these individuals with benefits such as workers' compensation (Fenwick, 2008; Kalleberg, 2000).

A gig worker is an individual who engages in short, one-time and/or single-task contracts for one or more individuals or businesses (Davis & Hoyt, 2020; Farooqui, 2021; Jeon et al., 2020). Gig workers are hired for a single masterclass or teaching opportunity, while independent contractors are typically hired for a longer duration such as a single semester or school year. Gig work is rapidly growing across all sectors and is not limited to trades such as Uber driving but also encompasses highly educated professions such as arts educators (Davis & Hoyt, 2020; Farooqui, 2021). Gig work has risen steadily since the global

pandemic; approximately 22% of working Canadians, or 7.3 million adults, are engaged in gig employment (Wilson, 2024; Lovei & Hardy, 2024). Gig workers in Canada earn an annual income of between $4,303 and $5,000 and are in the bottom 40% of the annual income bracket (Gigpedia, 2025; Hou et al., 2019).

Contract/gig workers are required to effectively negotiate and renegotiate the terms of their employment on a semi-regular basis, which may place these workers at a disadvantage if they lack the skills to negotiate effectively (Fenwick, 2008). Self-employed independent contractors resemble employees and often work in the client's studio or performance venue (Vosko, 2006). Many art schools in Canada, including the Hamilton Conservatory for the Arts, the Victoria Conservatory of Music, and the Royal Conservatory, hire self-employed independent contractors (Hamilton Conservatory for the Arts, 2021). As a self-employed music educator and university sessional lecturer, I have been hired for a single semester or school year.

Until recently, universities have been ill-prepared for changes in current employment trends (Caza, 2020; Means, 2019). For example, universities hire contract lecturers who often have no benefits or opportunities for advancements and earn wages below the poverty line (Means, 2019). Universities perpetuate the stereotype that certain fields such as business lead to stable employment (Caza, 2020; Means, 2019). Notwithstanding, one out of seven business school graduates in the United States will become engaged in gig employment, and most university classes taught by tenure track faculty have done little to prepare students for this reality (Caza, 2020). Some Canadian universities have become aware of the need for business training within the arts. However, of the approximately 223 publicly funded universities in Canada (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, n. d.), only nine offer programs combining arts or arts education with business degrees or business classes. For example, Memorial University offers a joint degree in music and commerce (Memorial University 2025), and the University of Waterloo offers an honors arts and business program (University of Waterloo 2025).

Aside from a small number of specialization programs in arts/arts education and business, few arts-focused programs provide students with adequate training on gig employment, entrepreneurship, and self-employment (Nugraheni et al., 2019; Paulsen et al., 2021). In a study of arts graduates, Paulsen et al. (2021) found that 60% were currently working freelance jobs and/or were self-employed. In a study involving art education majors, Nugraheni et al. (2019) notes that 63% of students lacked business management skills. Thus, there is a need to provide students with business and entrepreneurship skills which include career self-management, marketing, finance, and risk evaluation (Benzenberg & Tuominiemi, 2021; Bridgstock, 2013; Nugraheni et al., 2019). Entrepreneurship training could provide arts teachers with self-confidence as they navigate transitions, career fluidity, and the complexities of self-employment, thereby helping alleviate some of the challenges of navigating this sector. Transitions in arts education can be thought of as a period of reflection that leads to the development of a successful teaching business, or moving between solo self-employment to hiring self-employed independent contractors, and/or shifting between forms of related or unrelated employment.

Gig and Self-Employment in Canada

Little is known about the work and well-being of adults working in gig and self-employment. This is somewhat surprising because one in five working-aged adults, or 22% of the Canadian workforce, is engaged in gig and self-employment (Wilson, 2024). The platform economy has contributed to increases in gig employment through Uber and DoorDash for general workers, and TeachAway, VIPKID, and Skooli for educators (Choi, 2024; Fossen, 2021). Gig and self-employment have been found to increase during periods of economic hardship, such as recessions and rising inflation rates or in response to unemployment (Choi, 2024; Fossen, 2021). In Canada, gig and self-employment is predicted to increase due to rising living costs (Choi, 2024; Lovei & Hardy, 2024) and the tariffs imposed by the United States. Gig and self-employment are not only prevalent in the arts but within professions such as graphic design, English, general education, information technology, psychology, family medicine, and allied health professions such as massage therapy (Lovei & Hardy, 2024). Thus, all working-aged adults need business and entrepreneurial training to successfully navigate current employment conditions. Current trends suggest that everyone should be prepared to work in gig and self-employment at some point in their careers. Insights from this article can be used to help working-aged adults plan for these career trajectories.

Some research found that self-employed professionals experience social isolation due to the solitary nature of their work (Khan et al., 2021), while other research suggests that self-employed professionals turn to family and friends for support (Gholipour et al., 2022). Seligman's (2011) research indicates that social connectedness is vital to well-being and career success. Thus, my research seeks to better understand the messiness of being human within self-employment and how family connections help to support arts educators' careers and well-being. To achieve this goal, I used Elder's life course perspective to understand arts educators' employment in relation to familial connections and social historical context (Elder et al., 2003). However, this perspective alone was insufficient because components of well-being are not well articulated within this framework. Thus, Seligman's well-being theory was used to augment Elder's life course perspective.

Theoretical Frameworks

Elder's life course perspective (LCP) and Seligman's well-being theory have been combined to understand what it means to be human in art self-employment and further support the rationale for this research (Elder et al., 2003; Seligman, 2011). According to Timonen et al. (2018), existing theories can be used with constructivist grounded theory to deepen/expand existing theoretical knowledge; however, the researcher must be attentive to emerging themes from the data. Elder's life course perspective and Seligman's well-being theory were used to shape the overarching question: What is the nature of self-employed arts educators' work and relationships? The follow-up questions required participants to elaborate on interview questions adapted from Gross and Musgrave (2020) to describe the nature of their relationships and their feelings surrounding their work, all aspects reflected within the theoretical frameworks.

The life course perspective can be understood as multidimensional, interconnecting historical, biological, psychological, developmental, and social spheres and age-graded sequences of events and roles that individuals experience/interact with in connection to historical and social time (Elder et al., 2003). I assert that the sequence of life events may be less age-graded than this perspective implies. Key concepts found within LCP include *timing*, *transitions*, *trajectories*, *turning points*, and *linked lives* (Elder et al., 2003; Pavalko, 1997; Wethington, 2005). I created Figure 1 to illustrate intersections between components of LCP. This paper is part of a larger study and thus a discussion of all of the components of LCP are beyond the scope of this review. This article explores turning points, transitions and linked lives in connection with human agency.

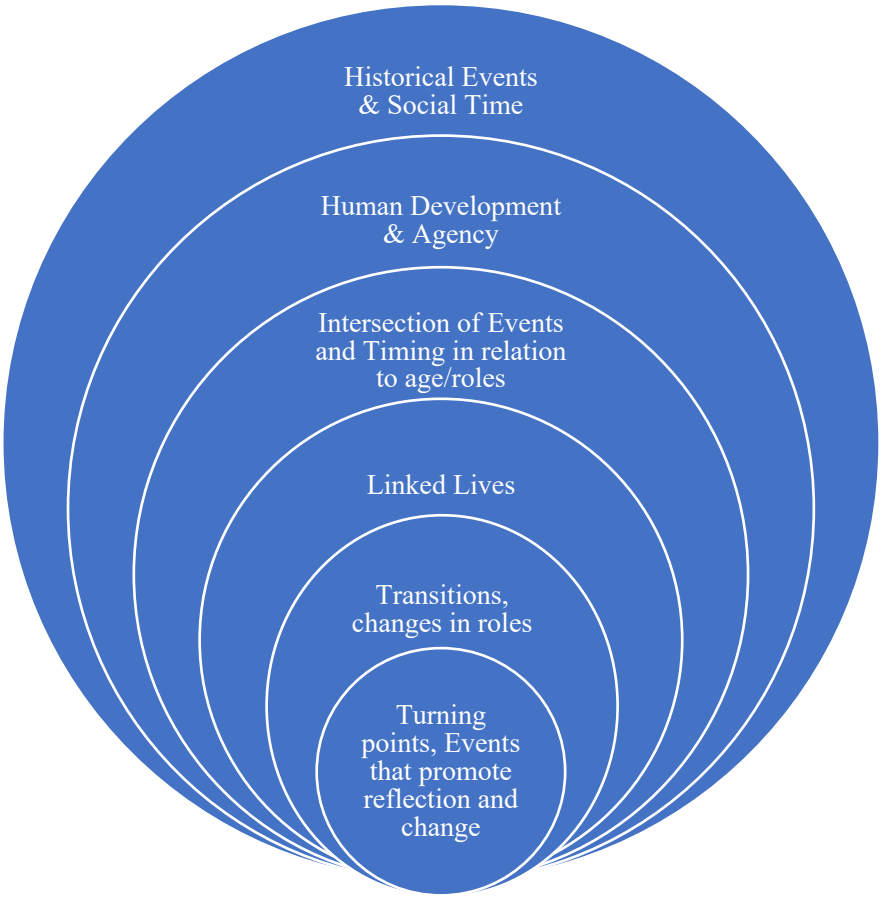


Fig. 1: Life Course Perspective (LCP)

The research question strives to understand arts educators' work through the concept of timing, how historical/social structural events shape arts educators' careers and turning points, and events that prompted participants to reflect on their careers and make changes. Underpinning this research are components of human development/agency as identified by reflecting on personal growth that results from turning points and transitions. The linked lives component, the impact of one person's life on another, was used to better understand how familial connections support self-employment. However, this framework fails to provide an adequate explanation of positive emotions associated with social

relationships. Thus, the linked lives component was paired with the positive relationships element of Seligman's theory of well-being to understand the impact of these relationships in the lives of educators. Furthermore, the engagement and meaning components of Seligman's theory were used to explore arts educators' feelings surrounding self-employment. Seligman's theory of well-being from the field of positive psychology addresses the emotional/psychological components of well-being.

Table 1

The Components of Seligman's Well-Being Theory (Seligman, 2011, p. 27)

Positive Emotion	Pleasure, ecstasy, comfort, warmth, and happiness. Tied to the present moment or a situation.
Engagement	"Flow" state or complete absorption in the activity.
Meaning	A sense of purpose beyond the self.
Accomplishment/ Achievement	Adds value and provides feelings or products of success.
Positive Relationships	Provides support, improved mood, connectedness.

Methodology

I chose a constructivist grounded theory design for this research to generate a descriptive/subjective theory in connection with historical time and social context (Alemu et al., 2017; Charmaz, 2017b). In constructivist grounded theory, results are representative through participants' narratives combined with the researcher's interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2017a, b). Thus, this methodology allowed me to expand our knowledge of this population through a reciprocal, reflective exchange of ideas between myself and the participants (Alemu et al., 2017; Charmaz, 2017b). I used the constant comparative analytical tool to compare similarities and differences between components of data and engaged in open and focused coding data analysis procedures (Timonen et al., 2018). The theoretical coding stage of this research integrated Elder's life course perspective and Seligman's well-being theory to develop a rich description.

Theories listed above were combined with the theoretical coding stage of this research. Participants for this study took part in one 60- to 90-minute interview with follow-up questions. I based four open-ended interview questions on the work of Gross and Musgrave (2020), a study that involved the work and well-being of professional musicians in the United Kingdom, because these questions meld well with the theoretical frameworks and are well suited to understand arts educators' work patterns and relationships. These interview questions required participants to describe the nature of their work, social relationships, and personal and professional struggles. Unscripted follow-up questions were used to prompt participants to expand on the information provided. Sources of validity for this research include thick, rich description and member checks. All but three of the 26 participants had either a bachelor's or master's degree.

Table 2

Research Participants

Total of 26. One participant taught both music and drama and was included in both categories. Timeline: September 2022 to March 2023.

Early-Career = 18 to 34; Mid-Career = 35 to 50; Late-Career = 50+

Discipline	**Number of Participants**	**Pseudonym/Career Stage (quoted participants)**
Dance	6	Sandra, Late-Career
Drama	7	Neil, Early-Career Emily, Mid-Career Joy, Mid-Career Sharleen, Late-Career
Music	9	Kelly, Early Career Lynn, Mid-Career Lucy, Mid-Career
Visual arts	5	Sarah, Mid-Career Glenn, Mid-Career Jill, Late-Career

I chose to recruit participants with a minimum of six years of teaching experience because burnout levels of teachers are higher within the first five years of their careers (Kimpton & Kimpton, 2016; Schussler et al., 2015). Thus, the inclusion of teachers with less experience could adversely impact the results by indicating that self-employed arts teachers have poor self-care and are more prone to burnout. Self-employed arts teachers and freelance artists face challenges in obtaining adequate employment from teaching. Thus, I included participants in this study if they were working six hours or more as a self-employed arts educator, so as to include participants with caregiving responsibilities, since these individuals typically work fewer hours as self-employed teachers (Cohen, 2015). Participants ranged in age from 24 to 70, with the majority of participants between the ages of 30 and 45; this allowed me to gain a general understanding of their work and social relationships at various career stages.

Results

The majority of participants blamed themselves for not knowing how to effectively run a business, market their services, or address business-related adversities. However, none of the university-educated participants received formal business training. Sarah, a visual arts teacher stated, "I don't think a lot of people have the awareness to manage [a business], it's just not taught." Sarah also noted that the formal training she received in university "had more to do with grant writing and exhibitions than it did with teaching" or managing a business. Neil, a drama teacher who runs a theatre school, observed, "No, I never received any business training." These same sentiments were echoed by the majority of participants. Sharleen, a late-career drama teacher, stressed the importance of training on how to navigate the gig economy. As she notes,

> For one thing it [gig and self-employment training] should be in elementary schools [and] in high schools. On another side, the gig workers really should have much more support. As I get older, [I] realize how important this kind of stuff is. It would be a great thing actually to do reality check classes for people starting in the gig economy.

Sharleen went on to describe the need to train people to work within the gig economy.

Many participants expressed insecurities about their business management skills and said they had to learn from their mistakes. Sharleen commented, "We're not known for being good businesspeople." Jill, a visual arts teacher, stated, "There have been moments where I could have been better at managing the business in terms of managing the database and evolving. So, I've had some ups and downs." Joy reflected on the trouble of being both a manager and a friend to those who worked with her. She said, "I was struggling financially, I had a lot of people that owed me money. I had staff that was stealing from me."

Many participants in contract work expressed their fears about money and future employment. Sarah noted, "If one contract ended [and] I knew that I had this other thing, that wasn't so bad. [But] there were several periods where one contract ended and I didn't have any sort of employment lined up." Some participants relied on verbal contracts. As Kelly commented, "I don't even have a contract this year because they know me, and I think that they just trust me."

Participants discussed the effects of financial pressures on their workday and feeling the need to work constantly to earn an adequate living. Lucy, a music teacher, stated:

> As a freelancer, when you don't work, you don't earn income, so there's often internal pressure to work as much as possible or take as few breaks as possible. There was a time when I wouldn't even take a lunch break.

As Jill noted, "I don't put my work to rest at night or on the weekends." This type of financial uncertainty resulted in many of the participants claiming to engage in supplemental employment in unrelated fields to survive. Glenn, a visual arts teacher/artist, noted, "That is one thing I find about people in the arts—we become a jack-of-all-trades. It's overwhelming to think about." Some participants held down multiple part-time contracts in teaching, performing/creating, and arts administration.

To compensate for their lack of business training, some participants sought support from formal services such as business coaching programs. Jill stated, "There was a community that was offering a free trial week that you could join this [business] coaching community." Jill went on to say that she spends $12,000 per year on business coaching. She noted,

> In the arts, you're self-employed, you have to be a strong businessperson or get some coaching. I really see myself as a small business owner first, but it happens to be in the arts. I think if I saw myself as an artist first, there's a good chance that I would be reporting very poorly financially.

Participants' business confidence was positively impacted by familial support and coaching.

Participants discussed approaches they use to grow their businesses, including the use of social media and listening to the parents of their students. Lynn stated, "I've done a lot of incidental marketing on Facebook. I will usually post something funny that my students said or post a picture of their reaction, it's kind of a soft advertising to let people know I'm good with kids." Jill added, "I was really open to suggestions from my audience on what they needed." Jill explained that she hosts art parties, which became profitable. Other participants continued to maintain online classes post-pandemic.

Participants' ability to navigate business challenges were influenced by the linked lives component, the interconnectedness and positive influences of family outlined in LCP (Elder et al., 2003; Pavalko, 1997; Wethington, 2005). As Neil noted, "My dad was a business manager, so I learned from him. He is the mastermind of my business." Similarly, Sandra commented, "I own [a dance school]. I have three colleagues who happen to also be my three daughters." Emily added, "My working hours are usually after school finishes. So, my mom [comes to take care of the kids]. I have a lot of support." Familial support was found to be integral to success in self-employment.

Participants talked about career rewards and positive relationships articulated in Seligman's theory of well-being. Jill stated, "I feel my own power which is really exciting. I have a business coach now and I'm learning a lot about tapping into mindset and how to maximize the customer experience." Neil added,

> The best thing about my work is being a self-employed boss. I get to make all the decisions. I'm working towards my own goal. So, every little penny that I spend is going towards achieving what I want for myself. So, it's very worth it.

Lynn, a music teacher observed, "So, I think if more people can figure out a way to work for themselves, that's good. It can be really rewarding, you know, to work for yourself."

Meanwhile, Jill reflected,

> I'm always learning, and I really love that it keeps me young. I get to be around children. I get to be around great and interesting people, and I get to be my own boss, which is great. You know, there's no benefits and there's no paid holiday. This is not perfect but it's a pretty special life.

Lynn's advice to self-employed teachers is "just to focus on gratitude." Jill added, "A lot of my students will say to me when I grow up, I want to be an artist." Her advice to them is, "You gotta have a knowledge of business and you have to have some general education if you want to make an income as an artist."

Discussion

Participants expressed apprehension about their lack of business knowledge and sought out business coaching programs. Individuals who took this step developed the knowledge to grow their teaching businesses. Participants spoke about the connections they made during professional development opportunities with other teachers as being vital to their professional growth because they not only provide arts educators with mentorship but also create a community that fosters growth and development (Chafe & Kaida, 2020; Kimpton & Kimpton, 2016). The concept of turning points, a component of LCP, defined as substantial changes during one's life that promote reflection and decisions regarding the future, are reflected in this study (Elder et al., 2003; Wethington, 2005). Participants talked about turning points that prompted them to take actions such as soliciting feedback from clients, engaging in long-term financial and career planning, and seeking professional development and other supports.

Positive emotions were expressed by participants as they discussed a sense of personal accomplishment associated with teaching. Participants expressed a sense of gratitude for their ability to engage in a self-employed teaching career, the meaningful nature of their work, and the sense of purpose they felt. They described overcoming adversity to grow their businesses and engage in lifelong learning activities. *Meaning* is a feeling of purpose or engagement in something that is bigger than oneself, and contributes to well-being (Seligman, 2011). An activity that is meaningful is often pursued for its intrinsic value, independent of rewards, and contains both subjective and objective elements (Seligman, 2011). According to Seligman (2011), "Positive emotions are a subjective variable" that encompasses "pleasure, ecstasy, comfort, warmth" and happiness defined by "what the individual thinks and feels at the present moment" (p. 25). Participants were not motivated by money beyond meeting their financial needs, and they accepted that a career in the arts would never result in high earnings.

The linked lives component of Elder's life course perspective combined with the positive relationships component of Seligman's theory highlights the role of positive relationships in the lives of arts educators (Elder et al., 2003; Seligman, 2011). Positive relationships are fundamental to well-being because they provide us with support and promote positive emotions through engagement with others, and contribute to feelings of purpose (Seligman, 2011). Linked lives, turning points, transitions, and, to a lesser extent, timing from LCP were melded with positive emotions, purpose, and meaning from Seligman's (2011) well-being theory to analyze the data collected, particularly in the theoretical coding stage. The descriptive theory that emerged from this research is one of social interconnectedness and success in self-employment. Both of these elements were found in all of participants' responses to the interview questions. Results of this study indicate that participants derived meaning through positive relationships with family and students and were aware of the impact they were making in their communities. Participants' business success was tied to the linked lives component by launching their business with other family members, learning about business from a parent, and receiving caregiving support from family members. The interconnectedness of family members helped them navigate transitions and overcome the complexities of self-employment.

Conclusion and Implications for Further Research

Results of this study indicate that the complexities of self-employment prompted participants to combine different forms of employment to achieve financial stability. Arts teachers require access to entrepreneurial training to effectively navigate transitions, negotiate contracts, and grow their businesses. Participants blamed themselves for their entrepreneurial mistakes despite a lack of formal business training. Further research could compare business confidence/skills among arts educators who received formal training and those who did not to determine if training has an impact on entrepreneurial success. Post-secondary institutions could explore how to better support future arts educators by preparing them for multifaceted careers in gig and self-employment. Arts organizations could offer workshops to help their membership navigate business challenges such as how to market teaching services, negotiate contracts, and plan careers, aspects that are associated with business growth (Benzenberg & Tuominiemi, 2021; Bridgstock, 2013; Nugraheni et al., 2019).

Linked lives/positive relationships, through the support of family members, was found to impact participants' career choices and their ability to grow their businesses. Relationships with family, colleagues, and students are integral to arts educators' well-being as they navigate transitions and cope with the complexities of the modern gig economy. Future research could explore the influence of familial and social relationships on arts educators' ability to manage their businesses by comparing the differences in levels of well-being between solo self-employed arts teachers and self-employed independent contractors. Universities and arts organizations could help arts educators cope with the messiness of being human in self-employment through networking events to further foster social interconnectedness that would allow arts educators to thrive.

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Propositions for Sustainable Relationalities

Sustainable Relationality Study Group

(Nicole Lee, Ken Morimoto, Melissa Boucher-Guilbert, Fayrouz Ibrahim, Robin Jensen, Meghan Macdonald, and Rebecca Zynomirski)

Abstract

From November 2023 to June 2024, an a/r/tographic study group gathered to engage with the concept of sustainable relationality. With the methodology of a/r/tography and propositional thinking, the relational gathering became an experimental curricular *uncommonplace*, a messy yet nourishing place from which to envision different ways of working and being. After introducing the intentions and theoretical background of the study, two art-based engagements that emerged for two groups of master's students are offered. Reflecting on the transitions undergone by these groups, we speculate on the conditions that might enable similar educational opportunities for human flourishing sustained by deep relational encounters.

Introduction

Ken and Nicole have participated in study groups together for about six years now. Both a/r/tographers first gathered around the Canadian federally funded *Mapping A/r/tography: Transnational Storytelling Across Historical and Cultural Routes of Significance* project as doctoral students, which was led by their mentor Rita Irwin, based at the University of British Columbia. Inspired by the a/r/tographic emphasis of research that unfolds from critical, contemplative, and creative engagement with the interplay of theory and practice in community (LeBlanc & Irwin, 2019; Lee et al., 2019), Nicole and Ken formed their own study group to work with the Master of Arts in Art Education (MAAE) students at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) University in 2023–2024. Both scholars, situated in a state of transition with Ken recently finishing his doctoral studies and Nicole still adjusting to the demands of a tenure-track position, wanted to continue sustaining permissive and generative spaces for thinking, philosophizing, writing, and making. The Mapping A/r/tography study group met monthly for multiple years, first in person and then pivoted online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Sustainable Relationality study group also gathered monthly, but only for eight months, and entirely online—it was not until June 2024 that this group met in person for the 2024 Canadian Society for Education Through Art (CSEA/SCÉA) National Conference.

The Sustainable Relationality Study Group's conference participation was made possible by a Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science grant, titled *Social Implementation of Arts-Based Pedagogy in Teacher Training by Program Development and Research Hub Construction* (PI: Koichi Kasahara, based at Tokyo Gakugei University), which in some ways extended work from Mapping A/r/tography's

transnational partnerships. This current study summoned researchers from Japan, Australia, Canada, and China to consider the concept of sustainable relationality: What does developing sustainable relationships with land, culture, society, and education in each of our local contexts mean? In this article, authors share the messy process of imagining, mobilizing, and becoming in an a/r/tographic study group centered on the concept of sustainable relationality in the situated milieu of K'jipuktuk (a Mi'kmaq word for "Great Harbor"), or Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The piece begins with a sketch of the facilitators/educators/mentors' intentions for the study group, the propositional thinking that propelled the unfoldings, and the a/r/tographic theoretical foundations that supported this work. It features two art-based relationship and community-building engagements that emerged for two groups of master's students: (1) Fayrouz and Meghan, and (2) Melissa, Rebecca, and Robin. The first developed intercultural learning through creating and playing a memory card game. The second shifted their instrumentalized understanding of art education research to one based on care and reciprocity through socially engaged practice. The reflections at the end speak to the transitions this group went through and speculate on the conditions that might enable similar communities of practice to develop and flourish.

Study Group Notes from Ken and Nicole, the Facilitators/Educators/Mentors

We (Nicole and Ken) came to this work sharing a commitment "to living in rich and creative ways" (Cohen, 2014, p. xv) because we experienced its potential for cultivating abundance in a/r/tographic communities of practice. Inviting students to join a study group was our way of inspiring others to consider the possibilities this commitment could enable, especially in a space marked by scarcity (United Way Halifax, 2024). Entering this engagement, we knew that these beginning scholars hoped to learn more about a/r/tography and how to participate in academic conferences. While the group was attuned to the potentiality of presenting together at the 2024 CSEA/SCÉA National Conference which was coming to Halifax, it was at first unclear what we collectively aspired to achieve and what form this a/r/tographic work would take. It took time to figure this out together, and this was a process of navigating transitions organically. Largely, each person entered these spaces with a commitment to being together. In the initial sessions, an agreed-upon structure—a proposition—enabled each study group member to share a part of themselves. Elsewhere, Ken has observed that "propositions, when taken up, in putting forth, set us forth, directing our being to motion … unground[ing] being from the assumed fixity of hereness into the unfixed domain of the not yet known" (Morimoto, 2024, p. 491). By responding to these propositions, ideas, quotes, data, and visual artifacts accumulated, we began working with this accumulation to story what had happened.

As facilitators, we (Ken and Nicole) mainly held a space of pedagogical abeyance for the students and their ideas to ripen. Price (2012) traces multiple interpretations of abeyance, including "transitory times," "flux," "suspension," "waiting," "aspiration, (and) desire," "look," "gape," "open wide in remembrance, expectation, and contemplation" (p. 66). We provided an environment for the students to unlearn their traditionally oriented beliefs of what is expected in social sciences and humanities research and

scholarship. This was a space of generosity that allowed students to uncover their curiosities, let themselves be moved by their concerns, and make sense of these impressions. In the endeavor to walk alongside the students, we as educators tried to bring "a sense of spaciousness to experiences … and gesture toward less fear and more space for suspension in learning" (Price, 2012, p. 67). Indeed, echoing Price's (2012) interpretations of abeyance (italicized here), we witnessed how this experience was a *transitory time* for the students that was full of *flux*. We *suspended expectations*, while we *waited* and *looked* with inquisitive anticipation for the something that was sure to emerge. In *remembering* what it was like for our own mentors to offer a similar space for us, we *contemplated* on our mentors' *aspirations* and *desires* for us, as well as our own for the students we now serve.

Lucero (2018), who thinks of his pedagogical practice as conceptual art and believes how "the everyday—attended to—becomes art" (p. 51), has inspired us to consider our teaching in the study group in similar ways. Lucero explains in an interview that this reframing of curriculum and pedagogy as artistic practice involves "work[ing] within limits—mostly conceptual, but sometimes material—to try to find the pliability of things that might appear to be concretized and immobile at first glance" (Kersten, 2021, p. 35). This focus on possibilities in the face of limitations formed the central ethos of the study group, and it carried our work forward. Like Lucero (2018), we embraced an emergent, lived curriculum, by having "conversations with [our] students about their goals, their intentions, their accomplishments, and about [our] role in helping them achieve those things" (p. 53). Characteristic of a/r/tographic inquiry, instead of asking students to start with a research question, we shifted to posing questions like "What practices move you into feeling?" and "Considering where you would like to put your energy, how might it reconceptualize the idea of work?" to get them started. This formed a permissive beginning to allow the messiness of the process to direct the course of our research.

A/r/tographic Relationality

Our propositional engagement with sustainable relationality is informed by a/r/tography (Irwin et al., 2024b; Springgay et al., 2008). In *A/r/tography: Essential Readings and Conversations*, Irwin et al. (2024a) discuss how a/r/tography engages "both artistic and educational practices as a basis for inquiry" (p. 4). The methodology has "resisted stabilization over time" (p. 5) since it activates "an artistic approach to understanding concepts as method" (p. 7). Each time someone takes up a/r/tographic work, it is never about simply following a set of protocols or parameters. The work always becomes something different, because "embracing concepts as method for engaging with artistic and educational ideas immediately opens up possibilities for thinking differently, encouraging a vibrant engagement with materials, and exploring interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary intersections of ideas" (p. 7). This is why our study group was structured not only to investigate the idea of sustainable relationality, but also to play with and in the concept as a lived phenomenon. This living inquiry "encourage[s] and enable[s] students to do their own 'experiment' in the laboratory of their psyche" (Bai, 2006, p. 14) so that ideas can be digested to strengthen one's "agentic vitality" (p. 14), which contributes to self-authority—a kind of knowing that emanates from the inside out.

A/r/tography has been described as a "methodology of situations" (Irwin et al., 2006) because of the rhizomatic nature of how inquiry is constantly being (re)directed depending on the situation (p. 75). Staying with a sense of not knowing involved some risk on everyone's part: the project could flop, there could be interpersonal conflicts, and we could have all done something else with our already overextended capacities. Yet, these conditions also held abundant potential for trust to flourish—a trust in the community to hold space for individuals to grow, and a trust in the self to find one's way. Mosavarzadeh (2024) refers to a/r/tography as a "methodology of trust," which:

> comes through the willingness and openness to engage with the process of living (with/through) the questions, keeping the questions alive throughout one's inquiry authentically and intentionally, and willing to re/conceptualize and re/contextualize the questions as one gains new understandings throughout the process. (p. 482)

Our work together centered on an "equity of relations, respecting those with whom we work as partners in the process, co-laboring, co-learning, and co-researching, in setting the direction for our work together" (Irwin et al., 2024a, p. 6). With time, we eased into a process of becoming that was shaped by each other as "artists, materials, and concepts, and what emerges from these relationships" (Irwin et al., 2024a, p. 7). We came to understand who we were in relation, holding with gratitude what each was able to contribute and never asking more than what each was willing to give. As such, relationship and community building became vital components in our understanding of sustainable relationality.

Our ideas on sustainable relationality draw from previous a/r/tographic research on environmental sustainability (Chung, 2024; Triggs & Sorensen, 2024; Rousell et al., 2020) as well as cultural sustainability (Burke et al., 2021; Coleman, 2023). These studies challenge our material and environmental encounters to dwell with "a pedagogy that attends to the ripples of life's moments, one that intentionally designs for accessing the realm of the aesthetic in the making of art and self" (Triggs & Sorensen, 2024, p. 115). These studies frame sustainability for art education not as an external objective to be analyzed and achieved but as a relational and ethical encounter. In this context, our theorization of sustainable relationality centers relationality as the ground from which to engage with others and build a holistic understanding of sustainability. In so doing, we can nourish and foster responsibility and commitment in a community of practice. Instead of beginning with an abstract goal of sustainability, we start by asking what it is that we desire to sustain and what might nourish us. Sustainable relationality is also informed by Donald's (2012) concept of ethical relationality: "Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to understand more deeply how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other" (p. 535). Sustainable relationality not only asks what is needed to sustain our world but also what we ourselves need to enact such engagements and what we are able to give to each other. Sustainable relationality is a relational framework to create messy spaces of abeyance where we can grow and nurture each other amidst ambiguity and uncertainty. In theorizing what sustainable relationality is, we embrace "a paradigm that sees humans moving along the continuum of possibility, forever in a state of realizing, realized, and not yet realized" (Cohen, 2014, p. 5). In doing so, we reinvestigate assumptions about the conceptualization of sustainability and give ourselves the artistic permission (Lucero, 2018) to transform our understandings and practices of sustainability based on our lived experience of relationality.

The Sustainable Part of the Conversation

Many of the study group members had multiple existing commitments that kept them busy. In time, it became evident that what brought individuals together was a search for nourishment, connectedness, well-being, (re)generation, and growth—a more sustainable alternative to the late capitalist society in which all of us work. Such a society values technicization, instrumentalism, individualism, utilitarianism, and impersonality, and what counts in this climate is the ceaseless production of measurable progress. Work must enliven and lift for it not to enact a cycle of harm that consumes human vitality and spits people out when production is finished. Our relational gatherings served as an experimental curricular *uncommonplace* to envision a different way of working and being/becoming together—a delightful resistance of sorts. This experimental living inquiry offered what Quinn (2023) calls an invisible education, which is:

> not about situations where learning is a goal or a pathway, but rather emerges indirectly from other activities and simply in daily living. As such it is oppositional to the "learning outcomes" that have come to dominate formal education. Uncertainty and liminality replace preordained results, suggesting what I would call an epistemology of the ineffable. (p. 4)

The tangible approaches to craft this curricular uncommonplace may have been mundane, but they created a space for us to witness, as much as possible, each other's fullness.

Citing Fenstermacher (1992), Clarke (2014) talks about the potentiality of responding to an educative agenda, which "focuses on providing support and success, in the fullest sense possible (not just academic), in the ways that students come to know and interact with the world" (p. 106). His support of Lara, a student who rallied an entire school to collect milk cartons for a rock radio station competition to have Australia's most popular rock band perform at the school (they won), was situated outside of the system of schooling, which is about "timetabling, scheduling, assessing, recording, and reporting" (p. 106). Curiously, our study group's learnings, too, seemed to be possible only because the experience sat outside of the formal curriculum of the university. There was no syllabus to follow, no predetermined content to cover, and no designated learning objectives to design for. We (Nicole and Ken) continue to wonder how the educative agenda could be protected within systems of schooling.

Given time, support, and encouragement, the students found their paths to a project that gripped their interests. They also found language to articulate their own approaches and processes to meaning making. The following two sections of this article illuminate two projects, one material and one conceptual. The first group, Fayrouz Ibrahim and Meghan Macdonald, created a card game based on a shared set of words. They each illustrated these words from their perspective and played the matching game to enable cross-cultural understanding between them. The second group, Melissa Boucher-Guilbert, Robin Jensen, and Rebecca Zynomirski, came to a fuller understanding of the pervasiveness of instrumentalization through dialogic aesthetic experiences. In resisting the creation of a product, they embodied an epistemology of the ineffable (Quinn, 2023) and provoked philosophical considerations of use (Ahmed, 2019). Some of this work was exhibited in *Artful Engagement: 2nd Annual MAAE Group Show* in the Anna Leonowens Gallery in Halifax, Nova Scotia, from June 25 to July 6, 2024. This show included many interactive components because the emphasis was not on the product but on the engagement with materials, ideas, and each other.

Memory and Materiality: An Exploration of Sustainable Relationality Through Art-Based Research

Fayrouz Ibrahim and Meghan Macdonald



Fig. 1: Memory card game stack. Image: Fayrouz Ibrahim and Meghan Macdonald.

We, Fayrouz and Meghan, met as students in the Master of Arts in Art Education program at NSCAD University. Fayrouz grew up in Sohag in Upper Egypt and Meghan grew up in Parry Sound, Ontario, Canada. Separated in age by a decade and by life experiences on different continents, we began our work together with explorations to get to know one another. We visited each other's homes, shared snacks, and walked along the shore of the Atlantic Ocean. We talked about our families, stressors, sadnesses, joys, and hopes. Fayrouz comes to this work as an Islamic art historian and Meghan as a postsecondary support staff member.

Some of the connections made through these conversations were facilitated by sharing tangible objects, places, times, and feelings that we both related to. We began exploring our developing relationship through the lens of material culture, which Blandy and Bolin (2018) describe as "human-formed objects, spaces, and expressions that make up our world, and frequently includes the articles we construct and/or possess for the purpose of personal memory making and the sharing of individual or group identity" (p. 7). The objects that we each chose to bring when we moved to Nova Scotia and what we have acquired since highlighted to us the pivotal role that material objects and artifacts play in shaping identities and experiences, especially within the context of diverse cultural backgrounds. These materials serve as tangible links to the past, facilitating a deeper understanding of personal and collective identities.

When Meghan visited Fayrouz's home, we had several chats about different aspects of materiality in our lives from the past and how they still influence our present. As we enjoyed Turkish coffee, Fayrouz shared that she was drinking from her favorite coffee cup, a lovely gift from a friend in Egypt, which features Islamic designs. Later, Meghan wrote a letter to Fayrouz about a basket that her grandmother had brought back to Canada from a trip to Egypt. Without knowing at the time, by "working with objects that might 'elicit' a response … in the form of memories, emotions, and sensorial knowledges" (Harrison et al., 2024, p. 2), we were engaging in a kind of object elicitation that has a long history in visual studies and ethnographic research. The artful turn arrived when these tangible objects became touchstones for deeper connections in our collaborative a/r/tographic project: Memory Card Game. The project highlights the connections between people and their objects and the potential for these objects to be a conduit for shared understanding and relationality.



Fig. 2: Memory card game in the Anna Leonowens Gallery. Image: Ginger Yu.

By sharing personal narratives and reflections on material artifacts, we felt how these tangible items served as anchors for memory and identity. Storying these special objects strengthened our connection with each other, and we decided to make a card game that would reflect the playful ease of our gatherings and inspire more intercultural exchange. Using the game Memory as our model, we formulated a list of 36 prompts from which we could choose an object, place, or feeling of personal significance to illustrate. These prompts included: *absent, accomplishment, adorned, age, betrayal, closeness, consumed, enveloped, forget, forgiveness, found, friendship, from great distance, from within a pocket, growth, held, hidden, hurt, isolation, label, lost, mirror, mother, nourish, reflection, responsibility, saved, secure, self (Fayrouz/Meghan), soul, stitched together, summertime, transparent, travel, wrapped up*, and *youth*. Beginning with a deck of 72 cards, we wrote each prompt on two cards in both Arabic and English, so each card would have a matching pair. Then we each took 36 cards to begin making drawings that would correspond with each of those 36 prompts. Though we were working with the same prompts, the images we drew were different, as the subjects we chose had a personal significance. We kept our cards a secret until we met again to play Memory.

The next time we gathered at Meghan's dining room table, the 72 cards were shuffled and laid image-side down. We took turns turning over two cards at a time, with the goal of collecting a pair. Through this flipping action, the illustrations on the cards were slowly revealed and we explained the significance of our drawings. If one of us did not reveal a pair on their turn, the cards were flipped back over and then the next person would take their turn. When someone did find a pair, they would collect those cards, and the game continued. The illustrations on our cards created a "language of artifacts and objects" (Svabo, 2007, p. 1). They were points on the maps of our individual lived experiences by which we could navigate our growing relationship. Making this collaborative art-based project and working with the cards enabled the co-creation of what it means to dwell together in the place we live.



Fig. 3: Memory card game close-up. Image: Fayrouz Ibrahim and Meghan Macdonald.

The metaphorical aspect of our Memory game, where turning over cards represented the gradual revelation of personal stories, provides insights into how relationships develop over time. In the Memory game, this process is accelerated, while retaining the dynamics of building trust and intimacy through shared experiences and conversations. During the Memory game, we would catch glimpses of something

within the other that was previously unknown as we read the prompts and explained the story of our drawings as a reciprocal exchange of offerings. We completed the game knowing a little more about one another, having shared and listened to the thoughts, memories, and experiences that were housed within the other.

Our collaboration helped facilitate in us a stronger intercultural understanding and connection. We found that engaging in art-based practices not only enriched our individual creativity but also promoted sustainable relationality. By creating and sharing artwork that reflected personal and cultural narratives, we developed an appreciation for each other's backgrounds and fostered a bond. Coleman (2023) suggests that like "holding up a mirror to the past, present and future all at once. . . . In the mirror, you find an embodied knowing through artful inquiry, your becoming, reflecting back at you" (p. 139). As we created and played the game together, we came to a deeper understanding of ourselves as artists, researchers, and teachers. This project has practical implications for art education, suggesting new ways to incorporate material culture into curricula and to develop methodologies. By encouraging students to explore their identities and cultural heritage through artwork and significant objects, this approach promotes empathy and cross-cultural understanding. We have enjoyed this collaborative process and look forward to expanding the research further by bringing this activity into classroom settings. There, learners can create their own Memory cards and share personal stories, fostering meaningful connections through play and art.

Dialogic Aesthetic Engagements for Connectiveness

Melissa Boucher-Guilbert, Robin Jensen, and Rebecca Zynomirski

We, Melissa, Robin, and Rebecca, come to this a/r/tographic inquiry on the concept of sustainable relationality as art educators with experience in K–12 schools and community art education. As a part of the study group, we created in-person and digital messaging spaces of communal engagement as socially engaged art, which Helgura (2011) writes, "functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity" (p. 5). While we initially set out to create a project, the open-ended conditions of the study group enabled us to join an emergent and relational practice, guided by our shared interest in connection and resistance against outcomes-oriented approaches to learning that saturated our experiences of education. The resulting process was a profound entwinement with one another while not imposing rigid scrutiny or expectations on each other. We texted each other prompts, readings, quotes, and pictures and spent time in each other's homes alongside food, children, and pets. While resisting the goal-oriented structures of academia, we found ways of connection and relation that offered authentic nourishment and healing.



Fig. 4: Dialogic text exchange 1. Image: Melissa Boucher-Guilbert, Robin Jensen, and Rebecca Zynomirski.

When we embarked on this study group journey, we did not really know what we had agreed to do. We signed up because we were deeply interested in spending more time together and were curious about the concept of sustainable relationality. For the first time in our learning journeys, we were attached to neither academic evaluations nor pre-built syllabi. This freed us to ask questions about what we truly needed and wanted and, more importantly, prompted us to begin listing what we did not want, such as making a final product. Echoing Helguera (2011), our socially engaged art challenges the traditional focus of art, which centers around object-making and authorship. It is "specifically at odds with the capitalist market infrastructure of the art world: it does not sit well in the traditional collecting practices of contemporary art" (p. 4). Deliberately naming what we did not want to engage in demonstrated the importance of dialogue and reflection that allowed for creative and relational resistance against the dehumanizing expectations of instrumentalization.

The invitation to think about sustainable relationality was open-ended. We found ourselves making choices that nourished our different needs. In our journey together we have felt, at times, tensions between our own needs and the pressure to perform. We discussed the preconceived expectations we believe academia imposes on us, the capitalist definition of productivity, and what play might look like for us. As students and teachers, we discovered a shared interest in unlearning our understanding of "productivity" and "accomplishment" embedded in our educational systems. Our inquiry about sustainable relationality elicited a desire to holistically incorporate the academic concepts we encountered, merging them more intimately with our personal and multifaceted lives. The support of our families and the members of the art education community helped us move forward in a direction that felt

rich and right for us. In doing so, our individual ideas, questions, feelings, and experiences held us together in connectiveness (Marshall et al., 2010)—a kind of sustainable relationality.

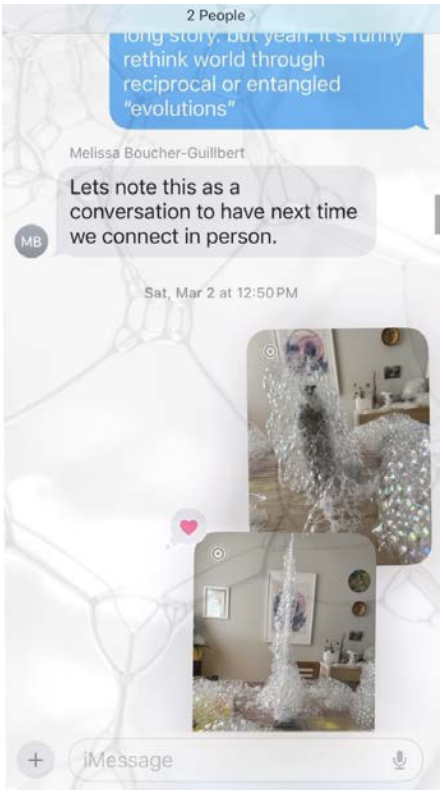


Fig. 5: Dialogic text exchange 2 featuring Robin Jensen's studio exploration of strong bubbles.
Image: Melissa Boucher-Guilbert, Robin Jensen, and Rebecca Zynomirski.

Finding Nourishment and Returning to Sustainability

While seeking an understanding of productivity that nourished us, we chose digital messaging as an accessible process that could enable interactions with each other at intervals that felt sustainable. Digital communication allowed us to nurture relationships through real-time response and correspondence along with our lives and each other, allowing knowledge to grow from within us. For over six months, we brought our research and educational interests into the group and shared them through text messages. Through the process, we realized that the accumulation in our digital messaging space formed a method of meaningful production that did not trigger the mental burden and barriers that came with the desire to perform.

Rather than setting objectives, we created a loose set of propositions to remain connected across our individual lives via the thread of our texting correspondence. Our discussion included education, play, self-care, community care, artmaking, feminine health, family, pets, and time. These texts became regular points of connection that stimulated our thinking and creativity, nourishing and energizing us. Occurring within our busy schedules that constrained and limited our physical and mental resources, the digital messaging format allowed for meaningful and sustainable connection. Giving ourselves a

permissive framework without defined expectations allowed us to create alternative spaces for self-exploration, relationality, and emergence. Eventually, the desire to meet in person brought us to spend time with one another.



Fig. 6: Dialogic text exchange 3. Image: Melissa Boucher-Guilbert, Robin Jensen, and Rebecca Zynomirski.

In our process of inquiry, we created an a/r/tographic community of practice that valued a sense of "critical softness" (Lee, 2024, p. 129). Lee (2024) suggests that critical softness entails a process of "respecting the boundaries of others as well as one's own as they are being discovered" (p. 129). Through an un-making of familiar institutional structures, we co-created a transformative community that emphasizes relationship, joy, agency, and sustainability. Such a community encourages us to think critically, work creatively, and appreciate the influence that each has on the other through active engagement across our similarities and differences. As Triggs and Sorensen (2024) suggest, "curriculum is also an act of creation, one that involves assembling contradictions and transforming these, in aesthetic relationships" (p. 116). For us, what emerged was a co-created curriculum for maintaining an ecosystem of complex connections. Becoming attuned to the "connectiveness" in this way through our creation of a community of practice with each other has required time to feel, care, think, speak, and act. This sense of time created the conditions necessary for us to inquire through our relationality, raising questions about productivity and its place in educational spaces: What is work? What happens when the learning

evidence lacks a product, a final paper, a final art project, and the learning is conducive to the process? What are our new responsibilities in this place where individual agency is nourished as part of a whole?

Conclusion: Transitions and Speculations

Wrapping up our presentation at the 2024 CSEA/SCÉA National Conference marked the end of our study group meetings. Afterward, we (Nicole and Ken) invited the group to consider contributing their works to a collaborative piece, which were shaped into this article. In reflecting on this experience, we contemplate with Bai (2014), who observes:

> Many teachers like to think that their teaching is directly related to their students' learning. I don't need to deny that sometimes, or perhaps often, this happens. That's a good thing. However, there are many things in life that are not learned by such linear causality. In fact, there is a sense that profound things in life are not learned that way at all. (p. 34)

In hearing the entangled yet beautiful transitions that the students went through, we have come to believe that an invisible education that is offered by walking alongside them holds tremendous possibility.

The strength of this a/r/tographic project remains in the community of practice that was fostered in and through art. The study group provided opportunities for the students to become acquainted with the art educational research communities and practices in which we are rooted. The permissive environment allowed the research process to get messy, and this offered breathing room for transitions to happen organically for the two groups. As for us, our positions shifted—from being held by our mentors in the past, to now holding students in anticipation of an unfolding educational journey. We witnessed how a commitment to cultivating an a/r/tographic community of practice can become sustaining and nourishing; we are proud of the students' work and the knowing that unfolded through this messy yet emergent process.

In our debriefs, we wondered how we can offer more permissive opportunities for students to come to embrace "an epistemology of the ineffable [that] explores knowledge and ways of knowing that escape and evade measurement, whilst still being formative and significant" (Quinn, 2023, p. 4). Such a worldview "attends to the values of moments: these moments of learning time spin and vibrate in ways that are difficult to name but easy to feel" (Quinn, 2023, p. 4). Ultimately, sustainable relationality poses questions about how we might linger in the joy of making and writing, research, as well as teaching and learning, and what connectedness, friendship, and entwinement have the potential to do. The deeply relational transitions undergone by our study group energized our commitments to lifting each other up and building each other's capacities so that we can continue to care for the ecosystems in which we are individually embedded to sustain larger webs of human flourishing.

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The Needed Messy Practice Ground for Curricular Un/Decolonizing and Indigenizing

Margaret Macintyre Latta, Bill Cohen, and Danielle Lamb

Abstract

In this five-year co-curricular-making project, participants individually and collectively engage in the messiness of ongoing meaning-making. Such curricular terrain acknowledges the particulars of individuals and place to provide the needed context as 100+ practicing and 140+ prospective educators seek un/decolonized and Indigenized co-curricular pathways. The documentation of educators' increasing cognizance of the relational interdependency of seeing with acting in classrooms reorients and furthers learners and learning. Modes of being with associated habits and practices emerge, revealing potential within the capacity of reciprocity for education's reparation and renewal, forming the necessary messy practice ground for long-term investment in curricular un/decolonization and Indigenization.

Introduction and Context

What does Indigenizing curriculum entail and how does such a stance position the roles of educators? What are the relationships to un/decolonizing[1] and how do these shape the lived terms of teaching and learning? What are the significances for educators and their learners? Are there short- and long-term consequences for extended communities including parents and the greater public? These are the kinds of questions drawing individual/collective attention over the first years of a five-year co-curricular-making project situated on the territory of the Syilx Okanagan Nation. And, indeed, educators are taking up the challenges and opportunities these questions present. In doing so, participants engage in partnership, collectively pursuing pathways for designing co-curricular-making experiences that are educatively responsive to the particulars of contexts.

To respond adequately, educators and their students participate in *co-curricular-making*: that is, navigating curricula not as a predetermined guide to follow, but rather as meaning-making paths that ask educators and their students to individually and collectively adapt, change, and build understandings. Such curricular terrain acknowledges that the particulars of place and individuals provide the needed context for un/decolonizing and Indigenizing co-curricular pathways. Participants include 100+ practicing and 140+ prospective educators with community partners from the local school district, Indigenous community members and organizations, plus community cultural institutions. Working alongside educators and partners, a team of researchers from the local university with representation from campuses across Canada seeks to reconceptualize education in ways that honor local Indigenous histories with pedagogies responsive to the relational connections to land, culture, and understandings of self in the world.

Un/Decolonizing is entailing scrutiny of pedagogical stances and beliefs that limit what educators see and respond to in classrooms, challenging values, assumptions, and beliefs. Indigenizing moves into meaningful, embodied responsive practices. But, in striving to embrace these tasks, many educators are confronted by not only the lack of Indigenous content knowledge but also a significant lack of practice in negotiating the curricular complexities of holding such curricular conversations with their students, colleagues, and extended communities. Attention to process from within process as the project unfolds is key to un/learning and insists on ongoing contact and communication with all involved. Modes of being and associated habits and practices emerge, revealing potential within the capacity of ongoing reciprocity for education's reparation and renewal, orienting toward individual/collective growth and well-being and away from predetermined control and competition.

The first year of partnered work with educators has made clear that such practice-engaged efforts are a needed catalyst for sustained embodiment of the needed habits and associated ways of being, entering confidently into the ensuing "messiness" of co-curricular-making. It is messiness that arises through attending on an ongoing basis to the strengths and particularities of students, the specifics of context and content, and the resources of place, orienting curricular enactment accordingly.

Over Years 2 and 3, participating educators across multiple disciplines and interests increasingly share their attempts at co-curricular-making, concretely negotiating responsive pedagogies, un/decolonizing and Indigenizing curricular enactment. In doing so, the intent is to draw attention toward the significances for teachers/teaching and learners/learning, gaining more visibility and tangibility, explicating and inspiring transformation and reconciliation given the particulars of their educative sites/situations. Varied sharing forums are intended to serve as a platform for continued dialogue as educators return to their classrooms and build on these efforts in their school and community sites, further mobilizing un/learning across all involved. Thus, the discourse structure of sharing forums is intentionally designed to promote continuous communication, foster collaborative participation and relational accountability, ensure substantive guidance and facilitation from (local First Nations) Elders/Knowledge Keepers, and mediate challenges and problems as they arise. Collectively, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, partners, and researchers are understanding this to be the task of un/decolonizing and Indigenizing curricular enactment—working alongside each other, learning with, from, and through each other, fostering community and trust-building. These forums act as an integral catalyst for unpacking and making visible how co-curricular-makings emerge, unfold, and hold significances. Most importantly, multiple opportunities to engage in shared sense-making experiences afforded within these forums invests further in mobilizing educators' un/decolonizing curricular habits and practices.

Increasingly, over Years 4 and 5, this project reveals reconciliation efforts integrally tied to particular relationships in particular places and concomitantly reveals reconciliation in action nationally. In particular, the focus on knowledge of local Indigenous laws, customs, protocols, and principles that define and inform rights and responsibilities to the land and culture provides access to the needed concrete co-curricular-making ways of being and practices for local educators and their students. This place-based approach holds potential for transforming the educational landscape not only locally, but also as an operative guiding approach more broadly.

Perspectives

The curricular opportunities to learn from Indigenous peoples' experiences and perspectives offer transformative understandings that embrace the primacy of investing in classrooms as sites for disrupting colonial relationships and promoting relationship-building with Indigenous peoples (Archibald, 2008; Donald, 2009; Hare, 2016; Lowan-Trudeau, 2014; Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). So, attention is turned to classrooms and, in particular, toward educators, as curricular enactment in classrooms is at the heart of what matters. Enfleshing kinships between Indigenous ways of knowing and being within curricular enactment assumes a pedagogical stance that is watchful—mindful of situation, relations, and action. Such mindfulness demands presence within the moment, taking in, receiving, and acting as situations arise. Thus, a found attunement orienting toward learners/learning's sake, deliberately seeking the well-being of others, characterizes the ongoing watchfulness. Worldwide, Indigenous connections to land, culture, and the relational self convey the need for such pedagogical attunement (Haig-Brown, 2010; Kanu, 2011; Styres, 2017). And, it is within seeking such attunement that the kinship of Indigenous commitments to interconnectedness, reciprocity, relationality, reverence, and respect emerge and offer the needed learning conditions, supports, and participation (Atleo, M. R., 2010; Atleo, E. R., 2011; Archibald, 2008; Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Cajete, 2015; Cohen, 2010; Cohen & Chambers, 2021; Four Arrows et al, 2010; Restoule et al, 2013).

As the multi-partner team—including Central Okanagan Public Schools, Okanagan Nation Alliance, IndigenEYEZ, the Kelowna Art Gallery and the Kelowna Museums Society—seeks to learn from the lands on which we live and teach, participants (mostly non-Indigenous educators) begin to unlearn their colonial patterns and re-learn what it means to live better in this place. New ways of being emerge through participation in Syilx Okanagan teachings, local ceremony, and *storyways pedagogy*—the Syilx term for learning which is provoked through traditional stories connected to places, resources, and practices within the Okanagan territory. Participants became familiar with *captikʷɬ*—a collection of teachings of the Syilx Okanagan used in various ways including governance, decision-making, and relationship-seeking—coming to better understand the Nsyilxcn term *tmixʷ* (all living things). This is described in the work of local Elder Jeannette Armstrong (2009) as a concept of life force involving "many strands which are continuously being bound with each other to form one strong thread coiling year after year always creating a living future" (p. 3). The life forces of tmixʷ include all that is living—water, land, plant, animal—human and non-human. These teachings guide and support modes of thinking as participants unlearn and relearn, coming face to face with interconnectedness, reciprocity, relationality, reverence, and respect as orienting learning and living very differently.

Unlearning colonized ways entails the conscious shifting of pedagogical stances away from those delimiting educator beliefs which prevent educators from seeing and responding to opportunities to orient curricular enactment as an adapting, changing, and building process alongside others. Drawing on the body of work by curricular theorists that have understood curriculum to be lived and experienced, reliant on attention to the given situational and relational ground of sense-making (Aoki, 1991; Pinar 2011), co-curricular-making values relational complexities. The relationality is understood as

forming the unique particulars within all learning encounters that ground and shape the un/learning ventures ahead. Making visible these given relational particulars of students, context, and subject matter entrusts the curricular situation and ensuing interactions to hold worthwhile learning directions. It is the continual trust within the unfolding process of meaning-making that opens room for students'/teachers'/communities' narratives of experience, curiosities, and suggestions, comprising the messy materials of co-curricular-making. Thus, the materials of co-curricular-making live within the experiences of students, teacher, subject matter, and the relationships experienced within context. Recognizing these given materials and finding ways to build relationships connecting students, teacher, subject matter, and context is the un/learning terrain of co-curricular-making. Such curricular enactment comes into being through a manifesting, provoking, and transforming movement. Co-curricular-making is not applied or imposed, but rather, entails a knowing-in-action that can never be fully anticipated.

Mode of Inquiry: Reciprocity's Potential for Reorienting Education

Educators' narratives of curricular enactment, field notes across project experiences, focus group and individual conversations, and artifacts gathered throughout the project from the research team, partners, and educators serve as the primary data sources. Reflexive analysis shapes the scrutiny of these, guided by the literature from the research that frames this study—curricular embodiment and enactment, decolonizing, Indigenizing, culturally responsive pedagogy, and inquiry. The sense-making that takes place as our reflexive process unfolds in conversation with each other and through our engagement offers additional insights for further enfleshing and strengthening understandings. Together we confront, negotiate, articulate, and re-consider these evolving understandings. Drawing across this evolving data set throughout, researcher flexibility and responsiveness are valued, offering methodological reflexivity and openness. Researchers' attention is continually drawn to key methodological features, including the following:

1) A recursive relationship between data collection and analysis with reflexivity operating both inductively and deductively throughout, making visible the learning significances

2) Remaining open to the learning experiences throughout the project with ongoing contact and communication

3) Regular opportunities to examine the evolving data as a research team and alongside all participants, with tentative analyses furthering efforts and guiding the process

Working alongside each other, the authors—a director of a school of education and project researcher, an Indigenous educator and scholar, and the project manager—attend to the participating educators' accounts of co-curricular-making, experienced as concomitantly entailing active searching alongside an intensely receptive activity. It is this receiving and acting interchange that enfleshes un/decolonization in action, becoming mediums for educators (and in turn, students) to continually situate themselves and their developing identities in relation to the given contexts. These mediums shape the data documentation that arises from our multi-year project 1) exploring a healthy diversity of cultures and

ecosystems, a pedagogy and praxis of dynamic balance between human lifeways and natural world ecologies; 2) exploring differences and diversities, appreciating the gifts from the water, earth, plant and animal life forces; and 3) exploring connections among others and to place, positioning all involved more responsibly to each other and the future.

The intent is for educators to gain enlarged and deeper understandings of curricular un/decolonizing and Indigenizing on an ongoing basis. It is the reflexive/receptive character within educators' seeing and acting that holds the messy makings of knowledge that orient the direction of thinking away from being imposed to an agency coming from within the unfolding inquiry of engaged students and teachers. And, it is a reflexive receptivity that is not instrumental or applied, but must be practiced within the interplay of given conditions. Elucidating this curricular terrain is critical to further seeing and acting for all participants. Project experiences are deliberately designed to recursively visit and re-visit this terrain as we encourage individual and collective dialogical multi-voiced curricular conversations in classrooms, unmask diversities, concretely practice the creation of fluid, purposeful learning, negotiate difficult knowledge, and recover trust, pleasure, and pride within learning engagement. In doing so, interrelated modes of being are fostered, gaining a "practiced receptivity" (Davey, 2006) with curricular enactment's inherent relationality, generativity, need of other(s), temporal/spatial agency and interdependency with imagination (Macintyre Latta, 2013). Documenting and explicating accounts/moments in which educators become aware of this capacity of reciprocity (and increasingly attuned to it), repairing and renewing what educators see and concomitantly act upon, forms the ongoing search. One such representative account from an educator's classroom over many weeks vivifies such a reflexive interchange, as presented in the next section.

Representative Account: Receiving and Acting, Co-Curricular-Making

An (un)learning experience in a Grade 6 classroom over extended weeks takes shape through selected songs and associated interpretive dance, drama, music, and poetry, as points of entry into the many stories comprising Canadian history. "Drill Ye Tarriers" is a work song referring to the construction of the railroads in the mid to late 19th century. The French word for a drill is *tarière*, and the tarriers identified the Irish workers drilling holes in rock to blast out railroad tunnels. It is a song that tells a Eurocentric tale of settler appropriation of the land, and it is intended to be sung with an upbeat rhythm infused with pride and victory, giving expression to a formidable heroic tale. Students are not simply memorizing the words of the song and rehearsing the melody, though. The context of the song starts to get unpacked, as students and educators seek connections across multiple disciplines.

One activity involves guided art instruction to support students in drawing a pencil sketch of a stanza from the song. Black and white archival photographs of the railway construction serve as fodder for generating ideas. Students are tasked with recreating lines of the song, organizing into groups of their choosing, and determining ideas or images to illustrate with a pencil sketch. A visiting animation artist enables students' efforts by providing some large-group instruction regarding the art of illustration. As the visiting animator seeks input from students, he draws the characters from the song "Drill Ye Tarriers" on the board. A focused energy permeates the room as the students mimic the think/sketch aloud with their

bodies. They puff up their chests as the animation artist describes the broad chest of Pat McGann, the foreman, and they squint their eyes as he shows them how different line angles show different emotions. Students are laughing and their imaginations are taking hold. One student decides that the "foreman [being drawn on the board] is so grumpy because he cannot grow a good beard." As the song comes to life, students begin asking questions such as, "What would the drills looks like?" The teacher searches for responses to the students' questions as the conversation about the song unfolds. The teacher posts images of the tools, the value of a dollar in that historical time period, and the extent of the railway building underway at the time.

It becomes clear that students have been singing "Drill Ye Terriers" for some time, and there are those who like the song while others do not. Many have never visualized the song and decide they like it better now that they are giving it some deliberate thought. During the drawing process one group is sketching directly on the photocopies of the archival pictures. Their sketches depict injuries, with associated markings all over the pictures. They fear they are in trouble, and so they cover up their play with the images. But, instead, the group is encouraged to engage the ideas forming in their markings. A growing silence stills the room as more and more group conversations tentatively consider the reality of the tarrier deaths and start naming the consequences from varied perspectives (see cross-section of student drawings-in-the-making below).

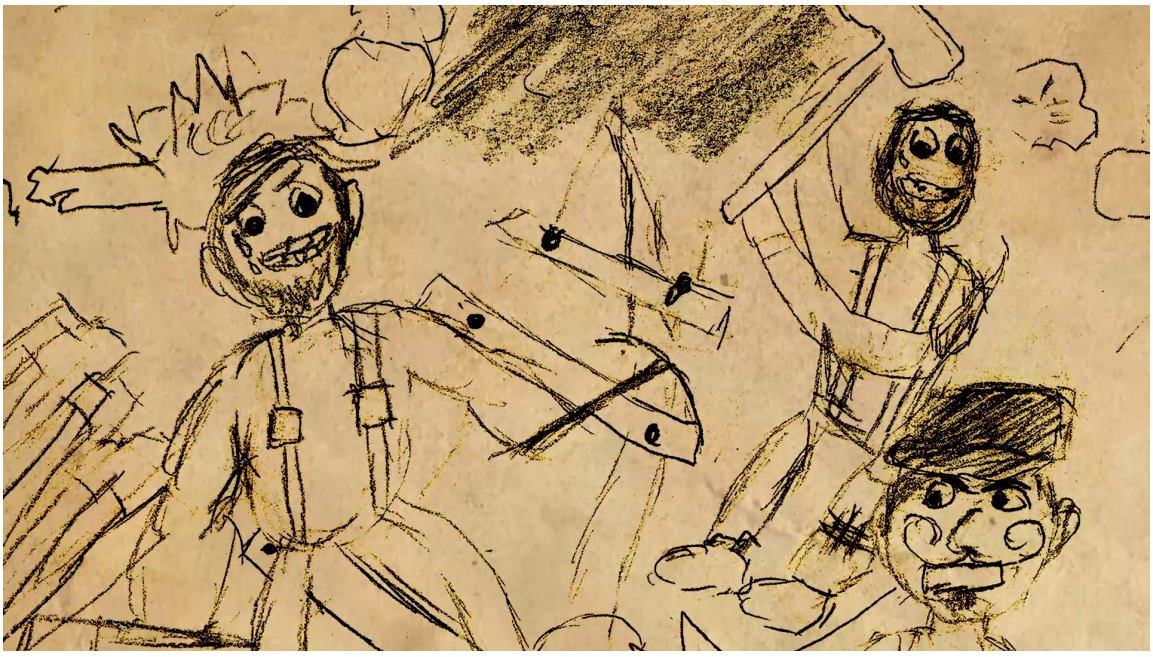


Fig. 1: Student drawing in the making



Fig. 2: Student drawing in the making



Fig. 3: Student drawing in the making

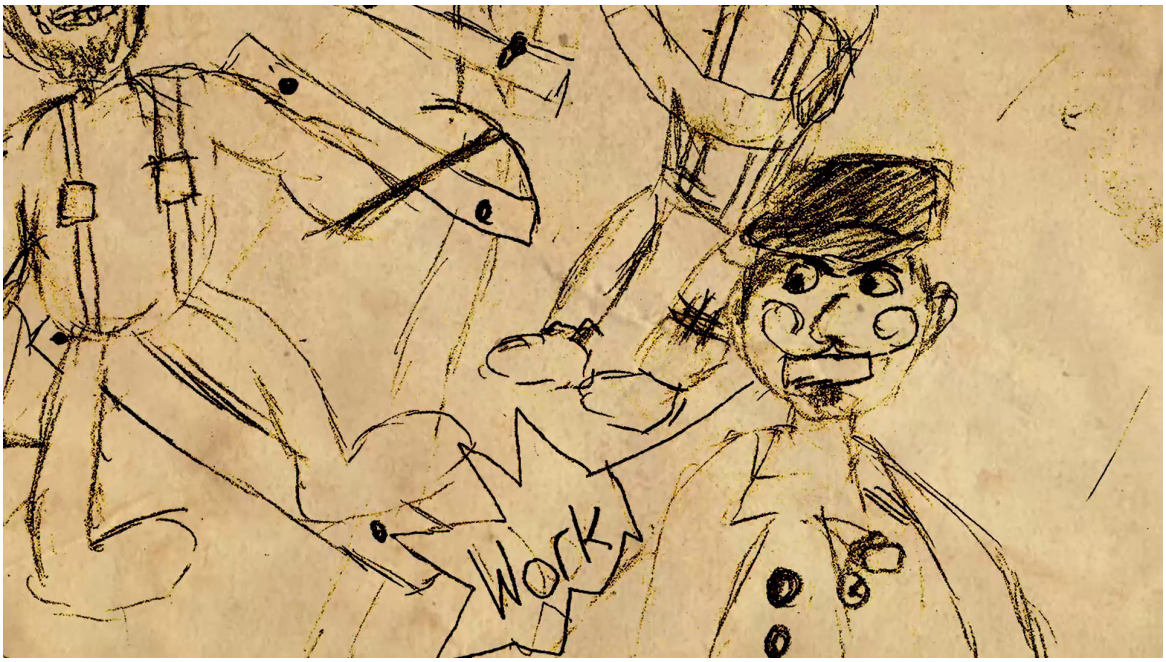


Fig. 4: Student drawing in the making



Fig. 5: Student drawing in the making

The time taken to think about the words and context for the song raises questions, issues, and reflections that complicate everyone's interpretations throughout the week. And, there are varying levels of comfort with these complications and the consequences, shaping individual and collective thinking. It is clear that students are entering into an enlarged and deepening relationship with the subject matter. The

receptive interplay engages students in situating their personal understandings alongside attending to others' understandings. The increased visibility and tangibility of these understandings informs the evolving account.

As the knowledge-building evolves further, it opens into ethical considerations. The assumed underlying notion of the railway workers as a "formidable tale" is scrutinized: Why the heroic assumption? Why were the men in Canada in the first place? Who were these men? Why was death a reality for many? Why was the railway being built? What and who was it disrupting, and what were lived consequences from multiple perspectives? One student explicates how the injustices identified make the song difficult to sing without thinking about all of these matters. Several other students agree, reflecting on how the song seems "light and fun" and yet it is "super serious."

The terrain of such inquiry-guided curricular conversations is necessarily contingent, but it is clear that individual and collective understandings of the song expanded and, in some cases, totally changed. Acceptance of this moving terrain as the sustenance for inquiry allows for the messiness to surface the unfamiliar, allowing for vulnerability, allowing for partial ideas, allowing for emotions, and allowing for personal experience, to critically and creatively locate self within this ongoing movement of thinking. It is only through traversing this moving terrain that learning's strength and vitality will take shape and sustain the individual/collective movement. Seeking direction from within the movement continually calls understandings into question, articulating tentative thinking, and re-configuring self in relation to others. The individual/collective empowerment gained assumes an attitude Dewey (1916) terms "intellectual hospitality" (p. 175), actively welcoming what each learner brings, prompting further growth. Messiness is increasingly accepted as the necessary contingent terrain of sense-making.

In a follow-up activity, the teacher recounts how "Drill Ye Tarriers" portrays five men working on 700-pound iron rail, ten men to a pair of rails. Thirty seconds is allowed for each pair of rails, two rail lengths every minute, three blows to each spike, and ten spikes to the rail, which students translate to 400 rails, 4,000 spikes, and 12,000 hammer blows for a single mile of track. The realities of the immense labor involved are increasingly embodied by a group of sixth-grade students that initially resisted all associations with the un/learning experience.

The opportunity to work with a hip hop dancer to convey the physical toil of the tarriers instilled connections that sustained as they proudly show their dance over and over again. The act of re-creation here evidences critical and creative thinking as students enthusiastically work with the dance teacher to create meaning together, and concomitantly, enlarged understandings of self. The dance movements continually position otherness as an operative construct to negotiate. It is the tarriers that calls their efforts critically into question. It is the tarriers that asks them to see/feel/hear/touch within specific moments. It is the tarriers that incites turns toward self-understandings. The dance form takes life with knowing experienced as in need of other(s) and inseparable from response/action. Pinar (2011) describes such movement as the experience of arts "pull(ing) us into the world as it refracts the world through our subjectivity; the educational undertaking involves inhabiting the middle while grounded in, attentive to, and engaged with both self and society" (p. 100). "Drill Ye Tarriers" becomes such middle ground for this

pulling and refracting movement, with all involved remaking selves. It is within this movement that the individual/collective pulls and refractions reflect critical and creative thinking's potential. It is the pulls and refractions that provoke individual/collective considerations of the impacts of the railway on First Nations families, beliefs, and daily life, the devastating introduction of small pox, and the changes experienced in First Nations communities that resulted from residential schools separating children from their families, intermarriage with settlers, changes in living spaces, changing economies, and changes in diet. The short- and long-term consequences of these impacts shape the ensuing messiness of critical and creative thinking, getting thicker, complicating conversations ahead, and, yet, bursting with un/learning potential.

(Educator/Researcher reflective conversation, October 2024)

Discussion

Entering into and sustaining complicated curricular conversations across all involved best characterizes the five-year research project. The primacy of such conversations being deeply connected to place acknowledges that this is highly localized, culturally specific work. Conversation is understood as entering into and engaging with context and all involved. It is both a way of thinking and also a type of relationship with surroundings—perpetually emergent—increasingly multiplex, as more perspectives are taken and more relationships fostered. Over the years, educators and local community partners, alongside the research team, enter into shared learning, inciting conversations that insist on openness and listening—remaining faithful to the messy intricacies and intensities of the experiences, seeking responsive ways that are fitting given the particulars of individuals and situations. A confidence in process is required, denoting not conscious trust in the efficacy of one's powers but rather faith in the possibilities within the relational situation. Key interrelated features of the conversations underway and developing draw attention to the primacy of complicated conversations understood as embodying the following characteristics:

> **Discursive in nature:** The dialogues entered into suggest links to individual/collective sense-making. The responsibility of educators and students to enter, nurture, and sustain this moving terrain foregrounds expectations to bring expertise, narratives of experience, and resources into collective conversation to inform the conduct and outcomes of inquiry on an ongoing basis. An individual/collective movement of thinking ensues. This movement always turns sense-making back toward the self, assuming awareness of personal complicity as integral within the parts-to-whole of sense-making.
>
> **Inquiry guided**: Interaction, debate, and deliberation result from foregrounding relational complexities, thus valuing co-constructing knowledge, respecting distinct forms of expertise, and fostering trusting relationships and action-oriented practices, manifesting an organizing and reorganizing venture that positions all involved to embrace the (un)learning journey-in-the-making.

Narrative in form: Varied traditions, perspectives, and approaches are revisited and become catalysts for enlarging and deepening thinking. Individual and collective narratives of experience reflect documentations of learning. These stories from individual classrooms, professional inquiry groups, and community involvement and supports shape the larger story that comprises the tasks of reconciliation.

Inherently and necessarily relational and collaborative: Bringing students, educators, and community members together into ongoing conversations from across disciplines and interests invests in the elemental and formative nature of knowledge as the needed groundwork toward reconciling pedagogies.

As noted above, these interrelated key features of complicated curricular conversations need to be embodied in action. Such investment in process is integral and a commonly held Indigenous ethic worldwide (McKinley & Tuhiwai Smith, 2019). Documenting and analyzing the lived individual/collective curricular, programmatic, contextual, and ethical consequences for students, educators, and communities, articulating the significances and implications for learners and learning, repairs and renews the nature and roles of education within the project over the five years. This storying and re-storying conversation allows for an attentive and inclusive gaze, responsiveness to multiple voices and perspectives, seeking and articulating intersections that are continually woven into sense-making, rather than being controlled by predetermined ways. Making these intersections as visible as possible to further the conversation insists on reciprocal interdependency with ongoing contact and communication across all project participants. Educators (and, in turn, students) come to value these spaces found between self and other(s). Pulling and refracting demands are experienced. The back-and-forth movement between self and the larger context opens a space where understandings are reached. This space is increasingly valued as catalytic, and *in-between* is the term that arises. Navigating in-between entails surrendering to process as being reciprocal, grounded in the life world of self–other relations, and requiring dwelling in situations to become conversant.

The richness of this in-between space of reciprocity for learning is evident in the representative account of the tarriers, with time taken to think about the words and context for the song, eliciting questions, issues, and reflections that complicate everyone's interpretations. As they acknowledge that there are varying levels of comfort with these complications, participants are increasingly cognizant that these relational complexities suggest purpose, shaped both individually and collectively by all involved. It is therefore through these reorganizing and reconstructing complexities that curriculum is experienced as a continuous movement of thinking. Educators encounter how critical and creative curricular negotiation incite students to enter into relationship with subject matter. The receptive interplay of critical and creative thinking engages students in situating their personal understandings alongside attending to others' understandings. The articulation and accentuation of these understandings informs the evolving conversation. An educator explains:

> I think it is so good for teachers to tread into these conversations. They begin to trust themselves and trust their students. They discover a vulnerable ground that must be entrusted. We need these conversations to gain practice. I am already taking more pauses today in my teaching. Making spaces to mine the thoughts and wonderings, connections and dreams of those I am teaching. Funny how we need reminders of such important things… (Personal communication, October 2024)

Another educator explains:

> I was awake for 2 hours last night ... wondering how a learning experience will all go, wondering how I can take part, how I can make sure to keep myself in this experience. This happens to me when I am keeping a big vision in place but can't envision all the moving parts. I have to practice long, slow deep breathing as the experience unfolds. I also look for the things for which I am grateful in this process. I know I will lose sleep as I meet challenges. In this profession, it is easier to just close our doors and teach as we always have. Opening them is symbolic of opening ourselves to this invitation to renew, reinvigorate, and co-create. (Personal communication, October 2024)

Educators, students, and researchers begin to story and re-story their learning experiences as ongoing dialogue. The conversational makings do not ever disappear; they are an ongoing given that must be embraced. It is the discourse entered into and generated that keeps forming the intents of the learning experiences. There is always room to engage and ponder, furthering the conversation with the community at large. It is individual and collective attention to the following up and linking movement, that such knowledge-building encounters and navigates. The inquiry-guided curricular enactment that transpires embraces temporality and growth as interrelated features that instill an order that is dynamic. In other words, order or direction is found within the time taken to experience the knowledge-building movement itself.

Such order-finding entails receptive practice by all involved, as it is a counter experience to the more typically predetermined order or direction set entirely in advance. Davey (2006) terms this human tendency to plan for what is to happen, the "will to method," holding colonizing tendencies that are reductionary (p. 21). Mapping out a preconceived order closes off differences found through ongoing attention to others, which Davey describes as an "impervious insensitivity to other voices" reducing "the complex variety of human experience to its own terms" (p. 21). Complicated curricular conversations assume the risks and opportunities of differences as critically and creatively productive for all learning.

It is key that participants' thinking is tangibly present in the narratives that are generated. It is thinking that can be retraced as educators and students discuss their mediations as reciprocal, cumulative, and continuously instrumental to each other. The experience that is evolving, weaving "Drill Ye Tarriers" into a larger tale re-storying Canada's history, takes shape through the discourse that participants enter into, suggesting inquiry-guided directions to pursue, relational connections, and narrative forms. The movement fostered is not a "piecing together … of disconnected experiences, but rather … the expansion of a given experience through suggestion, into a larger and richer whole" (Dewey, 1934, p. 197).

Conclusions

As a whole, this partnership project elicits and accentuates capacities for building educators' and students' confidence to keep investing in co-curricular-making as a medium for learning, fostering ongoing communication, awareness, and responsibility. In doing so, it reorients how all involved come to understand education, reframed toward a "more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute," holding long-term significances (Dewey, 1939). One striking significance that draws our attention is the way the project houses textured, complex, and conflictual accounts of Canadian history that resist assimilations, denials, and set conclusions. Rather, it engages all involved in storying and re-storying self in relation to the world attending to complications and tensions as productive. It is such productive movement through reciprocal attention to the creation of meaning, concomitantly critiquing its ongoing creation, that is revealed to be deeply educative. We see and feel it fostering inspirited curriculum, creating meaning, creating self, breathing life into learning, and moving into new, enlarged, and deeper learning.

It is this movement that the "Drill Ye Tarriers" learning experience invites and fosters. Educators and students become curious and invest in making sense of their world, drawing out ideas and images from the song, alongside other art forms shaping the learning experience. Sketching the stories through their own lens demands increasingly complicated engagement by all involved. Meaningful inquiry begins as educators and students ask for more detail and explanation of the song. As they draw, students engage dialogically with the text of the song itself, their peers, and their teachers. It is a relational stance where all involved relate their learning back to themselves and, in doing so, realize what is absent, unknown, and to be questioned, finding potential in these realizations. Such potential frees individual/collective learning away from right and wrong toward growth and well-being. The needed curricular vision and enactment is educators' responsibility. The learning experience underway provides a medium to reveal and examine how the critical and creative thinking en-route elicits and accentuates the individual (the whole being) in relation to the world (the all-inclusive whole).

For educators and their students, ongoing practice with complicated conversations facilitating critical and creative thinking as learning companions is key to instill the embodied curricular habits and modes of being integral within co-curricular-making. It is concrete practice with the associated habits and modes that instills faith in the messiness to be embraced in co-curricular-making. These habits and modes embody much potential as a powerful medium for reconceptualizing education as individual/collective growth and well-being; they also contribute to flourishing communities and strengthen education's roles concerning identity formation within all institutions, society, and beyond. The primary importance of growing a language for educators and their students to articulate and embody the ongoing needed reciprocity between seeing and acting, orienting their practices accordingly, addresses a significant knowledge gap, attending to educators' professional knowledge, confidence and capacities toward un/decolonizing and Indigenizing curricular enactment. The development of this lived language, articulating what educators (and their students) are orienting their practices toward, away from, and why, manifests as interdependent with acceptance of the messy curricular terrain that unfolds as being productive for all learners/learning:

- Making visible and tangible individual curricular efforts to enable everyone's understandings of the learner/learning significances
- Accessing curricular examples, as generative for others and for the greater community
- Sharing in safe, small professional groups the complexities and challenges encountered alongside the significances
- Creating the needed curricular spaces and habits that foster and support complicated curricular conversations
- Explicating the needed attention to context and process, valuing the search
- Building trusting relationships across local Indigenous communities with educators, heightening learning's relevance alongside capacities to see global connections
- Mobilizing inter/intra disciplinary "pathways" (Styres, 2017) for decolonizing education, engaging practitioners with researchers, and holding much promise for productively impacting what constitutes education—locally, nationally, and internationally
- Leveraging the ways university–school–community partnerships might collaborate to live better in the world with others toward fostering interdependent, caring relationships between humans and the natural world, and between diverse individuals and communities

Such practice ground empowers educators and their students, holding much hope for dismantling colonial patterns and injustice in school and community settings, and investing in developing more just societies. Through co-curricular-making, educators increasingly find kinships with long-held beliefs and modes of being embodied within Indigenous wisdom traditions, instilling the hope and sustenance that the world needs to think and act together.

Notes

1. The project brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators working alongside each other. Drawing on the research of Tuck & Yang (2012), decolonization is understood as necessarily including land repatriation. Rodriguez (2020) builds on this notion and asserts that decolonization is for Indigenous people only. Non-Indigenous educators/settlers are urged to consider using the term "uncolonizing" when referring to processes of detaching and disconnecting from colonial vestiges.

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Islamophobia and Pedagogical Complexities: Developing Inclusive Learning Spaces

Abdullah Najjar and Anila Asghar

Abstract

Islamophobia presents complex challenges in Western societies, leading to racial discrimination and violence against Muslims. This paper explores the interconnectedness and interactions between racism and Islamophobia, as Islamophobia is conceptualized as a form of racism in the literature. Specifically, it explicates racism and its different manifestations. It also deals with the intricate complexities of racism and Islamophobia in school settings and presents effective pedagogical approaches that teachers can incorporate into their curricula to develop students' social and political awareness through critical media literacy while fostering positive relationships among them based on mutual respect and appreciation of their cultures.

Introduction

Islamophobia has risen dramatically in the West since the 9/11 terrorist attack upon the US (Al Atom, 2014; Housee, 2012; Mahrouse, 2010). Unfortunately, police-reported hate crimes against Muslims in Canada increased by 151% between 2020 and 2023 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Islamophobia has negatively impacted the lives of Muslim communities in the West. It has become a critical issue in the West with the intensifying attacks against Muslims, such as the Chapel Hill Shooting in the US in 2015, the Finsbury Park van attack in the UK in 2017, the Quebec Mosque Shooting in 2017, and the Afzal Family massacre in Ontario in 2021. In North American schools, Muslim students reported experiencing marginalization, discrimination, and Islamophobia (Bakali, 2016; Halabi, 2021; Hossain, 2017).

Scholars argue that Islamophobia is a form of racism, as it involves "the co-constitution of race and religion" (Ahmed, 2018, p. 281; Love, 2017). As such, Islamophobia is conceptualized as a form of "structural racism" where Muslims are "othered" based on the differences in their religion, race, ethnicity, culture, and physical traits (Abbas, 2019, p. 58; Bravo López, 2011; Lauwers, 2019). Islamophobia reflects the complexities of human relationships that affect Muslim communities in Western communities in myriad ways.

The growing diversity in Western societies, resulting from various waves of immigration over the last century, has increased racial, ethnic, and religious diversity in schools (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). The complex relationships arising from this heterogeneity within educational settings complicate the lives of students. Given the rise in Islamophobia in these societies, Muslim students are particularly impacted negatively. Unpacking the complexities related to racism and Islamophobia in schools is thus crucial for improving current educational approaches to integrate Muslim students as valuable and productive

members of their learning communities. This article tackles this "messiness" by examining the constructs of racism and Islamophobia while proposing various pedagogical approaches to addressing these issues in schools.

Our study had the following objectives:

1) to understand racism and explore its various conceptual forms
2) to explain Islamophobia and its various forms
3) to analyze anti-racism education and its characteristics, and examine how it informs anti-Islamophobia education
4) to propose pedagogical approaches that can be effectively used to challenge Islamophobia

In this paper, we first discuss the intricacies of racism and its various forms. Next, we explain the concept of Islamophobia and its different manifestations in the West. Then, we elaborate on anti-racism education and present different pedagogical approaches to addressing racism and Islamophobia in classrooms.

Methodology

We reviewed the relevant literature by searching for literature on racism and different forms of racism. We used databases available in the McGill University library, such as ProQuest, ERIC, EBSCO, DOAJ, Taylor & Francis, WorldCat, CRKN, Springer, and Google Scholar. We used the following key search terms individually and in different combinations: racism; systemic racism; structural racism; conscious, unconscious, and dysconscious racism; colorblind racism; Islamophobia; anti-racism education; anti-racism pedagogy; anti-Islamophobia education; anti-Islamophobia pedagogy; challenging racism; and challenging Islamophobia. A large number of articles, books, and book chapters came up during our initial search using these key terms. We narrowed our search to select 61 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. The selection criteria included the themes that were relevant to the objectives of this article (23 about racism, 14 about Islamophobia and Islamophobia as a form of racism, and 24 about pedagogical approaches).

Qualitative content analysis strategies were employed to analyze and synthesize the literature. Specifically, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify the overarching themes in this paper. During the analysis process, the salient concepts in these articles were identified in relation to the objectives of this literature analysis. For example, the conceptual foundations of racism and Islamophobia, and their various forms, were explored, as well as various pedagogical approaches offered in the literature to address these issues in the context of secondary education. Similar concepts were grouped into broader themes discussed in this paper. Furthermore, key arguments emerging from the selected articles, relevant to the objectives of this paper, were analyzed and synthesized. The conceptual framework of this paper was informed by the first author's experience of teaching against Islamophobia in his English as a Second Language class and the second author's scholarly research about Islamophobia.

What is Racism?

Although physical differences do not qualify distinctions into biological races, the social construct of race remains prevalent in human societies, with racism serving as a means of discrimination, belying scientific evidence against the concept of race (NHGRI, 2018; Sussman, 2014). Racism is a systemic (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; 2021), institutional (Faucher, 2017), and structural ideology (Erick, 2022; Faucher, 2017) that consciously, unconsciously (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Faucher, 2017), and dysconsciously (King, 2015) targets racial, cultural, religious, and/or gender identities (Grosfoguel, 2016; Moran, 2023) to produce hierarchies that favor certain groups and discriminate against other groups (DiAngelo, 2016; Faucher, 2017). Racism remains a significant challenge to the principles of equity and equality, which are foundational to Western democratic values. It is an ideology rooted in negative and inherited beliefs about other racial and/or ethnic groups (Banton, 2018; Faucher, 2017). Racial practices are systemically entrenched in individual and societal practices that challenge any attempt to create an inclusive society.

Racism has three dimensions: individual, societal, and global. Individual racism is represented by individuals' racial practices against "Others" that are based on inherited hate, hostility, and/or negative stereotypes about another individual who is different from the in-group (Faucher, 2017; Urquidez, 2020). Societal practices are a manifestation of systemic racism that targets other racial, cultural, religious, and/or gender groups through the implicit and explicit practices and policies guaranteeing the superiority of one group and the inferiority and exclusion of other groups. In general, racism is the ideological practices that are based on negative inherited stereotypes to target others and produce hierarchies within society (Lynch et al., 2017; Moran, 2023). The global aspect of racism can be seen in colonialism, which includes various racial aspects (Go, 2004). This is clarified in Said's (1994) concept of *Orientalism*, which refers to the Western perception of the East. In contrast to the West, which Said refers to as "the Occident," Said's Others represent uncivilized, inferior, exotic, unknowledgeable, and irrational people who need the Occident to lead and govern them. This notion demonstrates the alleged racial superiority of the Occident or Europeanness over Orientals or non-Europeans and legitimizes the Europeans' colonization of Others to civilize them. Thus, colonizers justify their actions, which involve brutal enslavement, re-education, controlling their resources, and managing the production of knowledge to avoid any potential resistance (Said, 1994).

Racism is usually conceptualized from a white/nonwhite perspective, which is mainly based on a Western point of view (Duany, 2016; Pressgrove, 2013). However, it is crucial to extend the concept of racism to include other binaries based on religions, ethnicities, etc. and not limit it solely to the white/nonwhite binary to understand various manifestations of racial discrimination. Developing our thinking about various forms and factors contributing to racism will result in broadening our understanding to consider factors beyond race alone. As such, racism is an ideology that not only pertains to race but also encompasses other forms of exclusion, leading to hierarchies, inequality, and inferiority. It can take many forms, which are discussed in the next section.

Different Forms of Racism

Racism manifests through conscious, unconscious, and dysconscious policies and practices that perpetuate inequality, creating hierarchies that privilege certain groups over others based on class, race, and culture (DiAngelo, 2016; Faucher, 2017). Faucher (2017) differentiates between four forms of racism: "classic" (p. 408), "aversive" (p. 410), "colour blindness" (p. 409), and "structural" (p. 410) racism. Classic racism refers to overt, explicit, conscious forms of racial discrimination justified through pseudoscientific theories that were common in the 19th to the early 20th century. There are two types of classic racism: "closet" and "tolerant" (Faucher, 2017, p. 408; Ikuenobe, 2011, p. 171). Closet racism means harboring racist feelings privately without openly expressing them due to strong external motivations, such as strict anti-racism policies. On the other hand, tolerant racism means holding racist beliefs and occasionally expressing them while coexisting with other racialized groups because these groups are perceived as not having a considerable impact on society. Furthermore, classic racism was employed as a tool to justify colonization, where European powers occupied and exploited non-European territories, considering the people there as the "Others" who were inferior, uncivilized, and opposite to the civilized Western people (Said, 1994).

Aversive racism refers to hidden racial practices against other racial groups (Atkin, 2014, p. 117; Faucher, 2017). It is divided into two subcategories: "less-than-conscious racism" and "unconscious racism" (Faucher, 2017, p. 409). The less-than-conscious racism involves people who might be unaware of their racial practices or have "false consciousness" (p. 410) and advocate for a post-racial era. However, their racial practices become visible when their social status is threatened or challenged (Faucher, 2017). Furthermore, they often do not perceive their racial practices as racism, which leads to more discriminatory practices. On the other hand, unconscious racism is based on inherited and unconscious beliefs individuals may have and unconsciously influence them to stimulate racial prejudice without any intention to hurt other people (Faucher, 2017). Also, unconscious racism is influenced by the culture that prefers one group of people over other groups, which is influenced by stereotypes and specific misconceptions about other racial groups. Furthermore, any complaint about racism is frequently reframed as an act of racism itself, placing the responsibility on minorities for its existence. Understanding aversive racism is crucial to examining systemic racism and analyzing embedded racial practices within society against various ethnic, gender, and religious communities.

Color-blind racism has emerged as a prevailing racial ideology and a set of practices that maintain racial inequalities against people of color and other racial minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Faucher, 2017; Moran, 2023). It perpetuates these inequalities by leaving such practices unchallenged under the false pretext of blaming victims for their circumstances (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Furthermore, Whites, under the pretext of color-blind policies, deny the existence of systemic racism. For them, the victims should work harder to overcome their difficult situations. It argues that white individuals interact with other people based on their individual traits and skills rather than on a racial basis to maintain prevalent racial policies and rules. Color-blind racism provides room for individuals to move from explicitly expressing their racial comments and practices to performing their racial practices implicitly. Therefore, color blindness

rationalizes inequality and perpetuates racial practices (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). As such, it becomes a tool to contextualize systemic and institutional racism through hidden, unconscious, and structured practices within institutions (Moran, 2023; Doane, 2017). Also, color blindness frames diversity as a focus on individual differences rather than examining the broader context of this diversity, which does not challenge systemic/institutional racial practices (Doane, 2006, 2017).

Systemic racism refers to the entrenched discrimination that occurs within the policies, practices, and cultural norms of institutions and societal structures, which perpetuate racial inequalities and discrimination against certain racial groups (Banaji et al., 2021; Faucher, 2017). It manifests through unequal access to resources, opportunities, and services based on racial profiling, affecting various aspects of an individual's life. In other words, the system is designed to formulate policies that favor one group of people and marginalize others. This impacts the entire societal structure and influences individuals' behaviors and racial perceptions, both consciously and unconsciously. Furthermore, systemic racism is based on the combination of institutional, societal, and individual practices that together permeate inequality and racial hierarchy within the society (Banaji et al., 2021). Also, systemic racism should not be attributed to individual practices, as this overlooks the other factors that contribute to creating a discriminatory system. Additionally, it is crucial to understand the smaller practices of systemic racism to comprehend the broader concept. In other words, individual racial practices are inspired by broader social norms that either follow the institutional rules or are impacted by inherited stereotypes. Together, these elements create a system that discriminates against other racial and cultural groups.

The concept of *dysconscious racism* is also useful in understanding how racism manifests itself in societal practices. King (2015) defines dysconscious racism as:

> A form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges. It is not the absence of consciousness (that is, not unconsciousness) but an impaired consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race as compared to, for example, critical consciousness. (p. 113)

In other words, it is an uncritical acceptance of racism that is based on a superficial understanding of racial practices, which results in not recognizing these practices. Therefore, individuals avoid challenging the root cause of racial practices, which leads to maintaining them as norms rather than recognizing them as forms of racism. Also, understanding dysconscious racism helps in challenging the conventional ways of conceptualizing racism (socially, structurally, and individually). It should be based on ideological thinking that moves beyond a superficial understanding of racial practices to investigate the roots of racism.

Scholars argue that dysconscious racism is a result of "White miseducation" that maintains misconceptions and societal prejudice (Anderson et al., 2018, p. 6; King, 2015). Furthermore, not only does it fail to create a space for a positive change, but it also justifies racial inequality to perpetuate the status quo by uncritically accepting racial societal norms introduced in textbooks. King (2015) explains that dysconscious racism manifests in three categories: (1) historical determinism linked to slavery, (2) systemic issues like poverty, and (3) macrosocial understandings of racial inequity. Dysconscious racism based on these categories leads to miseducating students, preventing them from critically

engaging with complex issues involving discrimination against various racial, ethnic and religious groups. Furthermore, it leads to restraining students' awareness of the historical context of racial societal norms (Anderson et al., 2019; Ginther, 2015; King, 2015). In the next section, we will discuss Islamophobia as a form of racism (Gholami, 2021; Love, 2017).

What is Islamophobia?

Incidents of racial violence and hate speech towards Muslims in North America have intensified since 9/11. Negative views of Muslims and Islam are common in Western countries, and they are seen as an out-group who do not belong to the West (Helbling, 2012; Kalkan et al., 2009; Verkuyten et al., 2014). Moreover, they are seen as a different religious and cultural group as "Muslims' religious beliefs and practices, cultural orientations, and ethnicities have long made them different in key ways from the Judeo-Christian mainstream" (Kalkan et al. 2009, p. 1). This perspective fuels Islamophobic discourse, which perpetuates harmful stereotypes and misrepresentations of Muslims and Islam as antithetical to Western values while influencing societal narratives, legal frameworks, and institutional biases (Beydoun, 2018; Housee, 2012; Kozaric, 2024). Consequently, Islamophobia is far from being a new form of prejudice. It deepens and sustains entrenched biases rooted in Orientalist ideology, portraying Muslims as a threat to Western civilization and as incompatible with secular states. Furthermore, Islamophobia is the belief that Islam is inherently violent, incompatible with the West, and linked to terrorism (Beydoun, 2018; Kozaric, 2024).

Beydoun (2018) differentiates among three forms of Islamophobia: private Islamophobia, institutional Islamophobia, and dialectical Islamophobia. Private Islamophobia is characterized by violence directed against Muslims or those perceived as Muslims by individuals and/or non-formal institutions. Institutional Islamophobia refers to the systemic discrimination against Muslims or those who are perceived as Muslims through government laws, policies, and practices that portray Muslims as a threat to national security. It leads to reinforcing prevalent stereotypes and legitimizing the marginalization of Muslims, fostering suspicion and enabling both societal and individual discrimination. Dialectical Islamophobia examines how institutional Islamophobia provokes private Islamophobic practices. In other words, it refers to the influence that state policies exert to demonize and dehumanize Muslims, which consequently intensifies individual hatred and violent actions against Muslims, placing them in an ongoing cycle of suspicion.

Many scholars advocate for addressing racism, including Islamophobia, starting in schools. As such, a number of studies have explored the ways this can be done in our schools (Arneback & Jämte, 2022; Zaidi, 2017; Zine, 2004) to effectively challenge racism. The next section examines anti-racism education.

Anti-Racism and Anti-Islamophobia Education

Unlike multicultural education, which talks about celebrating diversity in different cultures without challenging the status quo or examining the roots of racial discrimination (Housee, 2012; King, 2022), anti-racism education focuses on addressing inequities and inequalities within a society, which manifest in conflicts of power among different groups through individual and institutional practices (Dei & McDermott, 2014). Therefore, anti-racism education aims to deconstruct and challenge racial discrimination within a society by not only correcting the misreading of other racial groups but also re-examining the way race and racism are formed within society (Thompson, 1997). Notably, anti-racism education delves deeper to examine the roots of these racial practices that are entrenched in societal norms on individual, structural, and institutional levels (Lynch et al., 2017). It values the voices of marginalized people by creating a space for them to tell their stories, talk about their lived experiences, and engage in counter-storytelling against prevalent misconceptions about them.

Teel (2014) argues that anti-racism education is a form of "social justice pedagogy … [that] emphasize[s] the urgency of social justice concerns in addition to appreciating the value of diversity" through multicultural education approaches (p. 5). It also addresses racial injustice through developing an inclusive pedagogy that fosters teachers' agency (Pantić & Florian, 2015). Within the framework of anti-racism education, educators can create a space for students to critically challenge the dominant paradigms in their society that are based on race, class, gender, and religion through celebrating the differences among groups (Dei & McDermott, 2014). It turns educational institutions into spaces that empower students to critically examine the dominant discourse of power within society. It resembles Freire's (2018) construct of "conscientizaçã" (conscientization), which aims to educate the powerless about their rights and the powerful about their discriminatory practices (p. 35). Furthermore, anti-racism education provides a valuable tool for understanding oppression entrenched within societal practices (Deckers, 2014; Simpson, 2006). Also, it creates a space where students can critically understand racial inequity, talk about their experiences, and suggest possible solutions to overcome it (Deckers, 2014).

Muslim students in the West have reported experiences of biased treatment, prejudice, and racism (Abu Khalaf et al., 2023; Bakali, 2016; Halabi, 2021). These experiences impact their emotional well-being, academic achievement, and their ability to integrate into society. They feel marginalized in schools because there are no spaces for them to talk about these issues. At the same time, the majority of teachers tend to avoid topics related to Islamophobia, largely because they have no experience engaging with topics related to anti-racism and Islamophobia (Amjad, 2018; Niyozov & Pluim, 2009; Stonebanks, 2008; Zaidi, 2017). Hence, educational institutions have a moral obligation to include Muslim cultures in their curricula and to develop appropriate pedagogical resources that support Muslim students in dealing with these challenges. Scholars suggest that a fruitful discussion with students about their religious experiences and practices helps deconstruct and challenge negative and preconceived notions that stigmatize what are seen as Other religious groups, thereby creating a safe space for students to talk about their religious identities (Bakali, 2016; Zaidi, 2017).

Drawing on the concept of anti-racism education, anti-Islamophobia education can be defined as pedagogical efforts to address the conscious, unconscious, and dysconscious racial practices against Muslims and those who are perceived as Muslims. It aims to dismantle stereotypes based on negative perceptions of Islam as a religion or Muslims as a religious or cultural group. Furthermore, a critical examination of social inequalities and injustices experienced by Muslims is an essential feature of this pedagogy (Flynn & Marotta, 2021; Gholami, 2021; Housee, 2012). Notably, anti-Islamophobia education is a transformative approach (Zine, 2004) that is based on students' voices, lived experiences, and "ways of knowing" (Stonebanks, 2008, p. 2).

Pedagogical Approaches to Confront Islamophobia in High Schools

The relevant literature mainly tends to focus on anti-racism and anti-Islamophobia education in higher education settings. Alarmingly, very few studies have examined these educational approaches in schools (Lynch et al., 2017). It is important to recognize that these spaces struggle to incorporate anti-racism topics into their curricula (Heafner & Plaisance, 2016; Stonebanks, 2008), particularly those related to Islam and Muslims (Zaidi, 2017). Teachers often avoid these topics because of a lack of experience and training in these areas (Hossain, 2017; Stonebanks, 2008).

It takes enormous courage, confidence, and ongoing commitment to confront racism in the classroom, as it involves a substantial shift in one's pedagogical approach and practices to address the evolving dynamics of race and privilege (King, 2022; Thompson, 1997). Confronting Islamophobia in school is particularly important to improve our current educational approaches. Teachers' practice is not confined to their classrooms only and needs to extend beyond the classroom (Lynch et al., 2017) to educate students about prevailing racial practices and create a positive impact on society. Below, we share some pedagogical approaches that could be adapted and employed to address Islamophobia, offering ways to navigate the reciprocities of confronting racism and Islamophobia in the classroom. Our goal is to provide examples to support educators in their pedagogical practices that address the messiness and the complexities of racism and Islamophobia.

Since mainstream and social media have been used as tools to propagate stereotypes and misconceptions that provoke Islamophobia in the West (Housee, 2012; Zaal, 2012), critical media literacy can empower students to critically analyze "media bias" (Garcia et al., 2013; Hossain, 2017). As such, critical media literacy can effectively stimulate students' critical reflections (King, 2022) on the information disseminated through various media platforms and how it shapes conscious, unconscious, and dysconscious racism. Teachers can also have students assess the portrayal of Muslims versus non-Muslims in the media. Furthermore, they may use real-life Islamophobic incidents reported in the media to "visibilize [conscious and unconscious] systemic racism" and develop their students' empathy toward their Muslim peers (Lynch et al., 2017, p. 135). These activities will enable students to recognize and understand the biased representations of Muslims and Islam in the ongoing discourse across various media sources.

During the first author's experience as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in Canada, he introduced an activity to the students where a student would choose a news story to present and discuss with their peers in class. This activity encouraged the students to analyze the language of the story and critically discuss it within the classroom. It happened that some students chose to discuss topics related to Bill 21 in Quebec (An Act respecting the laicity of the State, 2019) and the Quebec Mosque shooting. The students were encouraged to assess any biases in the news and interpret them in light of conscious and unconscious discriminatory and unjust practices in their community. At the same time, this activity helped them read news from different media sources, discover their peers' perspectives, and understand them through multiple perspectives. It created a rich dialogical learning approach within the classroom that helped the students read the news critically. Also, it introduced a space for the students to better understand their classmates' cultures and values. At the same time, it enabled the teacher to learn about students' perspectives and identify the misconceptions embedded in them to develop appropriate pedagogical strategies to further address them in a sensitive manner. This experience of using critical media literacy in the secondary classroom encouraged the author to delve deeper into this and other practical pedagogical tools for use in K–12 education to address racism and Islamophobia. Below, we present additional pedagogical approaches that can be adapted and implemented in secondary classrooms to address these issues.

Arneback and Jämte (2022) explored 27 Swedish high school teachers' anti-racism education approaches. One of the approaches they found was the *relational actions* (p. 204) approach, which seems to be appropriate to challenge Islamophobia in high school classrooms. The relational actions pedagogy "emphasize[s] the need to foster strong positive relations with and among ... students, characterized by care, respect and solidarity" (Arneback & Jämte, 2022, p. 204). The vital character of the relational actions approach entails building positive relationships with and among students. Building such relationships begins with treating students with respect, valuing who they are, and creating a sense of belonging within the school. Another important aspect is recognizing and celebrating students' cultures, which helps to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment. These actions are indeed vital for cultivating a classroom community where students feel valued, engaged, and motivated to learn. Furthermore, recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds in the classroom can help develop their self-esteem and foster a positive sense of belonging. Drawing on this approach, teachers can engage in respectful and candid dialogues with their students about each other's cultures. These dialogues would contribute toward building a better understanding of diverse cultures among students as they discover new aspects of different cultures and dismantle preconceived stereotypes. Additionally, valuing students' cultural experiences can help overcome different forms of racial practices on an individual level. At the same time, it can inspire those who harbor and express racial biases to explore other students' cultural histories, traditions, and values (Arneback & Jämte, 2022). For example, rich discussions based on students' interests about different subjects, such as history, geography, and languages, can be a useful starting point for introducing students to new ideas about other cultures.

The second point of building a positive relationship is recognizing and appreciating students' contributions to classroom activities. At the same time, a sense of empathy and solidarity can be developed among students by learning about each other's lived experiences. This approach can promote empathy and recognition of racial advantage (King, 2022). In addition to stressing the need for positive relationships in the classroom, the relational actions approach challenges "problematic socialization" (p. 204), which stems from harmful social interactions, resulting in social isolation and "a lack of trust in society" (p. 204). Problematic socialization may lead to racial discrimination due to isolation from society. Relational action pedagogy can be used as an effective tool to challenge racialized discriminatory practices. It is not only based on building a positive relationship with students, but it also calls for recognizing students' emotional needs (Arneback & Jämte, 2022; Mattsson & Johansson, 2020). Encouraging students to learn about each other's strengths, talents, and creative accomplishments would benefit students who feel marginalized, isolated, misunderstood, and victimized. In this way, teachers can gain the trust of students who are victims of racial discrimination. Developing students' empathy for each other can promote healthy relationships and coexistence. Also, recognizing privilege is helpful based on Freire's concept of conscientization, which can help the oppressors learn about their discriminatory and oppressive actions.

"Culturally sustaining pedagogy" (CSP) (Cole-Malott & Samuels, 2022; Paris, 2012; Zaidi, 2017, p. 63) also focuses on cultural sensitivity, responsiveness, and sustainable diversity in educational settings. It underscores the importance of developing a pluralistic and diverse classroom where students can celebrate their cultural, racial, and linguistic identity/ies. CSP is a reaction to the "deficit approach" in education (Paris, 2012), which views students' different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as something that should be kept away from the classroom and dominated by the majority language and culture. Therefore, CSP advocates moving from monolingual and monocultural to multilingual and multicultural education to address inequalities and promote social justice in education settings. In other words, it requires moving away from a monocultural curriculum and creating an inclusive curriculum that embraces diverse cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; Paris, 2012; Prasad, 2015).

Alternatively, "cultural[ly] relevant pedagogy" (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 465) is another approach that not only aims to embrace multilingual and multicultural classrooms but also confronts prevailing power dynamics and investigates the roots of racial inequality. CRP enriches the curriculum with marginalized students' voices, which can help build cultural bridges among students from various cultural backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; Paris, 2012). Importantly, CRP aims to embrace cultural differences and develop students' critical consciousness. Critical consciousness "describes how oppressed or marginalized people learn to critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them" (Watts et al., 2011, p. 44). Critical consciousness can help students critically analyze individual or systematic biased practices and uncover the roots of racism in them. It can empower marginalized students by helping them celebrate their identities and make their voices heard (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021).

Zaidi (2017) also proposed incorporating topics that challenge stereotypical narratives about Islam and Muslims, as well as including current issues related to Islamophobia, to diversify their curricula. These diverse perspectives within the classroom create an intercultural discourse focusing on a critical

examination of an issue from multiple aspects. This can also be an effective way to encourage students to critically re-examine issues they may not have found problematic and uncover their unconscious and dysconscious racial conceptions. Zaidi also suggested different ways to incorporate anti-Islamophobic topics into the curriculum. For example, creating a curriculum that uses music as a bridge, such as Karl Wolf's music, which blends Western and Middle Eastern music, can promote cultural understanding. The "Muslim Awareness Week" initiative could also be another activity that helps deconstruct stereotypes about Muslims and Islam (Zaidi, 2017, p. 64).

Furthermore, Zaidi (2017) emphasizes that it is vital to combat Islamophobia by comprehensively reviewing the curriculum and policies to address the evolution of multicultural societies in the West. Therefore, teacher education programs need to focus on preparing teachers to critically engage with racial and social justice topics. Teachers' practices are not limited to their classrooms. It is crucial that teachers gain knowledge of the social and political milieu that creates power structures, which in turn (re)produce racial hierarchies, so they can critically interrogate racial and social justice topics in the classroom. Therefore, teachers' education programs should not only prepare teachers to challenge racism within their classrooms but also extend their efforts beyond their classrooms to challenge racial practices and positively impact society (Pantić & Florian, 2015).

Conclusion

The relevant literature primarily addresses anti-Islamophobia education in higher education settings. This article specifically focuses on ways to confront and teach about Islamophobia in K–12 settings. We have discussed four pedagogical approaches to challenge Islamophobia in the classroom: critical media literacy, relational actions, culturally sustainable pedagogy, and culturally relevant pedagogy. These instructional strategies aim to develop students' political and social awareness (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013) and equip them with the requisite knowledge and skills that they will collaboratively construct to better understand the negative aspects of Islamophobia by connecting it to broader racial frameworks in society (Housee, 2012). Thus, it is vital to integrate anti-Islamophobia pedagogy into the curriculum to evaluate and confront conscious, unconscious, and dysconscious Islamophobic practices.

This analysis has led to significant questions and directions for future research in this area. It is important to explore secondary teachers' perceptions of and experiences with these issues. What obstacles do they face, and how can they be supported in addressing racism and Islamophobia upfront in their classrooms? Furthermore, empirical studies with K–12 students will help illuminate their authentic voices, experiences, and responses to such pedagogical interventions in the classroom.

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Autism Assessment Referral: A Mother's Experience

Brittany Ouellette

Abstract

In this paper I engage in an autobiographical inquiry into my experience of my son's autism assessment referral and how this experience has continued to guide me in my learning journey as a mother, educator, friend, and family member. Thinking about how a parent's greatest gift in this world is their children, I inquire into the messiness of life-making that occurs when parents are informed by a school specialist that their child should undergo an autism assessment. I share my experiences as a parent receiving information.

Introduction

I come to this work as a mother, friend, educator, and community member. I am a K–12 educator and school administrator who has held leadership roles in inclusive education. This paper is grounded in my experiences as a parent to two beautiful children alongside my partner. Being a parent has been the most educative and rewarding experience[1] in my life, but it has also come with many challenges and disruptions (Caine et al., 2022). These experiences have led me to wonder in my role as a parent and educator: How might school teams come alongside families and students in ways that are guided by "relational ethics" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 30)?

In narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2016) describes relational ethics as the "commitment to relationships, that is, to live in collaborative ways" and this requires attending to the "social responsibilities regarding how we live in relation with one another" (p. 30). It can lead to new opportunities for learning and imagining ways of engaging with others, as described by Dr. Vera Caine: "I don't think that relational ethics asks us to give up our beliefs… but living relational ethics asks us to do more in other ways, to open up to possibilities in order to live alongside" (Clandinin et al., 2019, p. 305).

This understanding of relational ethics in narrative inquiry resonated with me as I began to wonder about the possibilities of the ways school teams could come alongside families and students when sharing potentially uncomfortable information. This includes assessment referrals[2] and how these experiences could be guided by attentiveness to the stories and experiences of others. How could this inform and shape future experiences and life transitions of families, students, and school team members if it was grounded in relational ethics? I wondered and thought about this question when I was informed that our son should be assessed for autism. It was an experience that has greatly impacted my life since; it is ongoing and ever-present. A single phone call has shaped our family's future experiences—in ways I could not comprehend or was willing to attend to because of the pain it caused. This illuminated the ways in which unexpected information can demonstrate the messiness that can occurs from human interaction.

My conceptualization of "messy" and "messiness" for this manuscript is my experience as a parent when I received unexpected information about an autism diagnosis referral for my son Carter and the implications of this experience thereafter. As described by Hasnat and Graves (2000), "'disclosure,' the first communication of a diagnosis of disability in a child to the parents, is an experience which is often never forgotten" (p. 32). Further, because of experiencing this "unexpected and unfamiliar territory," parents may feel uncertain and "perplexed by new stages and challenges along the way" (Prizant & Fields-Meyer, 2022, pp. 2–3). Guided by this, the usage of the word "messy" includes the unexpected and unpredictable life transitions where I am alongside Carter in navigating the life events that have followed from this assessment referral: the administration of an autism assessment, Carter's schooling journey and community engagement, and facing the dominant narrative in society that Carter must work towards being "normal" (Kunc, 2000, p. 10).

I have come to understand narrative inquiry as the study of human experience that attends to the "richness and expression" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. xxvi) of lived experience as "storied phenomena" (Swanson, 2019, p. ii). Narrative inquirers begin with autobiographical narrative inquiry because it provides an opportunity for the researcher to "inquire into and retell earlier stories" (Swanson, 2019, p. 14). I selected an autobiographical narrative inquiry as an "appropriate avenue into my experiences" as a mother, educator, and friend, to assist me in making meaning of my experiences (Cardinal, 2011, p. 80). I inquired into my experiences that followed an autism assessment disclosure for my son Carter and this manuscript will share my new learnings, including becoming more "wide awake"[3] (Greene, 1995). I invite you to join me on this journey to tell and retell.[4]

Methods

I am grateful for the guidance and opportunities to learn from Indigenous scholars and mentors in my journey as a beginning narrative inquirer. The autobiographical works of Cree/Métis scholar Dr. Trudy Cardinal and Métis scholar Dr. Cindy Swanson guide me in my understanding of coming to this methodology. I have learned about the many ways to come to data in narrative inquiry through field texts which "are composed from conversations, interviews, and participant observations, as well as from artifacts" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 3). In this inquiry, I attended to the "three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry" which includes temporality, sociality, and place while drawing on multiple field texts (course writings, research proposal writing, and presentation transcripts) (Lessard, 2014, p. 31). Through these field texts, I inquired into my experiences through an autobiographical narrative inquiry by reading, rereading texts, and watching video recordings of presentations where I was a guest speaker.

Thinking with Course Writings[5]

Throughout my Master's and PhD programs, I have often revisited my experiences alongside Carter in my course writings and assignments. These experiences include sometimes being removed from key conversations regarding Carter's programming where I was informed of the decisions that had been made by the school team for him. Writing about these experiences brought new questions to the surface,

leading me to be curious if I was misunderstood by school teams as Carter's mom and wondering if institutional narratives framed my engagement in schools as a parent. This thinking took place through short noting taking, journaling, and reflections during my morning runs.

In turning toward the autism assessment referral, I recalled the events of that day in my writing and I reflected on how this experience has shaped who I am today as an educator, parent, and community member. This included reflective journals, Winter Count,[6] sketch notes, literacy reflections, and critical course Connections & Constructions papers. I inquired into this data by thinking with these stories alongside the scholarship and structures of my courses, connecting educational theory to my experiences and thinking with this experience in connection to issues in education today. Looking across these course writings, I have come to know how my experiences have shaped the ways I story myself as a parent and educator at that time, unveiling new learnings for me as a parent about school processes and interactions. While this inquiry is very much part of my autobiographical beginnings, my children are aware of and approve of me inquiring into our experiences of living alongside one another. Further, I have obtained ethics approval from the University of Alberta for my larger doctoral research which my autobiographical narrative beginnings fall under.

Thinking with Research Proposal Preparation

Even in the very first draft of my PhD research proposal, my intentions and goals of my program were grounded in my experiences as a parent, in particular, my life-making as Carter's mom. I wrote about memories of moments with Carter and his sister Zoe. It was important to include the events of when I was informed that Carter was being referred for an autism assessment. I re-visited and wrote about this experience at length in my proposal, to make connections with decision-making and inclusive education practices at school and how I had felt in my relationship with school teams at that time. Moreover, the ways our stories as a family were excluded from these decision-making conversations demonstrates the unpredictability and messiness of human interaction. It helped me inquire into the dominant social and institutional narratives in society and deepened my understanding of the "life identities, stories to live by" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 146); additionally, it allowed me to see how these stories are "conflicting stories" and "bump"[7] against the dominant narratives which shape how Carter and I are sometimes storied in school and community landscapes (Clandinin, 2016, p. 87).

Thinking with Presentations as a Parent and Educator

Over the past four years, I have presented at multiple teacher conventions in Alberta and as a guest lecturer for pre-service teacher courses at the University of Alberta. The common theme in these presentations was my life experiences as Carter's mom and the tensions and challenges that occur when our stories of home bump against school stories (Clandinin, 2016). In preparing for these presentations, I combined theory and my lived experiences to illuminate to the audience the social and personal pressures parents of children with disabilities can experience—especially when the attitudes and beliefs of others are guided by the "medical model of disability" (Chipchar & Rohaytn-Martin, 2021). I have sat with the presentation transcripts and Zoom video recordings as a form of reflection. What I have

discovered from my inquiry is that audience members' questions have opened me to new understandings, helping me think more deeply about Carter's assessment disclosure; specifically, how I would have wanted the disclosure to have taken place if I could go back in time. The pause I hear on the recording, the way I see my head tilting downward on the screen as I think about the question, prompted me to wonder and inquire into these tensions to understand more about the messiness and complexities of human interaction.

Evidence from Zoom recordings and Presentation Transcripts

> If you could go back, how would you want this information to have been shared with you? (Audience member question, Winter 2023)
>
> How should school teams share this information, or even begin the conversation with families? (Audience member question, Winter 2024)
>
> The neglect of parent knowledge and dominance of school teams; there may not be an appreciation for the unique position a family has in caring for their child. (Presentation statement, Fall, 2024)
>
> Past experiences do influence the way I see the world today, the rhythm of the life that we have alongside Carter and school teams. (Presentation statement, Fall 2024)

Re-visiting the Past

The Phone Call

When a parent is informed that their child may have a disability, it can be a difficult experience because "the manner of the disclosing professional can have a direct impact upon the parents" (Hasnat & Graves, 2000, p. 32). One month before Carter's third birthday, he was enrolled in Program Unit Funding (PUF), an Alberta program that provides interventions and supports for students with severe developmental delays (Alberta Education, 2015). The phone call took place in the fall of his second year, and even today, when I see the school division number appear on my caller ID, there is a tightness in my stomach and my heart flutters. A single phone call had, and continues to have, an immense impact on the ways I live in this world as a mom, friend, and educator.

"Hello, Mrs. Ouellette. My name is …"

> *"Mom!"*
>
> *I quickly turn from the kitchen counter where I am cutting oranges to see my two-year-old daughter Zoe standing in the kitchen doorway, holding a stuffed bunny, her big, brown eyes focused on me.*
>
> *"Grandma have snack too."*

She reminds me that Grandma should eat with them. I hear Grandma's laughter from the living room where they sit with Carter playing cars.

"Yes, of course, I will make Grandma a snack."

Finding my response satisfactory, Zoe flashes me a quick smile and runs back into the living room to play. Her dark curly hair flows behind her. I look out our kitchen window: the sun is shining, and it is a beautiful day.

We have just returned from an appointment for Carter and are now getting ready to eat a quick snack before going to the park. My thoughts wander to my Grade 4 classroom and the substitute. I often find myself torn between leaving the students and not attending appointments for Carter. I wonder if I will ever find this balance.

The sun shines in through the patio doors onto the wooden kitchen table, bringing light into the small kitchen. Suddenly, my phone rings and I see Carter's school division number on my caller ID. I place the knife down next to the plate of oranges and answer.

"Hello?"

"Hello, may I please speak with Mrs. Ouellette?"

"Yes. This is she."

"Hello, Mrs. Ouellette. My name is …"

They continue to inform me of their job title and then say it is their professional judgment that Carter undergo an autism assessment.

I feel as though the air has been sucked from my lungs, my skin feels irritated, and there is a loud whooshing sound in my ears. I am asked if I have any questions. I struggle to find my voice. Forcing myself to take a breath of air, I am able to respond with "No" and hang up the phone.

3:58… 3:58… while staring at this number on my phone, the length of the conversation, a wave of emotions floods through my body. In three minutes and fifty-eight seconds, my body became disconnected from me, moving sharply from happy and content to fear, guilt, anger, and sadness. My hands begin to tremble and I set the phone on the counter near the oranges. Looking up, I stare at the sunshine out the window, so warm and pleasant moments before, now distant and cold.

"Mom!"

Zoe pulls me from the sinking hole I am falling into, deep, dark, and devastating.

"Can we eat?"

Her brown eyes lock with mine, curious and bright.

Mentally, I force myself to smile.

"Sure. I'll be right there."

I carefully place each orange slice on the blue plate and slowly walk into the living room. What does this mean for Carter? Will he be okay? What about Zoe? As I set the plate down for Carter and Zoe, Grandma sees my face.

She tilts her head towards me, leaning in.

"Are you okay?"

Slowly I can feel the dam breaking.

"No. I need a minute, can you watch them for a second?"

She nods yes and I begin to walk back into the kitchen, tears streaming down my face. I open the door to the backyard and step onto the wood deck. My eyes well with large tears, falling, hitting the sun-bleached boards with small taps.

Tap…

Tap…

Tap…

The feelings of fear, anger, and sadness overwhelm me; I fall apart completely.

(Personal research journal entry, Winter 2024)

Reflecting on this experience, I can remember feeling many emotions. As I pay more attention to how my body responded to this conversation, I wonder if it was a result of how I storied[8] myself as Carter's mother. During my pregnancy I would daydream about him. What would his favorite food be, or color? Would Carter grow up to be a teacher like me? Play a musical instrument like his dad? Would our home be a place where Carter brings his friends after school? In this experience, I felt that relational ethics was broken, disconnecting me from the school team as a parent. I was shocked, taken aback by the information that seemed to be dominated by a narrative of school, excluding our stories of home and the ways Carter is in this world that may not be seen on school landscapes. Such terrifying information was delivered in a short, concise way; absent of relationships or even a warm cup of tea. I felt silenced as a parent, unable to advocate for Carter. Why autism? Who have they already spoken to about this before calling me that day? Was I the last to know?

The word "autism" was not part of my family vocabulary at that time. The only experience I had with individuals diagnosed with autism was students in classes I had taught who often required high levels of support. The ways I had imagined the rhythm of my relationship with Carter as his mom disintegrated because I did not know what would happen next. My transition into this next stage of change with my family was filled with uncertainty. This is what scared me the most; the ways I had imagined coming alongside Carter as his mom and the rhythm of our relationship together may now be different than what I had daydreamed long ago while folding newborn baby clothes in the freshly painted baby room. As I inquired into this experience, my research puzzle began to take shape. I wondered what had not been attended to when this decision was made in school and why did I respond with fear and anger? My research puzzle is my own inquiry where tensions occur when an autism assessment referral disclosure is made by a school specialist to me as a parent.

A Mother's Tensions and Retelling

Fear and Society

Clandinin and Connelly (2004) remind me of the educative practice of retelling an experience. They write "the more difficult but important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change" and to "make sense of life as lived" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. 71, 78). I see now the possibilities of retelling this story through an autobiographical narrative inquiry framework and have learned from this retelling that I was most fearful of what others would think of Carter and that this thinking would be shaped by the larger social narrative of what it means to be "normal" (Swanson, 2014). In the exploration of this experience, I returned to the stories of our family. The imagining of what Carter's life would be like, who he would be, and then the tensions I felt when the disclosure occurred. Inquiring into this experience through autobiographical narrative inquiry has assisted me with new understandings of breaking away from the fear that I felt at the time.

Travelling back to this memory, I realized I had already decided who Carter would be prior to the phone call. I had storied him through a lens of my own lived experiences and what society portrays as normal, being able to fit in. The work of Clandinin (2016) helped guide my thinking about the greater institutional, social, cultural, and familial narratives. She writes, "I thought about the ways in which we experience school shapes, and are shaped by family stories, embedded within dominant social, institutional, and cultural narratives" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 74). Chipchar and Rohatyn-Martin (2021) compare the two predominant models of disability: the medical model and the social model. The medical model of disability portrays the individual as the reason for their disability and the tensions or challenges that they may experience. In contrast, in the social model of disability, barriers are present within society and not the person. As an educator, I've seen that both these models of disability are present within school landscapes. For example, referring to a student through the lens of their disability and not their name ("Oh, the autistic kid in Mrs. Smith's class") reinforces the medical model of disability. The social model of disability includes solution-focused conversations regarding barriers within the school landscapes of individuals with disabilities and how to remove these barriers. In thinking about the greater institutional and social narratives, I began to be more awakened (Greene, 1995) to the ways I responded out of fear—fear of the medical model of disability as a way Carter could be storied by educational professionals and an ableist worldview[9] from society itself. I feared society would view Carter as broken, needing to be fixed.

I recall my questions and worries during that time: Will others understand Carter? What will they think of him? Will his teachers provide him with the education and supports he needs? What will our relationships be like with school teams? In bringing these wonders forward, I began to see the fear I felt from my own past experiences in school growing up where students with disabilities were placed in an isolated class. Further, the fear and uncomfortableness I have seen as a school administrator when teachers are informed a student with a disability will be in their class. As a teacher and school administrator, I had seen how students who are identified with a disability may be discussed through the

lens of their diagnosis and not as a person. I see now my fear of Carter being at the center of these conversations, the fear of autism being spoken of before himself as an individual.

Single Stories of Autism and Schools

When we shared with others that Carter was undergoing an autism assessment, the responses were normally of pity or silence—sometimes followed with comments "well at least he has you" or "he doesn't look autistic." It was as if I had made them uncomfortable with this information. It led me to wonder, why is autism overshadowing who Carter is as a person even before the diagnosis occurs? How can others see Carter as himself and not autism first?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) speaks of the "danger of a single story," which can lead to "critical misunderstanding." In her work, Adichie (2009) draws attention to how an individual or community can be framed within a single story by others, by way of assumption, pity, patronizing, and default position. Through this inquiry, I began to understand why I felt tension and sadness when Carter was diagnosed with autism. I was afraid that Carter would be pushed aside by others and society, and only seen or understood as autistic. I am reminded by Adichie (2009) of the ways single stories can come forward from the unknown or the unexperienced, in our case stereotypes of individuals living with autism through an ableist lens. I will admit that the comments and physical responses from others when hearing Carter was being assessed for autism angered me. This inquiry has assisted me in understanding my own response and gaining a greater perspective of others. How could they respond to such information when I had not shared my own understanding with them? Were they responding in the manner they had in an effort to not add stress to an already delicate situation? I understand now I feared that others would story Carter as a burden on society, stemming from the single story of autism that can come from stereotypes grounded in the medical model of disability (Chipchar and Rohatyn-Martin (2021). As we move forward, we do not frame Carter within a single story as a family because autism does not define who he is. It is a part of him as an individual. I see now that the unknown can grow seeds of assumptions and pity as described by Adichie (2009), because once others remember that Carter is still here and that autism has not replaced the sweet, kind young boy that he is, then the single stories begin to shift and change—and are replaced with love.

Through this inquiry, another single story (Adichie, 2009) came to mind, a story that is grounded in school landscapes and shaped how I storied myself as Carter's mom. From the assessment disclosure experience, I felt tension in my interaction with school teams, and this was very visible and present during Individualized Program Planning (IPP) meetings for Carter at school.[10] While schools were places where I felt excitement and confidence as a school administrator, as a parent I now felt unsure and guarded. I was afraid and wanted to avoid communication with school staff. Was I angry with school teams? Why did I have these responses and reactions walking into Carter's school? In inquiry, I discovered my responses stemmed from broken trust, anxiety, and frustration that resulted from how the assessment referral had been shared. Through my learning, I have discovered "communicating our expectations is brave and vulnerable, and it builds meaningful connections" (Brown, 2021, p. 47). As time has passed, I have become more vocal in school meetings to advocate not only for Carter, but for myself. From my

learning, I now have a deeper understanding of the messy uncomfortableness that comes with communication and life transitions. The way I have storied myself has shifted to a more collaborative, confident approach, including caring communication and, most importantly, centering the gifts of Carter as an incredible human.

World-Travelling with Love

I have often spoken of "The Phone Call" at conferences and consultations with school teams. During this inquiry, I thought of the specialist and their role in school landscapes. Sharing student information or referral recommendations can be part of this role. Simple, straightforward, is it not? At first, yes, I believed it was. I felt that I was impacted, Carter was impacted, and our family was impacted. Looking into the past, we had been taking Carter to specialists to determine the best "ways" to support him in his growth and development since he was two years old. I have sat in many meetings with strangers telling us all the things Carter cannot do; rarely were these meetings grounded in his strengths. It was exhausting and heartbreaking as a parent when I received the phone call from the school specialist. I wonder if the metaphorical wall that I had been attempting to build to protect my heart from these conversations and meetings regarding Carter's abilities had finally collapsed.

Thinking more deeply about this experience led me to recognize I was not the only person who was part of that phone call. I wondered about the school specialist, and Lugones's (1987) work helped me unpack the tensions I felt. She describes travelling with loving perception in connection with her own mother:

> Loving my mother also required that I see with her eyes, that I go into my mother's world, that I see both of us as we are constructed in her world, that I witness her own sense of herself from within her world. Only through this travelling to her "world" could I identify with her because only then could I cease to ignore her and to be excluded and separate from her. (p. 8)

Lugones (1987) goes on to write that travelling to another's world "enables us to be through loving each other" (p. 8). In my learning through this autobiographical narrative inquiry, I became more aware of how I had removed any possibility of travelling with loving perception to the world of the school specialist (Lugones, 1987). I was angry, hurt, and fearful for Carter. These emotions had overtaken me like a rockslide from my collapsing wall. I was angry with the specialist because of the information they shared and how they shared it.

Now, I have learned of the freeness of a "loving attitude" when travelling to another's world, or worlds (Lugones, 1987, p. 15). I wonder how the specialist may have felt that day before picking up the phone: Did they sit with butterflies in their stomach and stare, as I have as a school administrator before making a phone call to a parent? Did they expect me to shout, yell and call them names? Have they been received in such a way by parents before? Were they under pressures to follow policy and procedures of the dominant narratives in schools? I wondered about the weight that can come with delivering information that the listener may not want to hear. Initially, upon returning to this experience and inquiring into it, I did not travel to the specialist's world with loving perception (Lugones, 1987). They shared this information with me because it was their professional role and responsibility to do so. I now experience

the freeness of imagining new possibilities of coming alongside school teams who are part of Carter's life; I understand the importance of wonder and travelling with loving perception with others. Of moving slowly with care, because we are all human.

Learning From Each Other

In coming alongside parents and children who are diagnosed with autism, I acknowledge the incredible value of training and professional learning. For this manuscript, I want to turn towards the learning that may not come from a book or program; the ways we can learn from one another through life experiences and sharing. Learning alongside one another can create opportunities for the greatest connections, and in education, the late professor bell hooks (2010) argues, "I propose that teachers must be open at all times, and we must be willing to acknowledge what we don't know" (p. 10). I appreciate the moments when staff express that they are uncertain or that they feel vulnerable in their understanding of autism and, importantly, their understanding of who Carter is as an individual. In his work, Dr. Barry Prizant (2022) recounts his learning from a parent of a child who has been diagnosed with autism. The parent described the "got it" factor in how they have observed the relational connections between school staff and their child: "'We say people have "got it,"' she said. No matter their title, no matter their training, they connect… they are eager to learn, and they seek support and advice from a parent or someone else who knows the person well" (p.149). For me as a parent and in reflection of what I've learned through this inquiry, individuals who "got it" are willing to learn even in those moments where learning can be uncomfortable. This is sometimes the most difficult work as educators because it is internal, relational work. The internal work is to engage in critical thinking, to question one's language and how it reflects one's beliefs and values. As described by hooks (2010), "The heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works" (p. 7). It is leaning into discomfort through learning and in connection with students who are diagnosed with autism and their families because it builds the foundation for relationships.

Sharing our stories and lived experiences can help support learning in relational ways because "knowledge acquisition comes to us in daily life through conversations" (hooks, 2010, p. 44). Two powerful resources to support this relational work are families and students. Their stories are powerful and for someone seeking to build relationships with families and their children, it can create learning opportunities for learning through listening (Prizant & Fields-Meyer, 2022; Hayward, 2025). Parents are a key resource because they are experts in their child and know their child best; as described by Dr. Denyse Hayward, "Parents are an untapped resource for educators" (Personal communication, January 29, 2025). A simple phone call or sharing a cup of tea can create beautiful learning moments. I think of one experience where a staff member invited me to have a cup of tea with them. In our conversation, they asked for advice on how they could support Carter with his writing as he fatigued quickly. This simple, relational gesture filled my heart with gratitude because they took the time to connect with me as Carter's mom, were curious, and honored my parental knowledge.

In turning towards Carter, I appreciate the relational approach of the staff who have asked him what he would prefer in his learning and spend time with him engaging in an activity he enjoys, such as looking for tadpoles or making popcorn. According to Prizant (2022), the most meaningful learning experiences

about autism come from children because it is important "to be present and to listen, to acknowledge and validate (the child's) feelings" and then make changes to our behavior as a result (p. 32). After all, "our attitudes about and perspective on autistic people and their behavior make a critical difference in their lives—and ours" (Prizant & Fields-Meyer, 2022, p. 32). By listening to and learning from Carter, school staff have shared that they are much more confident in their ability to support him at school in ways that are engaging and help Carter grow socially, emotionally, and academically. Through this relational approach, educators can learn from these experiences, which can lead to shifts in professional practices and reshape the way they view their relationship with families and students.

Looking Forward: Disclosure through Relational Ethics

From this inquiry and my new understandings, I began to wonder about a "forward-looking story" of approaching relationships with parents and students through relational ethics (Nelson, 1999, p. 17). Nelson (1999) describes forward-looking stories as "action-guiding"; our past stories provide explanations of the present and how we might move forward (p. 17). I acknowledge the messiness that can come when a family receives unexpected information about their child, even if the information is shared with good intentions. What if we open ourselves to possibilities in education that create opportunities to be alongside each other in ways that are grounded in relational ethics, to move slowly alongside families in ways that remove assumptions? Guided by this, I imagine forward-looking stories where assessment disclosures and possible discomforts are supported through authentic relationships led by the heart and grounded in relational ethics. I imagine future school teams who will enter Carter's life and our life as his family. School teams who will partner authentically with me when I am advocating for Carter and listen with care during moments of misunderstandings. Shifting the dominant narrative of an ableist society to move and act with love, reciprocity, and respect centers the gifts of all children. I smile when I imagine this forward-looking story.

Notes

1. Caine, Clandinin, and Lessard (2022) discuss the works of philosopher John Dewey in connection to experience as "a source of knowledge" that is "always evolving and that experience builds upon experience" (p. 15). From this, I understand experience as ongoing and interactive; experiences shape future experiences and "attending to experiences can change the stories we tell and live" (p. 26). As an educator, parent, and friend, this understanding of experience has assisted me in the ways I navigate my life experiences by slowing down and bringing past experiences alongside present ones and looking towards those of the future.

2. In Alberta Education's *Standards for Special Education*, a referral is "arranging for students to receive specialized assessment and/or intervention" and a specialized assessment is defined as "individualized measurement across a variety of domains for the purpose of developing and providing individualized programming for students" (Alberta Education, 2004, p. 5). An autism assessment can be one of the assessments referred for students.

3. "Wide-awake" is a term used by Greene (1995) to refer to "awakening imagination," where the role of imagination "is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected" (p. 28).

4. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) describe retelling of a lived experience as a way for transformation to occur and to make sense of "life as lived" (p.78).

5. I am guided by the work of Cree/Métis scholar Dr. Trudy Cardinal (2020) in the structure of this paper's methods section from their chapter "Becoming Real," published in *The Doctoral Journey: International Educationalist Perspectives*.

6. In the course EDSE 603A&B (800) Sem A01: Holistic Approaches to Life and Living, alongside Dr. Dwayne Donald and Kehteya Bob Cardinal, the Winter Count practice is a form of literacy learning and involved the studying of the moon phases and our individual place that we choose to study during the seasons over a 13-month period. Then we came together monthly as a class to share our Winter Count observations and our symbols that we created for each moon phase.

7. In her work, Clandinin (2016) writes of the tensions that occur when stories meet, in particular, when "conflicting stories are understood as stories that collide with the dominant stories of school" (p. 67). When such a collision happens, there is a "bump" against the dominant narrative, creating opportunities to inquiry into the tensions that emerge from the bump as shown by Dr. Janice Huber: "This bump with their Chemistry 20 teacher caused her to think about who she was. And was becoming, in her stories of school" (p. 87).

8. In narrative inquiry, "storied lives" describes how humans live in this world, alongside others, how they interpret their experiences. As stated by Connelly and Clandinin (2006), "Humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories" (p. 447).

9. Ableism is referred to as a "societal worldview that able-bodied individuals are the norm and individuals with disabilities must strive to become normal. Disability is seen as a failing rather than a simple consequence of human diversity" (Hayward & Doris, 2019).

10. Individualized Program Plans (IPPs) are support plans for students with disabilities who have been assigned special education coding according to their diagnosis (Alberta Education, 2022).

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Art-Based Autobiographical Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in an Urban School

Maggie Rahill, Rosalinda Godinez, Adam M. Voight, and Mary Frances (Molly) Buckley-Marudas

Abstract

This article examines a classroom-based implementation of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) that integrates art-based autobiographical methods to support student reflection, identity exploration, and voice. Grounded in a year-long collaboration between a ninth-grade English teacher and Project HighKEY at Cleveland State University, the study documents how over 100 students engaged in storytelling through collage, poetry, and narrative writing. Drawing on student work, survey and interview data, and a teacher interview, the article highlights how creative expression served as both data and action—positioning reflection as a foundational phase of YPAR. By centering teacher and student perspectives, this work contributes to the growing field of arts-integrated YPAR and offers a developmentally responsive model for embedding participatory research in K–12 classrooms.

Introduction

> Students have the experiences. Let's provide the language and the space for deep reflection.
> — Maggie Rahill

This article shares a year-long collaboration between Maggie Rahill, an English teacher, and Rosalinda Godinez, a postdoctoral researcher, as part of Project HighKEY at the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at Cleveland State University (CSU). The collaboration focused on implementing Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) integrated with art-based autobiographical methods in a ninth-grade English class. Over the course of a school year, more than 100 ninth-grade students engaged in a sequence of reflective, creative assignments—including collage, poetry, narrative writing, and mask making—that invited them to explore and represent their identities, lived experiences, and social realities. These assignments culminated in student-generated research posters presented at a youth research conference, where students used their creative work to share personal stories and advocate for change.

This article aims to contribute to the growing field of classroom-based YPAR by documenting a case of teacher-led implementation that centers artistic and autobiographical expression. While scholars have increasingly examined the transformative potential of YPAR for fostering student voice and agency, there remains limited research on how art-based and autobiographical methods can scaffold youth reflection and support teachers in classroom-based YPAR implementation. In response to this gap, we offer a detailed account of one teacher's pedagogical approach and the ways in which art-based assignments deepened students' self-awareness and prepared them to engage in inquiry and action. We show how

creative expression served as both method and meaning-making tool, and we consider the implications for teacher practice, student identity work, and YPAR curriculum development.

Grounded in a relational, justice-oriented approach to pedagogy, this article positions art-based autobiographical YPAR as a method for transforming classroom culture and broadening what counts as research, reflection, and action. Drawing on student work, teacher reflection, and student interviews, we explore how the integration of arts and YPAR fosters inclusive, affirming, and critically engaged learning environments. By slowing down the pace of the traditional YPAR cycle and foregrounding reflection, this approach offers a developmental on-ramp to sustained youth research and activism throughout high school. Through this case, we contribute to conversations about how educators can cultivate space for student voice, storytelling, and community-rooted inquiry in schools.

Literature Review

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in K–12 Classrooms

YPAR is an educational and research approach that empowers young people to actively investigate and address issues relevant to their lives and communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Ozer et al., 2013; Voight & Velez, 2018). Students are positioned as co-researchers, engaged in identifying questions, collecting and analyzing data, and taking action based on their findings. YPAR has been shown to foster agency, critical consciousness, and civic engagement among youth, particularly those in marginalized communities. As students gain tools to examine and address inequities, YPAR serves both pedagogical and justice-oriented purposes.

While existing research documents YPAR's positive impacts on student identity and school engagement, fewer studies explore how teachers enact YPAR in classroom settings or how pedagogical scaffolds can support its integration (Buckley-Marudas et al., 2024; Mirra et al., 2015). Our work addresses this gap by examining how a ninth-grade English teacher adapted and implemented YPAR through a structured, art-based autobiographical unit.

Art-Based and Autobiographical Methods in YPAR

Art-based research methods—including photovoice, collage, poetry, and storytelling—have increasingly been used in youth-driven projects to amplify underrepresented voices and disrupt dominant narratives (Aldana et al., 2021; Del Vecchio et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2020). These methods offer young people accessible, culturally relevant ways to explore identity, articulate lived experiences, and express ideas for change. In the context of YPAR, art can function both as a mode of inquiry and a form of action. Creative practices often make space for reflection and emotion, inviting students to express themselves in ways that conventional academic forms may not permit.

Recent scholarship further emphasizes how art-based YPAR can foster not only critical reflection but also collective healing. Wager et al. (2023), in their chapter "Collective Imagining and Doing," theorize and

document a participatory research project where youth use art to build bridges between personal experience, activism, and community healing. They articulate how embodied practices—such as collaborative art-making—allow young people to move between reflection and action in ways that are emotionally and politically transformative. The authors highlight the importance of creative practice not just as a product of research, but as a relational and healing methodology in its own right.

Our work builds on and extends this framework by embedding similar reflective, healing-centered practices within a ninth-grade English curriculum. Like Wager et al. (2023), we center students' personal stories as sources of knowledge and action. However, our case offers an additional contribution by exploring how a teacher integrated these practices into a full academic year of classroom instruction—something that is less frequently documented in art-based YPAR literature. By offering detailed pedagogical scaffolds and student work samples, we aim to illustrate how autobiographical artistic expression can serve as a developmental foundation for sustained YPAR in schools.

Autobiographical Approaches and Cultural Sustaining Pedagogies

Autobiographical and narrative approaches to education center the personal as political and theoretical. Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *autohistoria-teoría* (1987) guides our approach, framing personal storytelling as a means of theorizing identity and navigating interlocking systems of power. This work is especially important in urban schools, where students' multilingual and multicultural experiences are often marginalized. We build on traditions of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and trauma-informed practice (Minahan, 2019), recognizing that storytelling can be a liberatory act for students whose experiences are often excluded from dominant curricula.

Recent reviews and analyses of participatory research with youth further affirm the importance of methodologically inclusive practices that extend youth voice and agency. Jacquez et al. (2020) offer a participatory thematic analysis model that includes youth perspectives in both analysis and meaning-making. The Youth Futures Foundation (2023) emphasizes the need for ethical, participatory practices that honor young people's lived experiences while avoiding tokenism. Williams (2024) highlights how formal classroom contexts can also serve as sites of youth empowerment when supported by reflective and collaborative inquiry. Our art-based autobiographical YPAR approach speaks directly to these calls by linking identity-centered reflection with action-oriented inquiry embedded in curriculum.

Positioning Our Contribution

Our approach, which we term *art-based autobiographical YPAR*, adds to this growing field by focusing on structured, teacher-led implementation in a classroom context. Whereas many YPAR projects occur in extracurricular or afterschool spaces, our work demonstrates how creative autobiographical assignments can be embedded in the English curriculum to support students' transition into research, reflection, and action. This article contributes to ongoing conversations about the affordances of the arts in social justice education and the potential of YPAR to transform classroom practices, foster student voice, and cultivate deeper understandings of self and community.

Methodology

Site and Context

This study is situated within Project HighKEY, launched in 2021 with support from the U.S. Department of Education, which partners with educators across the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) to implement and study YPAR in classroom settings. The project is co-led by Dr. Adam Voight and Dr. Molly Buckley-Marudas, who support teacher-researchers through monthly learning communities and collaborative design sessions.

The specific classroom context for this study is John Marshall School of Engineering, where Maggie Rahill teaches ninth-grade English. Class sizes averaged around 18 students per class. Her school serves a diverse student population across many areas, all of whom qualify for free lunch. The school population in the year of study was 64% male and 36% female. The majority of students identify as African American (33.1%) and Hispanic (31.7%), with students also identifying as Caucasian (23.2%), Asian (5.1%), multiracial (5.9%), American Indian (0.3%), and Pacific Islander (0.8%).

Methods

This study draws on qualitative methods to document and analyze how an English teacher and her students engaged in art-based YPAR. Data sources include:

- **Fieldnotes** gathered through classroom observations by Rosalinda Godínez;
- **Student artifacts**, including poetry, collages, written narratives, and poster presentations;
- **Student surveys** (n = 40) and **student interviews** (n = 19), focused on students' experiences of identity exploration and reflection; and
- **A teacher interview** with Maggie Rahill, which provides insight into her pedagogical decisions, reflections on implementation, and evolving understanding of YPAR.

This combination of data provides a multilayered portrait of the teaching and learning process. Student voices are analyzed as both expressions of personal experience and sources of knowledge, while the teacher's interview is treated as a reflective narrative that helps situate the curricular and relational decisions behind the unit. Our approach is rooted in participatory and relational methodologies, which prioritize voice, storytelling, and the co-construction of meaning within educational research.

Learning from Maggie's Classroom

Example of Art-Based Autobiographical Assignments

Over the 2023–2024 school year, Maggie guided her ninth-grade students through an art-based autobiographical unit. From September 2023 to January 2024, she facilitated literature circles (Daniels, 2006), offering students eight novels featuring young protagonists navigating personal and societal conflicts. Options included books such as *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone and *Slay* by Brittney Morris, addressing themes like racism, immigration, environmental justice, and body shaming. These discussions encouraged students to connect the characters' challenges with broader social issues, laying the groundwork for their own introspective work.

From February to March 2024, Maggie led students through art-based activities like collages and poetry, designed to prompt self-reflection and articulate life experiences. In March, students crafted narrative essays, integrating their art into personal stories that showcased their individuality and creativity. As a culminating project, students created research posters based on their essays and presented them at CSU. These assignments fostered self-expression, critical thinking, and empathy, creating a foundation for a more inclusive and compassionate educational environment.

Student Collages

The first assignment within this unit was to create a collage of at least five photos that represented how students perceived themselves. Students were allowed to highlight anything important to them, from the food they enjoyed to the sports they played; even favorite movies or artists were featured. This collage allowed students to begin reflecting on their identities and sharing those traits in a low-stakes way. They could practice discussing themselves with their classmates and teachers but still had a layer of protection that the photos provided. In this way, the collage activity was an excellent first scaffold for this autobiographical unit.

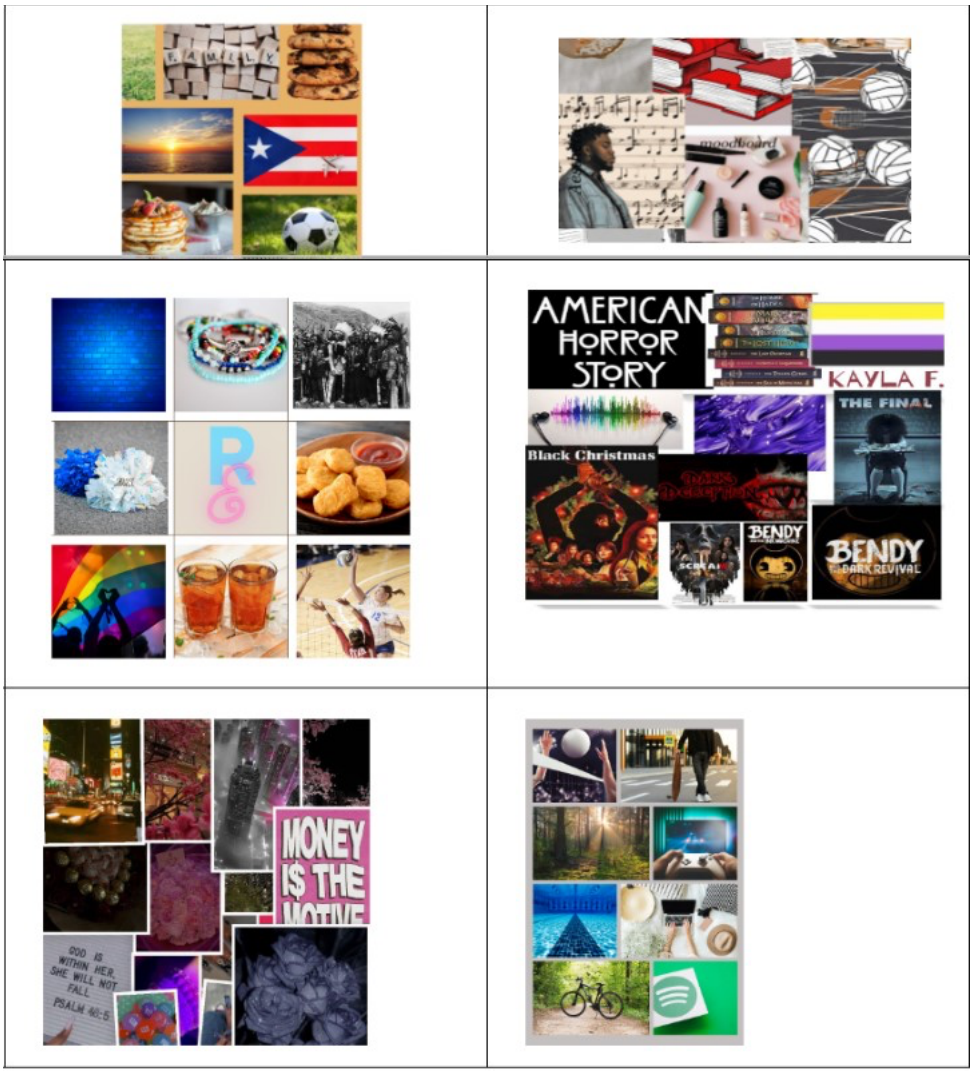


Fig. 1: Student collages showcasing their interests and important cultural artifacts

Poems

After looking at other ways of storytelling, from taking pictures to making videos, the class shifted toward the written form of storytelling and began with poetry. Students began by reading poems such as "Where I Am From" by George Ella Lyon and "My Honest Poem" by Rudy Fransisco, in which both authors highlight aspects of their identities using rich figurative language. After reading these models, students practiced writing poems inspired by the ones they had read. To spark the creation of these poems, students answered reflective questions related to the model poem's language. Questions included: What do you remember seeing as a child? What smells do you recall being in your home? After answering these questions, students shaped their responses into poetry. They captured moments of childhood memories, cultural significance, and personal identities through figurative language in their poems.

James writes:

I am from a hot island
from where coconuts hit the dry dirt
I am from basketball hoops made
from food crates and kids playing in the
rain

Jannet writes:

I am from the smell of soul food and cooking
From the rich smell of cocoa butter
I am from my grandmothers' woody porch
(Caused black feet and splinters)
I am from Jefferson park and the lake trying to run as fast as I can through the sand
I am from the hand-me-downs and bossiness
From children playing and laughing

James reflects on life on a hot island, portraying a resourceful and vibrant community. Jannet's poem evokes sensory memories, from the smell of soul food and cocoa butter to the rough feel of a grandmother's wooden porch. She recalls running through sand at Jefferson Park and highlights family dynamics through hand-me-downs and laughter. These poems showcase students' courage in sharing their identities through culture and personal experiences, which we as teachers, researchers, and adult audience members deeply admire.

Student Narrative

After doing those various forms of art expression, the class turned to their final assessment, a student narrative. Students read narrative examples from teens and adults alike and studied how those writers used techniques they had been studying all year to make their narratives impactful. As they continued reading and annotating mentor texts, Maggie introduced the prompts for their narratives. Prompts included:

1) Who are you?
2) What event has impacted you?
3) How has school affected you throughout your life?

After brainstorming various answers to these questions, students began writing their narratives as a rough draft. To engage students in writing, Maggie encouraged them just to write: write what they remembered, write what they felt, and write what they thought about these events they were including in their narratives. Often times, students are so consumed with a fear that their writing is not good enough that they do not even attempt it. The goal of this rough draft was to get them just to try. After that, Maggie read through rough drafts and made suggestions, and she also encouraged students to look back on the mentor narratives they had read and annotated. Were they including strategies the mentor authors used? Did they have a dialogue? A moving plot? Could you hear their voice? These questions probed their edits

for their final narrative draft, which they submitted a few days later. In their narratives, students focused on various experiences, such as divorce, migration stories, mental health, teacher abuse of power, jail/family incarceration, student life, student interests like basketball, and leisure activities.

Below we share a narrative example, which showcases a student's reflection on his identity and the emotional weight of navigating racism and Islamophobia as a Palestinian American in this current climate. We intentionally preserve Ben's authentic voice, including moments of anger and frustration, to emphasize the importance of creating spaces where students can honestly express themselves, even when those expressions are uncomfortable or difficult. We honor the student's full humanity by allowing students' writing to be a place where they are able to process legitimate emotions like anger and frustration to injustice. Ben's narrative is a great example of this as he writes:

> Another key characteristic of me is being a Palestinian Muslim in what some people would say is a "difficult time" for people like me… As of recently, there has been more hate toward the Arab Muslim culture, especially toward Palestinians. Now, the war between Israel and Palestine is something I honestly do not like talking about. I get uncomfortable on the subject, and even if I do say something, it is something along the lines of "there are terrible things going on both sides of the war really terrible things." It just so happens that Israel has been doing a terrifying amount of terrible things, but I try my best not to show or tell my opinion all that much. I have experienced an irritating amount of racism, especially at school, a good number of times, I am ok with it, but there are a few times where that really irritates the f[***]out of me. Most of the time when people make the joke, it's somewhat funny, but half the time, it is equivalent to "911!" then looking at me with a dumbass face, or literally just "Bomb!" and people just say anything that they think that sounds like Arabic which it really f[***]ing does not and again the same stupid ass face. When moments like that happen, I really want to give them a crazy Mike Tyson ass overhand, but I have never done anything like that and never intend to. And I'm not on some alpha male shit that would prove to them that Arab Muslim people are violent.

In his narrative, Ben expresses discomfort discussing the Israel–Palestine war, recognizing atrocities on both sides but feeling particularly distressed by Israel's actions. His reflection highlights the tension between his personal convictions and the broader political climate that stigmatizes Arab Muslim identities. Ben recounts repeated experiences of racism at school, where he becomes the target of offensive jokes and dehumanizing stereotypes linking him to violence and terrorism. His visceral anger in response to these incidents is palpable, yet he consciously restrains himself from acting on those emotions. Importantly, his restraint is not merely a matter of personal self-control; it reflects an acute awareness of the racialized expectations placed upon him—the fear that any expression of anger could be weaponized to reinforce harmful stereotypes about Arab Muslims as inherently violent. Through his narrative, Ben illustrates the emotional labor required to navigate and resist these oppressive dynamics, underscoring the critical need for educational spaces that allow students to express anger, pain, and resistance without fear of further marginalization. Through educational spaces like this writing assignment that allow students the freedom to express their full humanity (in all the messiness it encompasses), we make steps toward a more understanding, communicative space that prioritizes authenticity to work toward a more just space for all our students.

Other students also wrote about their life experiences in their narratives. For example, Allie, James, and Becca shared the following pieces.

Allie:

> I am a high school student currently. I am still growing up, learning about life, and figuring out new things. Life for me was not the hardest, but it also was not the easiest. I know a lot of people have gone through worse events than me, but this is my story of how one of the biggest events in my life made me the way I am. The event was my parents' divorce. My reason for this is because if it never happened, then I would not be going out to Michigan every other weekend and I would not be going to John Marshall either.

James:

> Hi, my name is James. Even though I am only in the ninth grade, but life has taken its toll on me. I know what you might be thinking. "Oh, you're too young" or "Oh, you don't know what life all is about" but you are wrong. I know I am only learning how to live life right now, but that's what most people don't realize: that just because we are young doesn't mean we don't go through stuff and that we also need some help with what we go through. Most people don't really show their hurt or their emotions because they either think that they would be a bother or they don't know who to trust. So, today, I will talk about what I have been through how I found a way to get through it, and how you might be able to too.

Becca wrote her narrative as a poem:

Dark
From the substance that went in you
Don't do this
Came out with string around my neck
Don't do that
Like I was gonna get taken from your arms
Blah blah blah
Grew up in the dark
Don't turn out like you mom and sister
Grew up stealing to make a living
You're too good for that
That substance you had stopped using
You have too much to look forward to
Back But I don't that's the thing
The end of it is rigged
Everybody around me was never clean
The flame so hot
Always dirty Sharp
Burns so well
No tape Feels good
No smile
No none see through things
No laugh
No pictures that aren't on plain paper
And once again

No contact without glass in between us
I'm all alone in the dark
Couple years go by
I'm all alone Just sad
Left while at school
Nobody to take care of me but my grandpa
No to talk to all alone so I suffer
All alone
All alone
All alone

Allie navigates life amid her parents' divorce, traveling to Michigan biweekly while attending John Marshall High. She sees the divorce as pivotal in her growth, though she acknowledges others may face greater challenges. James, despite his youth, insists that young people endure significant hardships and deserve support. Becca's poem reveals a childhood shaped by family substance abuse, survival struggles, and stigma. Despite encouragement to overcome these obstacles, she feels isolated, relying solely on her grandfather for care.

In these works, we see students describe deeply personal experiences and feelings, which inevitably complicates the boundaries of a traditional teacher–student relationship. In creating a space of safety and trust, students were never expected to share anything beyond their comfort level, and that which was shared invites a relational shift to occur—from simply teacher of English to trusted adult in a young human's life. This relational shift comes with emotional weight and new ethical responsibilities. Part of the "messiness" of this work lies in the absence of a clear roadmap: as a teacher, I am not a therapist, yet I cannot be indifferent to the emotional weight students carry. This is especially true in the subject of English, as much of the work centers around the experiences of characters whose full humanity is on display, mess and all. Holding space for students' full humanity sometimes requires simply listening without rushing to intervention; at other times, it necessitates connecting students to additional supports, such as counselors or trusted adults in the school or community. Navigating when and how to act is complex, situational, and deeply relational. What remains constant, however, is a commitment to honoring students' disclosures with care, respect, and a willingness to sit with the discomfort of not always having immediate solutions.

Poster Presentations at CSU

After weeks of creating various art forms, students selected pieces to share at CSU's Campus Conference 2024, organized by Dr. Buckley-Marudas. This event brought together students from local CMSD high schools to present their research projects. Maggie's students used posters to showcase their art-based research, sharing stories and artwork that reflected their identities. While not all aspects of their work were included, the presentations provided audiences with valuable insights into the students' experiences and identities. Students also used their posters to share key takeaways and recommendations for future actions in their communities. This action-oriented sharing reinforced YPAR principles, demonstrating the power and importance of their voices. Rooting this work in action solidified its place within YPAR, ensuring it transcended a traditional creative writing unit to embody the transformative essence of YPAR.

Through sharing their stories, community members saw the experiences students faced firsthand and listened as students imagined a different path for those who come after them.



Fig. 2: Students presenting at CSU

End of the Mask Making Unit

> Mask shows how people really feel in a creative way.
>
> —Ben, YPAR Student

At the end of the school year, the students created artistic masks to represent themselves as a celebration and final reflection on all the work we did this year. As we discussed identity throughout the year, we often highlighted how people display themselves differently to others than how they feel on the inside. So, the goal of this activity was for students to consider how they presented themselves to others on the outside and how they felt on the inside. They painted the front to represent the emotions or actions they present to others and the inside to represent how they feel internally.



Fig. 3: Student masks

Students reacted to this assignment in various ways. Some highlighted favorite anime or video game characters, others memorialized art for a loved one who had passed away, and some created designs they thought looked cool. However, they could articulate connections between their art and their experiences, feelings, or identities when asked. For example, Allie's mask, inspired by Sal's "Sally Face," a video game character who hides a scar, features flowers symbolizing her interests and life process, alongside abstract shapes requiring explanation. Nick's portrayal uses pink for his outgoing nature and black for his introverted side, reflecting on his eagerness for responsibilities like mowing the lawn and getting his driver's license.

Student Perspectives of Art-Based Autobiography

At the end of the art-based unit, close to the end of the academic school year, we asked students to share what they learned and how the art-based autobiography unit helped them tell their stories. With this intention in mind, Rosalinda visited Maggie's classroom, administering a survey, and gathering students' perspectives in a focus group setting. Rosalinda, being an advocate for art-based autobiographical research, especially that of Anzaldúa's concept of autohistoria-teoría (1987), where personal narrative is intertwined with theoretical exploration, wanted to understand how students described their experience writing about themselves and their story. The following are some of the students' comments from the survey.

> I've learned that we all have a lot of traumas throughout our lives but sharing our stories can help us reflect and be ourselves.
>
> I learned to embrace my story and that we all have our unique stories, especially after collaborating with friends and seeing how different our stories were but still equally important.
>
> I learned that sharing your story through art is easier than saying it out loud.
>
> I learned narrative unit could help a lot of people relate to you.
>
> I learned how to express myself.
>
> I'm a good storyteller.

> I learned that not all poetry has to rhyme to be poetry.
>
> I learned about how poems and photos convey a whole story and that it is a beautiful way of expression.
>
> I learned that many people's stories are not told.
>
> I learned that everyone has a right to be heard.

Students' responses show their learning of the narrative unit. They highlight the importance of embracing and sharing personal stories and recognizing the uniqueness and value of everyone's experiences. Several students emphasized that art, whether through poetry or collages, can be a powerful medium for storytelling, often making it easier than verbal expression. They noted that stories, even those filled with trauma, can foster connection and reflection. The students also learned that storytelling does not require adherence to traditional writing, such as rhyming in poetry, and that everyone deserves to be heard.

In sharing how art-based autobiographical YPAR helps them reflect on who they are and their life, students explained:

> It felt like I was out of my comfort zone, but it helped me. It made it easier that I didn't just have to write; I could use other things to express myself. It did help me feel seen and heard.
>
> Telling my story in art has shown me that my story matters.
>
> It helps me to think differently.
>
> It felt kind of weird telling my story. Different kinds of art did help tell my story. The process kind of did help me feel "heard."
>
> It felt good to speak up about what happened.
>
> At first, it felt very awkward to tell my story, but soon I felt better, the different people also expressing helped with anxiety.
>
> It helped me see and remember my life.
>
> It helped me release my struggle and be a better writer/English learner.
>
> It felt good to share my story and my experience.
>
> This project made me remember my childhood and adolescence when I was 11 or 12 years old. It helped me to be clear about certain things in my life that had changed in a big way. Seeing myself now and the way I think has made me feel proud of myself.
>
> It helped me become more confident in telling stories.
>
> It felt nice knowing I have a voice. It made me feel heard because my teacher was helping me.

This second set of student responses underscores the transformative power of storytelling through art. Many students expressed initial discomfort and awkwardness in sharing their stories but noted a gradual shift toward feeling seen, heard, and more confident. Using various artistic mediums, rather than just writing, allowed them to step out of their comfort zone and facilitated self-expression in a more approachable way. This approach helped them articulate their experiences, improved their social skills, and provided emotional release. Students reflected on their personal growth, with some gaining new perspectives on their lives and feeling proud of their development.

We hope it is apparent that art-based autobiographies extend beyond the mere task of research and writing; it is a voyage of self-discovery and empowerment for students. Students' responses show how they gained skills in reflexivity and confidence in their voices from art-based autobiographies. As we reflect on their responses, we are reminded of Anzaldúa's (1987) quote, "Through writing, I find my voice, my language, which enables me to regain my power and to shape a new reality," which resonates deeply with the experiences shared by students. This reflects their journey of discovering personal empowerment through storytelling. Many found that expressing themselves through art-based methods allowed them to reclaim their narratives and articulate their thoughts and emotions more authentically. The act of storytelling, whether through the written word or visual art, became a transformative process that empowered them to reshape their realities.

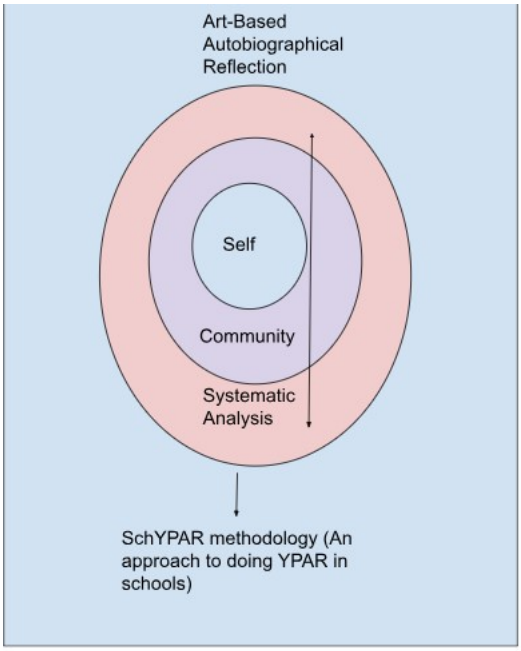


Fig. 4: Visual representation of our description of art-based autobiography

Learnings from Maggie's Interview and Reflection

Maggie's reflections on teaching YPAR provide crucial context for understanding the pedagogy and practice behind the unit described in this article. In an interview conducted at the end of the 2023–2024 school year, Maggie described the process as both "liberating and labor-intensive," emphasizing the dual demands of creating space for student voice and navigating institutional constraints.

Maggie shared that the unit was intentionally designed to help ninth-grade students develop the skill of reflection—something she described as "almost a prerequisite to issue identification." Based on previous experiences, she found that students needed opportunities to explore their own identities before they could meaningfully engage in broader social inquiry. She structured the unit to ease students into self-expression, beginning with accessible forms like collage and poetry before transitioning to narrative writing. This scaffolding, she noted, helped students "see that their stories mattered" and built trust over time.

Rather than adhering to a traditional YPAR cycle, Maggie described "bending and turning it around" to meet her classroom's needs. Students' creative work functioned as data—poems, collages, and narratives were both expressions of identity and tools for inquiry. While students did not conduct formal data analysis, Maggie framed their participation in a youth research symposium as a form of action. She sees this foundational work as preparing students for deeper research and collective action in future years.

Assessment, Maggie explained, was intentionally flexible. While she created rubrics aligned with standards, she emphasized that "if they were producing art, they were doing what I wanted them to do." Success in the unit was defined less by traditional metrics and more by effort, engagement, and authenticity. This approach allowed her to adapt expectations for students with Individual Education Plans and provide equitable access to the project. She also acknowledged the emotional labor involved in holding space for vulnerability—noting that she, too, modeled reflection by sharing her own stories with students.

Maggie spoke candidly about the challenges of teaching YPAR in the context of chronic absenteeism, limited institutional support, and standardized accountability pressures. She described how deeply rooted inequities—like food insecurity and transportation barriers—shape students' ability to engage. Still, she remained committed to creating a classroom culture rooted in relationships, choice, and care: "I'm not trying to fix everything with my class," she said, "I'm just trying to give them space."

Her reflections show the importance of teacher agency in adapting YPAR to classroom realities. Maggie's evolving approach—marked by humility, creativity, and critical reflexivity—reinforces the article's argument that teacher-led, art-based autobiography can serve as a powerful entry point into participatory research. Her interview highlights both the promise and the complexity of implementing YPAR in schools, and calls attention to the supports that teachers need to sustain this transformative work.

Discussion

Reflection as Action and Contribution in Art-Based YPAR

Both Maggie's and her students' perspectives highlight the importance of slowing down the YPAR process in K–12 settings. Maggie intentionally adapted the YPAR model to prioritize identity exploration, trust-building, and creative expression. This reflective foundation not only aligned with the goals of the English curriculum but also responded to the developmental needs of ninth-grade students who, as she observed, had "never had practice of someone listening to them." Her pedagogical choices—grounded in care, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness—resonate with work by Wager et al. (2023), who advocate for artmaking as a process of healing, theorizing, and collective transformation.

The inclusion of student voices and teacher reflection in this article represents a deliberate intervention into YPAR literature. Much existing research highlights student outcomes, but fewer studies document the day-to-day implementation decisions, tensions, and adaptations made by classroom teachers (Buckley-Marudas et al., 2024; Mirra et al., 2015). Maggie's experience illustrates how a teacher can creatively bend and stretch the YPAR framework to meet students where they are—especially in environments shaped by chronic absenteeism, standardization, and structural inequities. Her reflections also serve as a reminder that teachers, like students, are learners in the YPAR process, evolving their practice through dialogue, iteration, and uncertainty.

As students articulated in their reflections, this unit helped them feel seen, heard, and empowered. Several noted that using art allowed them to express difficult stories more comfortably than speaking or writing alone. Others described the experience as a turning point in their confidence as writers and thinkers. Importantly, these outcomes did not emerge from a single assignment or lesson, but from a cumulative process grounded in trust, relationships, and creativity. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of how art-based methods can serve not only as pedagogical tools, but also as research and reflection methodologies that affirm youth voice and lived experience.

Finally, this work offers a model for schools and educators seeking to implement YPAR in a developmentally and structurally responsive way. Rather than rushing through the phases of inquiry, this approach advocates for **a scaffolded, recursive model**, where reflective storytelling is positioned as both an end in itself and a foundation for future research and action. By embedding this work into the ninth-grade curriculum, Maggie is not only meeting standards—she is preparing students to be critical participants in their education and communities for years to come.

Implications for Practice and the Field

This approach offers a key implication for educators interested in implementing YPAR: begin with identity work and reflection before moving into issue analysis or data collection. Maggie's unit prioritized belonging and affirmation, ensuring that students had tools, language, and trust to explore their stories at

their own pace. Her scaffolded design also allowed for differentiation—especially for students with IEPs—and offered multiple entry points into research through visual, poetic, and narrative modes.

Importantly, the work also illustrates how reflective storytelling can be a form of action in its own right. When students presented their stories at a youth symposium, they not only contributed to a public dialogue about student voice—they took a public stand that their lived experience mattered. As Maggie reflected, "Even if they're just talking about basketball, that story is still valid." In contexts where youth are often silenced, pathologized, or over-surveilled, the invitation to narrate their own lives is itself a political act.

For the broader field of YPAR, this case contributes three interrelated insights:

1) **Teacher-led implementation matters**. Maggie's creative adaptation of the YPAR cycle shows how classroom educators can authentically integrate participatory methods within curriculum and standards constraints—especially in early high school grades.

2) **Art and autobiography are not add-ons—they're central methodologies**. They can scaffold students' movement from personal to political and provide accessible ways to process and present complex experience.

3) **Reflection is not a detour from action—it is action**. Particularly for younger students, reflective work lays essential groundwork for deeper inquiry, collective analysis, and community-based change in later grades.

Looking ahead, we imagine this unit as the first step in a four-year pathway, where each year builds on the previous one. As Maggie's ninth-grade students become sophomores, juniors, and seniors, they will be equipped to draw on their prior reflection to identify community issues, conduct peer-based research, and lead projects for change. This recursive approach honors student growth while embedding YPAR into the fabric of the school experience—not just as a project, but as a pedagogy of transformation.

Conclusion

This article shares how art-based autobiographical YPAR can serve as a powerful foundation for student reflection, identity development, and future activism. Maggie Rahill's classroom shows how creative storytelling—through collage, poetry, and narrative—can invite students to explore who they are and how their experiences shape the world around them. By centering both student and teacher perspectives, this work contributes to the growing field of YPAR by offering a classroom-based model that is reflective, relational, and developmentally responsive. Maggie's approach affirms that reflective storytelling is not separate from action—it is a critical step in helping students recognize their voices as sources of knowledge and power. As these students move through high school, this early grounding in self-expression and critical reflection lays the foundation for deeper inquiry and collective action. In this way, art-based YPAR becomes more than a unit—it becomes a pathway.

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Engaging with/in the Messiness of Curriculum Alongside Educators in a Trauma-Informed Microcertificate

Nathalie Reid and Thi Thuy Hang Tran

Abstract

To attend to educators' experiences as they work in the midst of competing demands, increased classroom complexity, and a growing understanding of the importance of well-being, a group of stakeholders from across Saskatchewan co-developed a microcertificate entitled *Trauma-Informed/Sensitive Pedagogies and Practices*. The microcertificate was piloted in 2023, and we used community-based action research to better understand the experiences of participants. From their feedback, experiential themes arose drawing our attention to the messiness—of time, of delivery, and of beginning and becoming—in relation to an understanding of curriculum as the dynamic interaction between teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu.

On Coming Together—An Introduction

Nathalie

My fourth day teaching was September 11, 2001. I was in Ottawa, and within minutes of the news breaking, F-18 fighter jets were flying around Parliament Hill. Students were diving under their desks screaming "They're here! We're next!" And so began a period of young people trying to make sense of their world that no longer made sense. We didn't have the language "trauma-informed/sensitive/integrated" back then. But I did feel, deeply, that something had been missed in my teacher education program. As my years in the classroom continued, I encountered other experiences that I would now story as traumatic, and that I felt ill at ease navigating. I therefore chose to study teachers' experiences of and with trauma for my doctoral research, and what I came to understand was both the need for more thinking, (un)(re)learning, and growing in the midst of the messiness of individual, collective, and structural experiences that can cause trauma. So, when I began my role at the Child Trauma Research Centre at the University of Regina, I felt the need to shape something that would be supportive of children and youth in schools, as well as those entrusted with their care. As such, in partnership with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation Professional Learning, the Treaty Education Alliance, the Centre for Continuing Education (UofR), Indigenous guidance, and a facilitator community of diverse educators, we created a microcertificate entitled Trauma-Informed/Sensitive Pedagogies and Practices.

Hang

Eleven years ago, my daughter was just starting Grade 1 at an urban elementary school in Vietnam. My daughter and I were so excited for her very first month of the first grade after transitioning from Kindergarten. However, her experiences were upended after the first week of joining the class of 30 children and one main teacher. I was shocked to see that my daughter was having nightmares every night after a long school day. In her sleep, she always cried and shouted to someone to stop beating her: "Đừng đánh con, đừng đánh con, con không làm gì sai!" in her mother tongue, which means "Don't beat me, don't beat me, I didn't do anything wrong!" I kept hearing her screams during those nights. Later on, I tried to calm her down and open a friendly, safe space to invite her to share with me what had happened at school. The truth turned out that at school, her teacher used a long wooden ruler to beat her hands and some other friends' hands because the class monitor reported some students made noise when the teacher was away from class for a teacher meeting. Every day after that beating experience, my daughter had lingering nightmares and it was hard to sleep tight at night, while during the daytime she lost her appetite and much of her weight. I started to become aware of the strong impacts of traumatic experiences on the mental health of a child/student. As a mother, I tried to learn more about trauma to best support my child. As an emerging educator, I learned about diverse ways to support not only students but also teachers.

Beginnings

A microcertificate through the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) at the University of Regina (UofR), requires the completion of three badges, or mini-courses. Our intention for this microcertificate was to offer teacher-participants (TPs) three badges focused on different aspects of trauma, as follows:

> Badge 1: Foundational knowledge of trauma, its sources, its impacts, and its behavioral manifestations in schools
>
> Badge 2: Indigenous wisdoms for walking alongside Indigenous children and youth in community in good ways
>
> Badge 3: An elective badge tailored to different audiences and needs (e.g. understanding refugee and immigrant children, youth, and families' experiences; trauma-integrated leadership; grief; prevention; etc.)[1]

At its inception, we drew together a Facilitator Community (FC) who co-created the learning engagements and whose members then became the instructors for the badges. From January 2023 to April 2023, we piloted the developed badges with 26 TPs. What drew our attention was the nested messiness of the layered interactions of a) the FC members, who held the responsibilities typically associated with the role of *teacher* b) the TPs, most of whom were adults working in school environments, coming to this microcertificate holding the responsibilities typically associated with the role of *student*; c) *the subject matter*; and (d) the opportunities and restrictions of offering the badges through *the milieu* of a digital platform. We found ourselves, in the planning stages, drawn to considering the messiness of coming alongside students of teaching/teachers of students. It was in and with this unfolding awareness that we

sought to engage the messiness of the experiences of development, pilot delivery, and reflection as we move toward additional offerings of the microcertificate.



Fig. 1. A graphic of our microcertificate

Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Our Research Journey

The following theoretical frameworks have shaped our reflective engagement with/in the messiness of the experience.

Theory of Experience

Our research takes Dewey's (1938) theory of experience as central because it has grown from the experiences of the students and teachers who are composing lives—building a narrative understanding of their lives in transition (Clandinin et al., 2013)—in the messiness of learning, teaching, and everyday life-making. Central in Dewey's (1938) theory of experience in education is his understanding of situations, which he sees as shaped by two criteria: interaction and continuity. While interaction accounts for the intersection of internal and existential conditions, continuity is defined as the temporality of experience. For Dewey, situations do not just happen but are historical and temporally directional according to the intentionality of the person in the midst of the situation (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Dewey (1938) also considered growth as the overarching goal of any experience, in terms of the quality of experience. It is meaningful that when each experience unfolds, each subsequent situation can offer us "a novel perspective to look back on the experiences leading up to, and out of, an experience, making growth provisional and emergent rather than fixed and found" (Downey & Clandinin, 2010, p. 384). This sense of experience as educative shaped the unfolding of the microcertificate's learning engagements, and we continue to draw on this sense of continuity in the shaping of this reflective space in which we inquire into the experiences of the development and pilot of the microcertificate.

The Messiness of a Curriculum of Lives

As we began, we came to understand that we were engaging an understanding of curriculum-making (Huber et al., 2011) in a curriculum of lives (Aoki, 1993). We grew in our awareness that we were engaging with a theoretical understanding of "curriculum" not as "plan" (Aoki, 1993, p. 257), but rather as a "lived curriculum" (Aoki, 1993, p. 258). This knowing reminded us of how Clandinin and Connelly (1992) suggest that curriculum "might be viewed as an account of teachers' and children's lives together in schools and classrooms … [where] the teacher is seen as an integral part of the curricular process in which teacher, learners, subject matter, and milieu are in dynamic interaction" (p. 392). This experiential understanding of curriculum as shaped by, with, and in the dynamic interaction of Schwab's (1973) four commonplaces of curriculum—teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu—invites engaging with/in messiness. According to Schwab (1973), while the *teacher* is the one who wants something more for students than rote learning, the *learner* is the one composing their lives on learning landscapes with different "personal histories" (p. 518). With regard to *subject matter*, Schwab (1973) believed that the contents of subjects should be flexible rather than being seen as fixed structures. The fourth commonplace that Schwab includes is *milieu*, conveying the contexts of teaching and learning. In this paper we use this framework to untangle some of the messiness of the experiences. Schwab (1973) also offers the pathway followed by this paper: he names *discovery*, *coalescence*, and *utilization* (p. 501) as operations, and we draw on these operations in this paper in order to understand, analyze, and shape hopeful forward-looking stories for the microcertificate.

Methodology: Community-Based Action Research

Having seen our work originate from community and be dedicated to community, we embraced community-based action research as our methodology. Strand et al. (2003) offer three significant features of community-based action research, showing that it "is a collaborative enterprise between academic researchers and community members," "validates multiple sources of knowledge and promotes the use of multiple methods of discovery and dissemination of the knowledge produced," and "has as its goal social action and social change for the purpose of achieving social justice" (p. 6). In addition, Strand et al. (2003) focus on "collective/collaborative learning that de-emphasizes hierarchy, including authority differences between teacher and student," "demystification of conventional knowledge, including the notion that objectivity is impossible, that knowledge is not neutral, and that people's 'lived experiences' are valid sources of knowledge," and "teaching for social change" (pp. 11–12). These goals again strengthen our intention in supporting the development of, delivery of, and reflection on the microcertificate.

From the outset, we drew on specific conceptualizations to shape the direction and development of the microcertificate. Here we highlight the three most influential.

Composing Lives in Transition

Clandinin et al. (2013) foreground five qualities that shape our narrative understanding of composing lives in transition. These qualities include that transitions shift over time and place; that we compose lives as a process of change; that there is a need to stay open to understanding transitions as liminal spaces; that improvisation is an integral part of transition; and that imagination and relationship are not separated from transitions. Significantly, when we began to think about the conceptualization of composing lives in transition in teachers' lives, we began to understand more of the complexities that drew the TPs personally and professionally. Understandings of trauma are a relatively new transition in classroom/school relationships, and we sense the counterstories that bump against the dominant narratives of thriving at school. We were drawn to attend to the complexities—life dynamics, time constraints, multiple diversities, etc.—that are essential to understanding the teachers' experiences in this messiness. We shaped the microcertificate in ways hopeful of supporting the TPs' becoming, striving to understand the TPs' stories in "more diverse and complex ways, in the shaping and reshaping in embodied moments of transition" (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 256).

Trauma-Informed/Sensitive Pedagogies and Practices

The microcertificate is grounded in trauma-informed/sensitive pedagogies and practices. Nathalie Reid, who is one of the program designers and facilitators and also the first author of this paper, has done much research on trauma and trauma-informed/sensitive pedagogies and practices. In her doctoral project, Reid (2020) moved away from more clinical understandings of trauma (e.g. Harris & Fallot, 2001) to center a more experiential understanding of trauma. She drew on the work from the *Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative* (2013), or TLPI, which differentiates between *trauma informed* and *trauma sensitive*:

> TLPI believes it is important to distinguish between the terms "trauma sensitive" and "trauma-informed" in order to recognize the different roles of schools and behavioral health providers. The term "trauma sensitive" helps emphasize that educators are not expected to take on the role of therapists. (para. 5–6)

This understanding has significantly shaped our microcertificate's content and modes of delivery, but as the common language is still *trauma informed*, we retained the word for the title. However, the development of the microcertificate focused on moving away from notions of service delivery to clients and toward a more experiential understanding of trauma.

Etuaptmumk (Two-Eyed Seeing)

We grounded this project in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action through the practice of Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall's concept of *Etuaptmumk* (Two-Eyed Seeing), which calls all people to bring together their different ways of knowing and being in order to shape a better world for future generations. Marshall describes Two-Eyed Seeing as "to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and to see from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to use both of these eyes together" (as cited in Bartlett et al., 2012, p. 335).

Our practice of Two-Eyed Seeing drew us to consider the understanding that "in the context of post-secondary education, [Indigenization] involves bringing Indigenous knowledge and approaches together with Western knowledge systems" (Wilson, 2018), thus enabling learning across the systems, with the intention of "epistemic insight, the awareness of knowledge and knowledge provenance, that permits collateral and learning" (Moorman et al., 2021, p. 204). Two-Eyed Seeing facilitates the relational and ethical pedagogies and practices in areas of trauma. As such, from the project's inception, the Facilitator Community worked alongside an Elder who offered wisdom and guidance in the creation of each badge.

Shaping the Facilitator Community

At the project's inception, I (Nathalie) felt that in order to create something supportive, responsive, and meaningful, it would take a much wider circle. While this would invite a less linear pathway, it felt critical that whatever was to be created for community would be created by, with, and in that community. I reached out to the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, Professional Learning (STFPL) so as to begin building the relationships I felt would best support this project's development. I was connected with Nicole Turcotte, an associate director with STFPL who was already responsible for a myriad of learning engagements with teachers. Together, we decided that in order for this project to be representative of the needs and experiences in Saskatchewan classrooms, we needed to build a Facilitator Community (FC). Our intention for this community was for its members to be representative of the experiential, professional, cultural, sex, gender, age, career-lifecycle, and other diversities present in schools. In May 2023, STFPL provided facilitator training to the FC as we spent time building community and planning badges for the microcertificate.

We then subdivided the FC into badge teams based on members' interests. These teams were responsible for the content and organization of their respective badges. From June to September 2023, each badge team met online to finish planning their badge. The microcertificate was marketed in November/December 2023, and the 25 spots for the pilot filled within six hours of being made available. The pilot began in January 2024. The members of the badge team responsible for shaping that particular badge became its instructors. TPs each earned three badges, thus earning the microcertificate. As this was a pilot, we obtained TPs' feedback at the end of each badge, and at the end of the microcertificate.

Navigating Alongside Teacher Participants

It was a central commitment of the FC's work to always strive to understand both the commonalities and the complexities of the TPs' experiences. Each TP came with their unique experiences and circumstances. As such, while laying a foundation together, the FC strove to always attend to who the TPs were, who they were becoming, what they wanted to know, and what they wanted to do.

Feedback from Teacher Participants

TPs offered formal feedback through the Centre for Continuing Education's post-badge feedback questionnaire; the FC also invited them to participate, on a voluntary basis, in community-based action research data collection. Our intention was to continuously draw on this feedback loop to contribute to the microcertificate's ongoing evolution. Each of these data sets underwent thematic analysis with particular themes reinforcing the emerging "messiness" of this kind of work. Additionally, the authors of this paper engaged in dialogic reflection, laying our experiences alongside those described by FC members and the TPs. The following section shares the key themes that surfaced through our analytic process as they called and continue to call us to engage directly with the messiness.

Discovery: Messiness in the Midst

The Messiness of Time

Working alongside young people and colleagues who navigate their lives with trauma is a process that takes *time*. Often, negotiating inappropriate or hypervigilant behaviors in classrooms takes *time* away from classroom instruction or practice time. Educators are often encouraged to practice self-care *on their own time*, of which they have very little. This is a complexity with which we wrestled from the project's inception. As we developed and offered the microcertificate, we continued to ask: How could we be offering ways to *make time* by *taking time*? In the questionnaires, we invited feedback on our ongoing question of how to best satisfy the 14-hour requirement: what would work better—a weekend, four 2.5-hour sessions, or three longer sessions? We wondered if winter/spring break might be more amenable. We wondered about travel time: would TPs prefer to travel and be face-to-face, or would they rather save the travel time? What day of the week would be best? We wondered about other, outside-of-school commitments. These deliberations shaped the FC's decisions.

We decided to use observation and to ask TPs about their preferences during their participation. One observation was that the number of TPs decreased over the course of the three badges (in January, there were 26 participants, and in April there were 16). We used the TP Feedback Form to gain valuable information from the TPs regarding time preferences and constraints. One TP noted, "March was AWFUL," while another noted that they would prefer "October, January, April—slower times." However, as we engaged with the messiness, another TP noted, "There is never a great time, but I think Feb–May was a good choice." Some TPs preferred the 3 hour class sessions saying, "It worked better for my other commitments to have fewer evenings to meet. I don't mind lengthier class time." However, others preferred four meetings of 2.5 hours, admitting, "I struggled to pay attention during the 3 hour class—it's a long Zoom [video call]."

Another TP noted, "I would avoid the school breaks because I think educators don't take enough 'recovery' time as it is," which echoed some of the tensions around time and planning we were experiencing and attempting to navigate. This made us ask, how did we become yet another demand on

an educator's time to inquire into trauma sensitivity, in trauma-sensitive ways? These questions shaped and continue to shape not only scheduling decisions, but also class and homework requirements. We engaged deeply with and in the messiness of *time* in life as we continued to reflect on the microcertificate's offerings.

The Messiness of Delivery

Another aspect the FC wrestled with was the "how" of delivery. Our FC comprised people from across Saskatchewan, and we met mostly over Zoom, except during a two-day session in Saskatoon dedicated to planning the individual badges. While we all felt that this face-to-face gathering was exponentially more productive and enjoyable, we decided that we would offer the pilot entirely via Zoom so as to maximize its geographic reach, and decrease barriers to participation. This was well received by one of the TPs, who said, "I really liked that it was virtual and we could connect with educators throughout the province. It was very valuable to hear about others' experiences and divisions." TPs noted that they enjoyed not having to travel to go to class, but that three hours on Zoom after a long day's work was difficult. One TP also noted, "I would not have been able to join if it were face-to-face because I wouldn't have made it to Regina in time after work"; others advocated for a more blended delivery, requesting that both face-to-face and virtual options be offered.

The Messiness of Beginning and Becoming

As with any "beginning," we experienced the expected growing pains, technological glitches, and pacing issues. Additional points of being and becoming also surfaced.

The Messiness of Coming From Different Beginning Points and Wanting Different Things

As each badge comprised nine hours of class time and five hours of independent work, a difficulty that arose was our awareness that TPs were coming with different experiences, different perspectives, different career and life trajectories, etc., and as such, with different understandings of trauma. Thus, we shaped the Foundations badge intentionally in order to create a common understanding, and we received competing responses. One TP shared, "I expected the course materials to address the outcomes. It did, and so much more. Discussions and readings left me wanting to continue to learn," while another participant shared, "I think we could have dove deeper." Other responses were also conflicting, ranging from "useful" to "wishing for more."

People come to learning engagements with a sense of what they hope to accomplish, and most students come to a Zoom engagement with memories of their COVID-19 experiences. As such, for some participants, smaller breakout-room discussions were an excellent place of safe exploration, while for others they wanted more whole-group instruction from "the experts."[2] One TP articulated, "The breakout groups are great in Zoom, but keep groups similar for the same class. Too much change creates a disconnect and resets the conversation and doesn't allow it to build." Another wrote, "I found the content of the class thought-provoking and it was easy to apply to my work. However, … there was less time in

breakout groups discussing readings and case studies and this diluted the value of the class for me." Yet, another participant shared, "I think I was expecting more content delivery by the instructors." Being in the midst of, and trying to balance, the messiness of desires and learning comfort/preferences mirrors the discussions the FC had around how much content to "dump" onto students while simultaneously shaping learning engagements that would build their confidence to be able to navigate in trauma-sensitive ways following the completion of the microcertificate. The FC was drawn toward shaping learning spaces of inquiry, while some of the TPs wanted more direct instruction, shaping a messiness requiring reflection.

The Messiness of Intentions

The FC members, with the guidance of the Elder, set their intentions to shape something useful and responsive. The TPs intended to give up some of their time to learn. The FC felt the responsibility of activating every minute. As such, there were outside-of-class readings offered to the TPs that the facilitators used as springboards for the learning engagements during the synchronous sessions. The intention was not to dissect the readings but to have them enrich the synchronous learning. The messiness arose when we realized that several of the TPs were engaging in the course as though it were a more typical course where the readings would be directly addressed in class. While the FC's intentions were good, they did cause some frustration for some TPs, with one participant stating that "the discussions and conversations were usually very good. However, I felt that there wasn't enough connection between the posted readings and the class activities and the assignments. I initially tried to read all/most of the posted materials, but gave up when they weren't referenced as part of the class." This TP's understanding of the purpose of the readings was for academic engagement, while the facilitators' intention was for the class time to extend beyond the readings. This resulted in some tension within the feedback, ranging from "this course exceeded my expectations" to "No. I wanted higher academic content" and "I learned more about how to work with Indigenous youth and their families, and I learned valuable information about the Medicine Wheel, and ways to incorporate this into my practice." Each of these TPs offers invaluable insight that contributes to our engaging with/in the messiness of course orchestration and delivery.

Coalescence: What We Are Learning

Engaging in the messiness supports us to improve the microcertificate. It is our sense that in *thinking with* (Morris, 2002) the four commonplaces of curriculum (teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu) as a theoretical interpretive framework, we can untangle some of the messiness in order to shape hopeful forward-looking stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) for this microcertificate. In this section, we use the commonplaces to inquire into the complexities of the threads shared above, shaped as a conversation between Hang and Nathalie.

Teacher Commonplace

Hang

The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (2024) reported that "over 10 years, the total number of students increased from 173,548 in 2014–15 to 195,582 in 2023–24, representing an increase of 20,034 or 12.7 percent" (p. 2). I believe these statistics show how much pressure has been put on the K–12 teachers. This increase of 12.7 percent, plus the diversity of students' cultural, social, personal, historical, familial, religious, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, has definitely brought more challenges to the teachers. The microcertificate's TPs enriched our teaching and learning with their own lived stories of being situated under countless constraints. Often, the TPs became the "teachers" revealing for all present the layered complexities of their daily experiences. All of these together situate teachers within the themes of the messiness of time, of responsibility, and of becoming. However, the design and content of the microcertificate have made the teachers more grounded in this world of messiness in ways supportive of flourishing. One said,

> I appreciated having an Indigenous knowledge keeper and an immigrant as part of the badges because it helped with the authenticity of information being taught. I really enjoyed that the group was small enough and non-judgmental, so that we could ask questions and dive deeper into discussions in breakout rooms.

The TPs' understanding that parents, guardians, and community members are also teachers in our midst will contribute to enhancing the microcertificate.

Nathalie

Thinking with the teachers' commonplace draws me to think deeply about the unique simultaneous positioning of people who teach as learner and teacher. This thinking pulls forward the threads of the FC's intentions and decisions. Building on what Hang said above, long-term flourishing was often the product when the intentions were supported by, and taken up by, the TPs through the learning engagements shaped by the FC. As such, Schwab's sense of the role of the teacher might invite a move away from the idea of teacher as expert, pouring knowledge through a metaphorical conduit (Olson & Craig, 2005) into passive students. Rather, it supports us to engage in the messiness and move toward being facilitators of learning invitations while foregrounding the importance of making this intention extremely clear from the outset. It is my sense that if we had positioned the conversation spaces as places of deep inquiry, we might have had less tension with the delivery. In thinking with the "role" of facilitator or teacher through the lens Schwab offers, we have learned that clarity and communication of intention is a significant aspect we will draw into future offerings of this microcertificate.

Student Commonplace

Hang

When taking a student-centered approach as the orientation for our teaching and learning activities during the microcertificate, we respected that students were vulnerable when being exposed to information about trauma. Understanding this, we acknowledged that trauma can happen at any time and anywhere; therefore, throughout the three badges, we also focused on supporting the TPs. Learning about different theories and practices helped build the TPs' confidence in stepping out of comfort zones to best support the messiness of their, and their students', experiences of/with trauma. One participant shared about her experience after attending the microcertificate: "The readings, videos, and assignments were directly connected to (my) teaching and leading in our current world of education. After each class I felt I could take my learnings and implement them into practice immediately." As students of this microcertificate, the TPs drew our attention to understanding that they, as teachers, need to pay more attention to the increasingly diverse student needs while having limited time, limited familiarity with diverse cultures and languages, limited support resources, limited facilities, and increasing demands. This drew us, as the FC, to witness and reflect on the TPs experiences to shape future versions of the microcertificate.

Nathalie

I agree with Hang. Much in the same way that the FCs were positioned in the midst of complexity, so too were the TPs who were also evaluating the "experience of the experience" (Feiner, 1970). As such, their intentions, desires, and expectations are all interwoven, are all in dynamic interaction not only with the content, but also with the facilitators shaping the learning engagements. This complexity is also the engagement's greatest strength. Through reflecting on the often contradicting responses, we have been able to better understand the TPs' needs and intentions. There is clarity in the messiness, and this clarity emanates from centering the TPs as "holders and makers of important knowledge" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992), not just as students.

Subject Matter Commonplace

Nathalie

The messiness, as noted above, underscores the importance of balance. One TP spoke of their deepening understanding of the Medicine Wheel and how that understanding is now applicable in their professional and personal life. TPs articulated they wanted some academic reading, but not too much; they wanted some direct instruction, but they enjoyed the community that was created and wanted more; they wanted to extend the forum beyond the course to continue in digital conversation, but not too much. The interaction of the above-named threads demonstrates that balance in each badge and across the microcertificate is what is desirable. One TP reflected,

> This experience was incredibly personal. It offered many opportunities for participants to share their learning and personal experiences as they fit into the badge content. Instructors took the time to get to know the participants which made each class feel relevant to teaching and leading in these spaces.

Hang

To create the balance Nathalie identifies, our microcertificate badges are designed to walk alongside the TPs from the foundational knowledge of trauma-informed/sensitive pedagogies, to supporting the refugee and immigrant students and families, and to better understanding the experiences of Indigenous children, youth, and families. There is complexity in the breadth of the subject matter. Yet, the TPs shared that theories and practices of trauma-informed/sensitive pedagogies can be applied across the disciplines, which supports them as they engage in the messiness of optimizing the holistic and sustainable teaching and learning.

Milieu Commonplace

Nathalie

In delivering this microcertificate, there were two milieu considerations: the first was all of the contextual factors that shaped the TPs and FCs' experiences that drew them into the course. The second was the digital platform offered by Zoom. We are all aware that we are living in the aftermath of the pandemic, and its downstream effects are palpable. We are also living in difficult times with economic crises, food crises, a housing crisis, etc. The impacts of these intersecting complexities are experienced in schools daily. Anecdotally, many of our TPs joined the microcertificate in order to better understand and serve the children and youth they work alongside. TPs shared their desire to shape their school milieus and their relationships in thoughtful, caring, and trauma-sensitive ways. The milieu of Zoom offered interesting complexities. Yet, while this platform is usually criticized for its fragmentation, we were able to create a sense of community in a very short time through maximizing the milieu's potential, which proved to benefit the teachers, one of whom shared: "Yes, this worked for my scheduling. I was able to meet synchronous in evenings and then continue the asynchronous learning on my own time (like once my kids were in bed)."

Hang

In addition to what Nathalie said, the desire to support the education of the whole child (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018) calls us to acknowledge and value the messiness of the milieu commonplace. We believe that teaching and learning do not isolate the students from the messy world around them but, rather, teaching and learning should be interwoven with the milieu in which the learners and teachers are working, studying, and living—in the same way that we honored their experiences (Dewey, 1938) at the beginning of this paper. Drawing on the importance of the messiness, both FCs and TPs engaged with/in the milieu's elements including but not limited to social,

political, historical, ecological, familial, linguistic, and cultural contexts as inseparable from trauma-informed/sensitive practices bridging learning and living. In this same vein, we saw that using a virtual space could offer a higher degree of access. Just as our FC was composed of people from across Saskatchewan, so too were the TPs, several of whom acknowledged that had the course been face-to-face, it would not have been accessible to them. Another aspect that the TPs highlighted was their appreciation of some of the functionalities of the platform, such as the discussion forum. TPs wrote that they enjoyed "Dr. Nathalie's contributions in the chat on each of them" and "appreciated Nicole [Turcotte]'s strategies in encouraging Zoom participation." These foreground the possibility of shaping a relational and responsive milieu in the dynamic interaction of Schwab's four commonplaces.

Utilization: Our Forward-Looking Recommendations for Teachers Who Are Composing Lives in Messiness

Currently, we seem to be living in a time with a pervasive sense of transition. The world is transitioning out of a pandemic. Canada is in a time of economic transition. Globally and nationally, we are in a time of political transition, with elections occurring at multiple levels of government. Globally, we are also in a time of knowledge transition in multiple ways, ranging from the emergence of AI to the dramatically increased knowledge about health, trauma, and well-being. In the midst of all these transitions, and the resulting messiness, educators and young people come alongside each other in schools. It has been our FC's experience that educators are seeking out ways to support the young people they interact with who are navigating these transitional times, reportedly with increased anxiety, discontent, fear, and anger, which often manifest as negative behaviors in schools. Thus, our FC shaped this microcertificate into a hopeful forward-looking story supportive not only of young people, but also of the well-being of educators. The complexities are more easily understood through attending to the dynamic interactions of teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu. This framework supported our engagement with, and inquiry into, the complexities of this emergent microcertificate, offering us a pathway to inquire deeply into our senses of curriculum as co-created in the midst of the FC and then as co-created again with the TPs. We encourage others considering similar ventures to attend closely to these commonplaces as they untangle their experiences. Taking up a similar reflective inquiry for any program or development in education holds the possibility of rich data and even richer learning.

Gaps in the literature focus on trauma-informed professional development for teachers and their attitudes toward trauma-informed pedagogies, and there is little evidence linking changes in teacher attitudes to changes in practices (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024). Our work revealed insights into the practical experiences of the teachers during the microcertificated. The understandings from the teachers' feedback will continue to shape future iterations of the microcertificate. The TPs called on us to consider how they are currently stuck in their dilemma between a wish to learn and develop professionally amidst many constraints of time, resources, budget, students' diversity, their mental health and well-being, etc. Our work also suggests more research is needed to understand the effectiveness of microcertificate programs in preventing teachers' burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and even leaving the field. While

microcertificates and teachers' mental health are not new topics, we felt that our approach to creating this microcertificate with a Facilitator Community guided by an Elder was both holistic and innovative. Finally, (re)thinking with/in the messiness supports forward-looking hopes not only for the microcertificate itself, but for how it might continue to support teachers composing their lives alongside students composing their lives, in communities composing their lives in messiness.

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Notes

1. For more information, please visit the University of Regina's page about the microcertificate: https://destiny.uregina.ca/public/category/courseCategoryCertificateProfile.do?method=load&certificateId=1523032

2. None of the instructors/presenters/facilitators would name themselves as experts, but rather as learners and facilitators. This participant's language draws us to deeply consider the pervasive power of "expertise" and the hierarchies that are sustained within that structure. While we tried to move away from a deficit sense of non-knowing by facilitating conversations in which the participants could draw on their experience to think with each other, this desire to return to a "right" and "wrong" way of "doing" trauma-sensitive work calls us to consider the messiness and discomfort many educators feel when bumping up against their typical assumptions of school and of professional development.

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You Cannot Find the Calm Without the Storm: Creating Spaces for Embracing Change

Sakina Rizvi and Aleesha Noreen

Abstract

Educators need to provide students with opportunities for experiential learning, inquiry-based exploration, and collaborative discussion. Students bring an amalgam of diverse ideas to the classroom; knowledge-building principles provide a framework for inclusive learning experiences that strengthen engagement, content retention, and positive well-being. In this article, we explore how educators can use knowledge building and holistic pedagogy to create scintillating learning spaces. Such environments help students develop a deep sense of personal and social accountability. To illustrate our reflections, we accompany our conclusions with vivid collage art that captures the beauty of complex human experiences.

Introduction

As I (Aleesha) stared at the assignment on my computer screen, I knew my student had plagiarized. I felt no anger or frustration; I recognized that their choice to use an AI software was a product of their perceived inability to complete the task. This student was talented and intelligent but feared the possibility of receiving a low mark. When I shared the experience with Sakina, she mentioned that she had seen a rise in such incidents in her classroom as well. When we reflected on why these students misrepresented their work, we recognized that such choices were a result of complex lived experiences. There are no "bad" children; students are products of the conditions they are socialized in. When a child makes a mistake, it is important for teachers to ensure that the mistake does not define the child's identity. Labels like "bad" or "difficult" overshadow opportunities for improvement. These labels imply that students' choices are a result of their identity, and the education system needs to take no accountability for them. As teachers, we should reconceptualize the cultures, norms, and practices that lead our students to such decisions.

Teaching is learning; it is an endeavor that demands continuous reflection and growth. Our efforts as researchers have emerged from our learning and teaching experiences. Children possess a natural passion, excitement, and eagerness toward learning new concepts. Seeing a child have a "light-bulb moment" is one of the most fulfilling experiences for a teacher to witness. We became teachers because of the transformative power of these interactions. We propose the integration of holistic pedagogy and knowledge building to create classrooms that are conscious of students' lived experiences, relationships, and self-perceptions. Holistic pedagogy and knowledge building tap into the inherent goodness present within every child as they create spaces that inculcate students with a self-driven desire for learning. When students have an intrinsic motivation for their education, they develop a deeper sense of personal and social accountability.

With the rise of AI software and technological advancements, it is becoming increasingly difficult for students to find purpose and meaning in producing authentic work. Our classrooms should produce conscientious individuals who are confident in their unique abilities to contribute to society. The individuals that make up our world and impact its present and future are the students who sit in the classrooms we teach in. Change and complexity are an inherent part of human experience; embracing these states helps educators and students accept the messiness of being as a natural step toward growth and progression. In this article, our experiences as teachers inform the narratives and visual stories we present. We hope this work will help researchers and educators create learning spaces that celebrate transitions and transformations as exciting opportunities for student empowerment.

> Teaching is a wonderful way to learn. (Dweck, 2006, p. 201)

Holistic Education: Mind, Body, & Soul

Holistic education is about nurturing human potential to create the most suitable space for growth. Seeds grow when they are cultivated with care and provided with adequate food, water, and sunlight. A combination of parts must come together to form a whole. Similarly, for students, an amalgamation of approaches needs to be integrated to cater to the various spheres that structure mental well-being (D'Intino & Wang, 2021; Gaitas et al., 2024; Shareefa, 2021). Holistic learning is anchored in educative environments that help students find meaning in their lives and the world they operate within (Lauricella & MacAskill, 2015). Nava (2001) explains this paradigm as follows:

> The student is not seen as a brain to be programmed, but as a human being with unlimited inner potential, a sensitive being oriented toward learning, a spiritual being in search of meaning, an aesthetic being capable of recognizing life's inherent beauty, who embodies multiple dimensions of the human experience. (p. 44)

Holistic pedagogy considers the entirety of human experience and the various aspects that influence these experiences in the intellectual, spiritual, physical, emotional, and social realms of life.

Learning involves a myriad of cognitive processes; as educators, we must develop a multi-dimensional view of intelligence to facilitate spaces that are inclusive of diverse learning styles. When teachers engage in an interdisciplinary approach to education, they create a nurturing space for students to explore their identity, interests, and capacity. Every child can actualize their full potential if they are provided with adequate guidance and support. Unfortunately, many learning spaces have become environments that stifle creativity, curiosity, and critical thinking. As a result, students do not feel motivated to learn, and educators struggle to address challenges related to class engagement and content retention (Legault et al., 2006).

Some educators may feel that prioritizing well-being is impractical in the presence of other pressing responsibilities. However, mental well-being is a prerequisite for academic success. In other words, if educators invest in students' mental well-being, strong academic performance will follow. However, if they neglect to prioritize well-being, it becomes much harder to sustain academic growth, engagement, and motivation (Gholam, 2019). Considering well-being does not necessitate a complete replacement of

all assessments and pedagogical strategies. Rather, it simply requires a shift in mindset that can begin with small exercises that help students gain opportunities for leadership and initiative. Relinquishing power to students and repositioning their role within a teaching capacity opens opportunities for meaningful discussion and growth in the academic and socioemotional spheres of their lives. The collage below (Figure 1) encapsulates the juxtaposition of children who receive support when they ask for it in comparison to those who are unable to find spaces of warmth and belonging.



Fig. 1: Reaching. A collage that depicts the inner turmoil that students experience when they do not feel welcome or valued in a learning environment. Collage by Sakina Rizvi.

Standardized teaching approaches do not celebrate the individuality of every learner or allow for students to participate as active knowledge contributors. Such models position learners as dependent passive beings in the process of knowledge formation, and it is with this understanding that educators are traditionally conditioned to adopt an authoritarian role in the classroom (Patton, 2015). This paradigm encourages conformity to standards that homogenize individual learning needs and differences. Students who can meet these expectations are labeled as "high achieving," "gifted," and "smart," while those who do not fit a standardized mold are excluded from being categorized as "intelligent." Learners form perceptions of themselves based on these labels and compare their efforts to their peers. Nava (2001) mentions the following in this regard:

> Comparison is a practice that destroys the love of learning. It instills shame in children over their performance, makes them afraid to participate, and crushes their dignity. Comparison in education must always imply the rejection of one human being over another and promote the idea that one person is better than the next. Holistic education, on the other hand, proposes education free of comparison, in order to create a culture where everyone is a winner. (p. 28)

Comparing students on the basis of a fixed standard can be likened to fitting different shapes within a single mold. It is not fair to punish students for not conforming to a mold that they were not designed to fit. To empower students with the life skills that are critical for success in the professional world, we must relinquish power processes that structure hierarchical forms of knowledge creation. Students naturally look up to their teachers for support and will only learn to challenge ideas and form new experiences when they are given the space to explore—*the space to be the teacher*. Educators need to provide students with opportunities for facilitating discussions, guiding inquiries, and forming innovative ways for assessing achievement (Kemp et al., 2002; Lee & Johnston-Wilder, 2013; Lyons & Brasof, 2020). Relational teaching approaches create a class community where students feel confident in taking on leadership roles. In addition, such an environment welcomes questioning and critical analysis for a more engaging and involved learning experience.

Immersive educational environments should provide learners with pragmatic experiences grounded in the values of community and collective growth. John Dewey was a social reformer and philosopher who advocated this view: he strongly believed that classrooms should be spaces that prepare students for the real world (Dewey, 1966). De-contextualized academic content is outdated and difficult for learners to internalize due to the lack of relevance (Williams, 2017). When teachers design immersive hands-on projects, students are challenged to tap into their intellectual, social, emotional, and physical abilities for a more holistic learning experience. Moving a step forward, knowledge-building pedagogy recenters all classroom practices around the learner.

Knowledge Building: Students Chart the Course of Their Learning

Knowledge building is when a group of learners collectively take on the responsibility to advance the state of knowledge in their community, ultimately producing knowledge for public good (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2008; Scardamalia, 2002; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2003; Tarchi et al., 2013). This is an approach guided by 12 principles and is centered around constructing knowledge through inquiry (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2014; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2021). The principles that drive knowledge building allow students to curate their own learning experiences with *epistemic agency* at the center of knowledge building activity. Epistemic agency in knowledge building allows students to choose the direction of their learning, define their learning objectives, chart the course of achieving these objectives, and re-assess, redefine, and re-evaluate their work as they move through their inquiry (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2014; Zhang et al., 2022; Zhu, Chai, & Ding). This empowers learners with the confidence to lead and shape their own educational experiences.

As students curate their learning, their lived experiences inform the direction of their explorations. The knowledge-building principle of *real ideas and authentic problems* states that the inquiries that learners desire to explore are often those authentic to their own experiences (Hong et al., 2015; Scardamalia, 2002; Zhang et al., 2022). When learning in the classroom is based on authentic problems, realities, and ideas, students engage in knowledge work that is anchored in their subjective experiences of reality. Such knowledge work is the same work that is undertaken by professionals to solve the real, authentic

issues present in society. In this way, knowledge building prepares students for the professional world. The principle of *pervasive knowledge building* states that knowledge work can explore relevant problems across a varied range of subject areas (Hong et al., 2015; Ma & Scardamalia, 2022; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2021). Thus, engaging in knowledge work teaches students to employ an interdisciplinary skill set to address issues in a holistic manner. This also teaches them that collaboration is crucial for knowledge work because the diverse strengths of a group provide a larger toolkit that learners can use to comprehensively tackle any issue.

Students' sense of belonging to the classroom community impacts how well they can navigate academic challenges (Abdollahi & Noltemeyer, 2018; Chiu et al., 2016). Positive classroom norms foster this sense of belonging. In knowledge building, the principle of *democratizing knowledge* fosters such norms: the contributions and differences of all learners are valued, and the ownership of collective progress and community achievements is shared by all members of the community (Cacciamani et al., 2021; Scardamalia, 2002; Zhu, Chai, & Ding, 2023). As students engage in knowledge building, they need to move from viewing their work in isolation to viewing it as part of the collective community effort. Low-achieving students may feel a sense of isolation and detachment from their community, but this principle integrates their efforts with those of their peers to help them see themselves as part of the collective. These are the positive norms that create an inclusive and safe classroom space.

Knowledge building challenges the perceptions of educators and learners. Educators typically believe that low-achieving students will have difficulty operating in pedagogical models such as knowledge building because it requires high-order thinking skills (Chan & Lee, 2007; Yang et al., 2020). However, research shows that knowledge building benefits these learners and helps them form deeper understandings of the content under study (Chan & Lee, 2007; Yang et al., 2016). Thus, it is important for educators to self-reflect and identify ability-based biases in their decision-making.

Reconceptualizing Valuable Work

Perceptions of success in learning are typically based on a student's ability to replicate existing knowledge (Ahmad et al., 2020; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2005). However, in knowledge building, the principle of *collective cognitive responsibility* states that student work is valuable when it contributes to advancing the state of community knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2016; Tan et al., 2006; Yang et al., 2020). The kind of work that advances the state of community knowledge is a comprehensive exploration of the inquiry at hand. The principle of *idea diversity* states that to understand an idea comprehensively, all accurate, opposing, and contrasting explanations need to be considered (Chen et al., 2015; Scardamalia, 2002; Tan et al., 2006). Thus, knowledge building redefines valuable work. Inaccurate hypotheses are important as they open new avenues of exploration; eliminating irrelevant and incorrect explanations is as important as recognizing correct ones, as they can become stepping stones for moving the work forward. Additionally, this process teaches learners the 21st-century competency skill of effective collaboration (Chalkiadaki, 2018; Geisinger, 2016; Pinto et al., 2016). Knowledge-building research shows that learning from inaccurate explanations strengthens the collective skill set of the group and is crucial to propel the problem-solving process forward (Chai & Zhu, 2021;

Chan et al., 1997; Zhu, Khanlari, & Resendes, 2023). This is an especially empowering and encouraging move for learners who are on the low-achieving side of the spectrum. They will see that their contributions, irrelevant of accuracy, are as important to the collective effort as those of their high-achieving peers.

Collaborative work, agency, creativity, and metacognition are some of the most essential 21st-century skills for intellectual growth (Geisinger, 2016; Gut, 2011; Van Laar et al., 2017). These skills can also accelerate the academic progress of low-achieving students (Yang et al., 2020; Zohar & Dori, 2003). In the case of such learners, teachers usually focus on their ability to regurgitate information, thus losing the chance to develop critical competencies that are needed in contemporary professional spaces (Kaufman, 2013; Kim et al., 2019; Silva, 2009). In knowledge building, all ideas, accurate or not, can always be revised, edited, improved, and built on under the principle of *improvable ideas* (Chai & Zhu, 2021; Zhang et al., 2009). Whereas improvements are traditionally provided for the work of low-achieving students, within knowledge building, all ideas are improvable no matter how promising they are. Low-achieving students often experience negative emotions because they struggle to acquire the skills they need (Woolf et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2022). A collective culture of group feedback can help educators create a positive learning environment where students do not feel singled out when their work is critiqued. Improvement is the driving force of knowledge-building work, and it is not a sign of low competency or achievement. Such environments may be challenging at first, but they create safe spaces that help all students excel.

It is in these spaces that students have the opportunity to think critically and reflect deeply on their learning and experiences. I (Aleesha) learned about knowledge building three years ago, during my Master of Education, and implemented it in a Grade 10 Careers class. Students used knowledge-building principles to interact with their weekly readings. They were asked to build on each other's contributions, and the student-centered nature of knowledge building challenged them to find harmony amongst ideas that initially appeared to exist in a state of chaos. In their efforts to make sense of their individual and collective work, they not only embraced the challenge of this transition but used it as an opportunity to embrace diverse viewpoints. When knowledge building immerses students in these experiences, it becomes a reflection of how problem-solving happens in the real world. The collage below (Figure 2) depicts students' efforts to harmonize their ideas and experiences for the emergence of valuable connections.



Fig. 2. Searching. This collage shows learners walking through the messiness and chaos of ideas that emerge from their unique experiences, knowledge, and skills in order to focus on the value they have to offer to their classroom and society. Collage by Sakina Rizvi.

New Directions: Holistic Pedagogy, Knowledge Building, and Plagiarism

Holistic pedagogy empowers educators with the tools to reconceptualize policies, pedagogies, and practices that structure exclusionary learning spaces. Our education system is composed of students from a diverse range of backgrounds. Equity in education necessitates a consideration of individual learning needs, as opposed to a homogenized one-size-fits-all approach (Levinson & Brighouse, 2022). When education systems and classrooms are not able to offer inclusive opportunities for growth, disadvantaged students develop learning gaps, while students who have access to external resources propel forward (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Vavrus, 2008). If students' needs are not addressed and the gaps persist over their years of schooling, learners will likely develop self-debilitating beliefs about their capacity and academic potential. As a result, they may turn to plagiarism (Akbari & Sahibzada, 2020; Lodge et al., 2018).

Plagiarism is to present someone else's work as your own without giving any credit to the original source (Helgesson & Eriksson, 2015; Maurer et al., 2006). Research highlights that most students resort to plagiarism because of burdensome expectations, procrastination, low motivation, and skill deficiencies (Cebrián Robles et al., 2020; Park, 2017; Roberts, 2007). AI models are not the first tools that have been used for inauthentic knowledge production, and they will not be the last. Thus, it is critical for educators to develop a long-term sustainable solution to this issue. As the world continues to advance with new technologies, we suggest that holistic pedagogy and knowledge building can be used to help teachers develop innovative approaches to support student learning and engagement.

Holistic pedagogy recenters the student as the focus of all learning activity. With this approach, every child is an essential member of the class community. As discussed previously, this is also present in the knowledge-building framework, as the principle of *idea diversity* highlights the criticality of valuing all student contributions (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2021; Zhang et al., 2011). Thus, when class norms and policies are anchored in holistic pedagogy and knowledge building, all ideas are valuable regardless of accuracy. This encourages learners to pose original questions, provide experience-based responses, and explore new directions. Whereas in traditional classroom settings, students may aim to replicate a specific standard of work to attain a better grade (Cebrián Robles et al., 2020), knowledge building and holistic pedagogy encourages learners to be their own standard of achievement. Progress is not homogenous, but rather it is present in the authentic effort of every individual to advance the community's state of knowledge. In our experience, students are less likely to feel the need to use AI to generate specific responses when educators create a culture where their unique contributions are valued.

As knowledge building empowers students with the skills to direct their learning, they experience a heightened sense of responsibility for their work (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2014). Research has shown that a sense of personal responsibility can increase learners' motivation levels and self-esteem (Ayish & Deveci, 2019; Caprara et al., 2008; Humphrey et al., 2007). When students believe in their own abilities to succeed, they will not feel that they lack the skills required for the work they must engage in. Additionally, holistic pedagogy is centered around inquiries that are authentic to students' lived experiences (Lauricella & MacAskill, 2015). This acts as a motivator to keep students engaged and interested in the work they are doing. The desire to explore the subject authentically deters students from resorting to plagiarism for their work. When teachers structure inquiries that emerge from learners' experiences, students cannot rely on the work of others; they must tap into their own intellectual and socioemotional capacity. In this context, original work is of value because it is authentic to learners' personal experiences.

We started our journey into exploring the integration of holistic pedagogy and knowledge building because of our observations of increased instances of plagiarisms and student disengagement. I (Aleesha) decided to use this integrated approach in my class and was surprised to see that when I introduced the framework, my students had an instinctual reaction of fear. They were anxious to take on a more active role in their work and felt vulnerable. However, when *real ideas and authentic problems* were incorporated, they became passionate about contributing their ideas toward issues they had encountered in the real world. I continued to introduce holistic learning exercises using a range of knowledge-building principles, and in a matter of a few weeks, the culture of the class had completely changed. Students found the transition difficult, as this approach was unfamiliar and outside of their comfort zone. However, as I read through their contributions week after week, I saw the principle of *democratizing knowledge* at work: the expertise and knowledge of the classroom members began to be distributed and resulted in every student benefiting from them. Over the course of the class, my students contributed valuable original work, and I encountered fewer cases of plagiarism.

Knowledge building and holistic pedagogy foster classroom norms that value authenticity, originality, diverse contributions, lived experiences, and the ability to produce something of value to the community. These norms intrinsically combat the causes of plagiarism and beyond that, they work to support students who will advance the frontiers of knowledge globally. They can also help students use AI positively. As teachers, if someone asked us to introduce AI software to our students, a major inhibition would be whether the students would use AI in an ethical manner. Placing this responsibility on their shoulders seems unrealistic and one can't help but think that the result would likely be plagiarism. The key to the conundrum lies in addressing our difficulty in trusting students to hold such responsibility.

When educators engage in holistic pedagogy, the classroom becomes a space that empowers students to create authentic knowledge. Thus, we do not need to prohibit students from using AI. Rather, we should integrate it into our classrooms to model how it can be used as a positive tool for conceiving new ideas. AI models can be used to generate powerful visuals that can become springboards for insightful discussions. Incorporating visuals can also help educators support learners who benefit from pictorial forms of instruction (Bobek & Tversky, 2016; Cronin & Myers, 1997; Khaydarova & Yokubjon, 2023). Figure 3 shows some activity ideas where students can use AI to strengthen their understanding on a range of topics. Students can write detailed answers to the activity questions and use AI models to see an imagery-based representation of their ideas. The more accurate their descriptions are, the more accurate the AI output will be. Thus, this exercise would provide students with a holistic understanding of a topic supplemented by text and graphics. Figure 3 includes sample outputs from Microsoft's Copilot AI based on example answers to the activities. Visualizing can help students make deeper connections and ask questions that further their inquiry work. These AI-generated visuals are also powerful in helping students critically analyze real-world problems from a variety of viewpoints.

Activity	What is the relationship between plants and fungi?	How do you think animals feel in cages?
AI Output from Microsoft Copilot		
Activity	Why is it wrong to create food waste?	How does climate change impact the condition of the Earth?
AI Output from Microsoft Copilot		

Fig. 3. Sample activities with AI-generated visuals based on sample prompts.

AI, like any other tool, is neither inherently negative nor positive. Its impact on our lives is based on the ways we choose to use it. This is an important lesson for students to learn as it will teach them to make the best use of their tools and resources in order to address the issues present in our world. This is possible only if we become open to and accepting of change as educators. The introduction and integration of two unique pedagogies is not an easy transition but is a valuable one. The change that AI brings to the sphere of education is unexpected, but our proposed integration gives educators and learners the confidence to accept new tools as opportunities for finding new meanings and understandings of reality.

Conclusion

Learning is a powerful intellectual and socioemotional process that is essential for continued self-development. It is not a process that begins or ends within schools; rather, it is an integral part of human nature—the essence of *being*. Humans are inquisitive creatures designed to question, explore, and discover new ideas; it is this nature and these fundamental inclinations that have helped society progress over time. Academic institutions must provide learners with the agency to lead inquiries and investigations, approach concepts with innovative methodologies, and form understandings from experiences that provide meaning in their lives. Such an approach requires an ideological shift and re-conception of the purpose of academic institutions. Academic spaces maintain no purpose if they do not serve those who they were created for. In other words, when practitioners and researchers neglect to recognize the role of learners as active knowledge contributors and mobilizers, they facilitate the development of exclusionary spaces that limit students' academic and socioemotional growth. Holistic pedagogy offers researchers a collection of tools for re-humanizing the learning process to be more inclusive of students' well-being outside of their academic responsibilities. Every child is unique, and their individuality is their strength. This reality needs to be at the center of the learning that happens within the classroom because it is the basis for the innovative work that happens in professional spaces.

As students take collective responsibility for their work with authentic inquiries (Scardamalia, 2002), in essence they are building something from scratch that has the potential to positively impact their lives. Knowledge-building principles give students the confidence to be agents of change in their circles of influence. As they work to address their inquiries, every step is of extreme value because it is their work. Plagiarism would be a low-value contribution because it does not move the community's work in a meaningful direction. Thus, the norms of knowledge building and holistic pedagogy instill the idea that to plagiarize is to devalue one's own efforts as well as those of your classroom community.

Holistic pedagogy and knowledge building create classroom spaces with motivated learners who are excited by the opportunities that bring their worlds into the classroom. By engaging in these inclusive pedagogies, educators invite all student voices to the table, such that every student feels valued no matter their background or level of academic achievement. When classrooms provide positive support structures in this manner, students feel empowered to address any challenges that come their way. New tools no longer become a means for students to replicate what they may deem to be ideal work; instead, these tools become useful resources that help them pursue authentic inquiries.

Embracing change through transformative pedagogies means teaching our students to cherish the uniqueness of their experiences. This makes the classroom a space that brings learners together in a joint effort to advance the state of knowledge in their communities. When we as teachers take the first step towards walking through the messiness of transitions to accept change, we empower our students with the confidence to step forth on the same path.



Fig. 4. Stepping. A collage that portrays how holistic pedagogy and knowledge building prepare students to step into the real world and leave an ever-lasting footprint. Collage by Sakina Rizvi.

To our students who are always teaching us and giving us the privilege to be a part of their journeys:

> Footsteps fade with time
>
> Except for the paths we traverse together,
>
> Your journey interlaced with mine
>
> United, every storm we will weather.
>
> (Poem by Aleesha Noreen.)

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Conceptualizing Literacy Engagement: The Interconnectedness of Teacher Beliefs and Enacted Practices

Tara-Lynn Scheffel, Sarah Driessens, and Bethany Correia

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a full-day professional learning workshop where K-3 educators explored student engagement during literacy learning. Drawing on a narrative approach, the authors discuss the conceptualizations of literacy engagement from initial to shifting to deepened. Data sources include literacy engagement artifacts shared by the educators as well as multimodal representations of engaged learners/engaged educators. Educators' (re)thinking highlighted the complex, and sometimes messy nature of literacy engagement and illuminated the importance of active educator engagement.

Introduction

> Listening to other teachers and their examples opened my eyes to how I can have students engaged in my own classroom. (End-of-day reflection)

The term "student engagement" has been a buzzword within educational settings for many years, both before, during, and following a global pandemic. Yet, interpretations about how to engage students are, at times, conflicting (Harris, 2010; Lee et al., 2021). The literature demonstrates that educators' conceptualizations of engagement are inherently messy and complex.

There are four often-cited categories of student engagement: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic (Bobis, et al., 2016; Cremin, 2023; Fredricks et al., 2004; Harris, 2010, 2011; Harris et al, 2022; Van Uden et al., 2013; Reeve, & Tseng, 2011; VSGDE, 2023; Zyngier, 2007). Behavioral engagement refers to the extent to which students participate in academic activities and is often measured by the amount of time spent on task (Fredricks et al., 2004; Harris, 2010; Havik & Westergard, 2020; Lee et al., 2021). Emotional engagement points to students' affective responses toward teachers and learning. Cognitive engagement highlights the personal investment a student makes in the learning process (Cremin, 2023; Fredricks et al., 2004; Harris, 2010, 2011; Havik & Westergard, 2020; Lavrijsen & Verschueren, 2020; Tadich, 2007; VSGDE, 2023). Agentic engagement describes the ways in which students intentionally and constructively contribute "into the flow of the instruction they receive" to enrich their learning (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, p. 257). Despite these broad categorizations, as literacy practitioners and researchers, we are left with the following curiosities: What do we know about student engagement? How is it enacted? How can we observe or measure it? In essence, what does engagement look like within the classroom?

Harris (2010) notes an incongruence among teachers regarding how to foster student engagement, highlighting the need to develop clarity in "the concept of engagement … within academic research and government documents to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations" (p. 147). Harris (2011) further observes that "few researchers have examined how teachers understand this concept and what outcomes they expect from student engagement" (p. 377). A similar concern can be found in relation to specific curriculum areas. For example, Lee et al.'s (2021) systematic literature review highlights that only 42% of the research studies they examined explicitly defined the term "reading engagement." What appears to be missing is a closer look at the complex process of how teachers perceive and observe student engagement within their classrooms, and in relation to specific curriculum areas, and how their conceptualizations may influence their practices. While researchers have started to address these gaps, it is essential to further develop this body of scholarship, as teachers' conceptualizations and interpretations of engagement within their own classrooms "are valuable when shedding light on the concept of engagement" (Nyman, 2015, p. 14). This paper aims to respond to this need, specifically within the context of literacy learning in the primary grades (K–3).

Review of the Literature

Student engagement research demonstrates a positive effect on student achievement, sense of belonging within school, and school completion rates (Brandmiller et al., 2024; Harris, 2011; Pantaleo, 2016; Wang et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2018). The majority of this research seeks to understand engagement from the perspective of students and researchers, heavily emphasizing quantitative measures (e.g., questionnaires and observational checklists). Harris (2011) notes that teachers' understandings are rarely examined. In a subsequent article, Harris et al (2022) drew on the work of Fredricks et al. (2004) looking at student engagement as a "meta-construct" that encompasses "observable behaviors, internal cognitions, and emotions" (Harris et al, p. 850), noting these are seldom investigated simultaneously. The authors suggest a need for robust models of student engagement that apply to different learning contexts.

Conflicting Teacher Conceptualizations of Student Engagement

Harris' (2011) phenomenographic qualitative study highlights mixed conceptualizations of student engagement. Through semi-structured interviews with 20 high school English teachers, Harris (2011) documents a critically important distinction between engagement in *schooling* and engagement in *learning*, further emphasizing the messy nature of teachers' conceptualizations of student engagement.

From a *schooling* lens, teachers use somewhat simplistic indicators, such as behavior and obedience, enjoyment, and motivation to assess student engagement. To increase engagement, they focus on delivering and modifying school activities (Harris, 2011). Within this surface-level approach to student engagement, learning is situated within the background, treating students passively (Harris, 2011). This approach misses a deeper understanding of the relationship between engagement and learning. While teachers may assume that students are engaged because they follow classroom rules and stay on task, does this necessarily mean that students are in fact learning?

From a *learning* lens, educators understand student engagement beyond mere completion of school activities, adopting more complex indicators, including students' level of thinking, sense of purpose, and ownership in their learning (Harris, 2011). From this perspective, deep learning is the focus of student engagement and collaboration is an essential tool to enhance learning (Harris, 2011).

Harris et al.'s (2022) study documents additional teacher considerations to foster student engagement given the context of the pandemic, with a focus on Kindergarten to Grade 12. While teachers' definitions of student engagement continue to emphasize behavioral dimensions, elements of emotional, cognitive, and agentic engagement also emerged (Harris et al., 2022). This study considers engagement in the unique context of virtual distance education, but two things remain consistent with the previous study: the prevailing focus on observable behaviors to assess engagement and the lack of consensus on what student engagement truly means.

Deficit-Oriented Conceptualizations of Engagement

In addition to the lack of consensus on how to understand, measure, and foster student engagement, some educators apply a deficit lens. Zyngier's (2007) research, for example, demonstrates how some teachers unproblematically conceptualize student engagement through a deficit lens reflecting "an attitude that students … are simply not competent or capable because of their background" (p. 333). During an interview, one teacher commented, "Their skills are weak, they are frighteningly weak, that these children can't read … we have really got to work on their basic skills. How can they go off and research independently when they can't read?" (Zyngier, 2007, p. 335). Teachers who ascribe to this mentality tend to support an instrumentalist or rational technical conceptualization of student engagement, equating engagement with time spent on task. Within this context, engagement is located within the individual student with little regard for the sociopolitical, sociohistorical, or cultural context influencing their willingness to engage. Ravet (2007) indicates similar results wherein teachers perceived student (dis)engagement as a result of personal student deficits and familial background, relationships with teachers, classroom management practices, and a lack of student ability.

Teachers' perceptions of engagement have significant implications for their students. Wang et al. (2018), for example, point to the interconnectedness of teachers' perceptions of student engagement and the ways in which teachers differentially engage with students based on their interpretation of student behavior as either engaged or disengaged. Similarly, Zhu et al. (2018) indicate that teachers' perceptions of student engagement are directly related to students' future achievement, expectancy for success, and level of aspiration, meaning teacher judgments can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy for their students. Students perceived as engaged are more likely to succeed than their seemingly disengaged counterparts (Zhu et al., 2018).

Collectively, these findings support Zyngier's (2007) assertion that teachers who lower their expectations for students perceived as incapable of achieving academic standards are, in fact, nurturing student disengagement. If this holds true, it is unsurprising that teachers perceive widespread disengagement among their students (Tadich, 2007). This issue is exacerbated when teachers conceptualize engagement

merely through observable behavior, rather than the meaning students derive from participation (Zyngier, 2007). Deficit approaches reduce all acts of resistance (i.e., disengagement) as a function of the individual. There is a need for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of student engagement that incorporates individual, social, and cultural understandings into one unified concept. These findings also highlight the need to further understand how teachers conceptualize engagement within their classroom and the implications for student learning more broadly.

Moving Beyond Observable Student Behaviors

Teacher conceptions that reduce student engagement to behavioral engagement ignore the individualized and context-specific factors that may impact how engaged a student becomes. Barkaoui et al. (2015), following focus groups with 16 teachers in Toronto, note that although teachers identified behavioral components as important factors, they also agree that "definitions of student engagement vary greatly … because engagement is highly individualized and context-dependent and is more than a function of the individual student" (p. 88). The teachers in this study recognize the degree to which the curriculum reflects and honors student diversity, and the ways in which social issues, such as violence within the community, impact students' daily lives. In an effort to improve student engagement, teachers identify five strategies related to building 1) trusting relationships, 2) relevance within the curriculum, 3) enthusiasm through learning pedagogies, 4) trust and collaboration through school–home connections, and 5) connections between community and school life (Barkaoui et al., 2015). These teachers inadvertently highlight the ways in which critical literacy might be an effective approach to improving student engagement, a worthwhile investigation for future research.

Unrau et al. (2015) note similar results in a study of 23 teachers who engaged in focus groups about their personal conceptualizations of student engagement. Emerging themes include sparking a student's interest, providing choice, role modeling, promoting positive student-teacher relationships, and collaborating with students. Teachers also agree that "mandated testing undermined their students' motivation for reading rather than contributing to it" (Unrau et al., 2015, p. 122). Given the prevalence of standardized testing, such as those administered by Ontario's Education Quality Assurance Office (EQAO), it is worthwhile conversing with teachers to better understand how standardized tests may (dis)encourage student engagement. As such, including teachers' voices—within the student engagement literature in particular, and educational discourse more broadly—is paramount to fully understand the scope of this concept. These conversations must also be situated within an extended sociopolitical and sociohistorical context.

Cummings (2012) took a sociocultural lens to understanding student engagement. Over six weeks, Cummings (2012) met with two high school art teachers to discuss the challenges they face. Through reflective practice and collaborative research, these teachers changed their teaching practices in an effort to increase student engagement. For instance, they began to develop curriculum content based on students' interests and personal choice. Other changes included encouraging student autonomy, genuinely caring about each individual student's needs, making an effort to get to know their students personally, and encouraging personal growth. As the year progressed, these teachers found students were

more engaged in their lessons. Cummings' (2012) research supports Tadich (2007) who writes that teachers believe it is their responsibility to motivate and engage students.

Nolen and Nicholls (1994) designed a teacher questionnaire to better understand elementary school teachers' conceptualizations of engagement and how they influence interactions with students. Strong predictors of student engagement from the responses of 178 teachers include promoting cooperation and choice, stimulating student interest, and attributing thoughtfulness as opposed to evaluative praise. Van Uden et al. (2013) indicate similar results in their survey. Based on 195 teachers' responses, interpersonal teacher behavior, perceived self-efficacy, and perceptions of pedagogical competence were strong predictors of perceived student engagement. For Bobis et al. (2016), professional learning can improve teacher self-efficacy and broaden teachers' conceptions about student engagement beyond simple observable behaviors. This broadening contributes to a re-definition of student engagement and indicators within the classroom. These studies suggest the need to understand the connection between student engagement, teacher self-efficacy, and professional learning.

McKee and Heydon (2020) highlight the possibilities for student engagement when teachers adopt nuanced and holistic understandings of student engagement. In this study, a teacher prioritizes sharing tools and responsibilities with their students and purposefully plans spaces where the "children's explorations would inform the way pedagogy unfolded" (p. 789). This example highlights a need for more fluid approaches to engagement that empower literacy learners to use their strengths.

Understanding the Complexities

Teachers' beliefs and conceptions about student engagement reflect personal attitudes and experiences, which may at least partially explain why the concept of student engagement is so diverse and complex. This literature review highlights the need for a greater presence of teachers' voices within the dominant educational discourse about student engagement. While strides have been made to reposition teachers within the conversation, deficit approaches that reduce student engagement to a function of the individual seem to dominate, creating serious implications for how teachers view their students and how students view themselves (Ravet, 2007; Ready & Chu, 2015; Wang et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2018; Zyngier, 2007).

Research highlights the ways in which exploring holistic and inclusive teaching practices, as well as opportunities for personal reflection, can reframe and transform teachers' attitudes about student engagement (McKee & Heydon, 2020; Zyngier, 2007). We recognize a need for more opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning workshops in an effort to broaden their lens regarding what constitutes student engagement and the interconnectedness of how their assumptions both inform and impact their teaching practices. Zyngier (2007) suggests implementing pedagogy that connects to and engages with students' cultural knowledge, allows students to own the learning process by seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum, responds to students' lived experiences, and empowers students to make a difference. What is important, though, is that rather than telling teachers what they need to or should know about student engagement, "researchers need to begin again by studying what teachers

already know—and want to know" (Nolen & Nicholls, 1994, p. 67) about engagement. Researchers must collaborate with teachers to develop a greater understanding of student engagement within the classroom, rather than simply offering prescriptive frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

Within this study, literacy is viewed more broadly than a specific subject area (e.g., language arts). Literacy involves the communication of meaning-making across multiple modes (e.g., image, sound, gesture, etc.) (Walsh, 2011), crossing various dimensions (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, representing). Theorists such as Cambourne (1988) and Guthrie (2004) set the foundation for exploring what is meant by literacy engagement and how it is conceptualized and demonstrated by educators within the social context of the classroom. Cambourne, for example, defines literacy engagement by three statements in which learners believe: "I am a potential 'doer.' This will further the purposes of my life. I can do this without fear" (p. 33). At the same time, broader theories and definitions of student engagement were considered, weaving together the foundational and interconnected categories of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of student engagement (see Bobis et al., 2016; Fredricks et al., 2004; Harris, 2010, 2011; Shernoff, 2013; Van Uden et al., 2013; Zyngier, 2007). Agentic engagement suggested by Reeve and Tseng (2011) was not considered as it did not have sufficient traction when the research was conducted.

Research Design

We took a qualitative approach to sharing stories of what it is like to be an educator who engages students during literacy learning. This approach has been established as a relevant way to forefront educators' voices (see Hollingsworth, 1994; Prus, 1996).

A small group of ten K–3 educators joined a full-day Exploring Engagement professional learning workshop with the goal of highlighting their experiences. The workshop included opportunities for (1) whole-group brainstorming, and (2) small-group/partner discussions to expand upon teachers' understandings of engagement in their classrooms. Drawing upon Clandinin's (1986) proposal that the construct of image is central to understanding the knowledge and story of a teacher, the workshop included opportunities for educators to consider the image they hold of engaged learners and educators who engage learners. Educators were also invited to share artifacts of literacy engagement, serving both as a way to get to know each other and to establish initial conceptualizations. The research design served to expand on earlier findings (Scheffel, 2016; Scheffel, 2017), but with a focus on K–3 educators' understandings, to further discussions about engagement in both professional and academic fields. The main question asked was, "How do K–3 classroom educators conceptualize engagement within literacy learning?"

The workshop took place outside of regular teaching hours and was held at the university local to the educators. To respect educators' time and knowledge, they were provided with a resource package of children's books. As per our ethics protocol, and due to the small participant size for this in-depth workshop, no quotes are attributed directly to participants but are generalized to say "an educator" or "educators" where ideas were collectively agreed upon. All participants signed confidentiality forms pertaining to information shared by other participants during the workshop.

Specific data sources included workshop transcription (62 pages) and approximately 15 literacy engagement artifacts shared by educators (e.g., an image of a specific learning opportunity that stood out for the way it engaged a learner(s); an image of a key book/response activity used to engage a learner(s); etc.). Analysis was thematic and focused initially on individual subsets of data collected during the workshop (e.g., keywords, artifacts, visuals of engaged learner/engaged teacher). Tara-Lynn and Sarah independently reviewed each subset of data, highlighting categories and patterns for discussion (Creswell, 2007; Kim, 2016). We then looked across data subsets to determine overarching themes.

Findings

Initial Conceptualizations

Figure 1 visually depicts the keywords initially generated by educators to describe what engagement looks like, sounds like, and feels like in the classroom (with a focus on literacy-related learning opportunities). This brainstorming took place early in the workshop after a time of sharing the engagement artifacts they brought with them (e.g., an image, learning story, key book or other visual that stood out to them for the way it engaged learners). No research or definitions had been shared with participants at this point in the day.

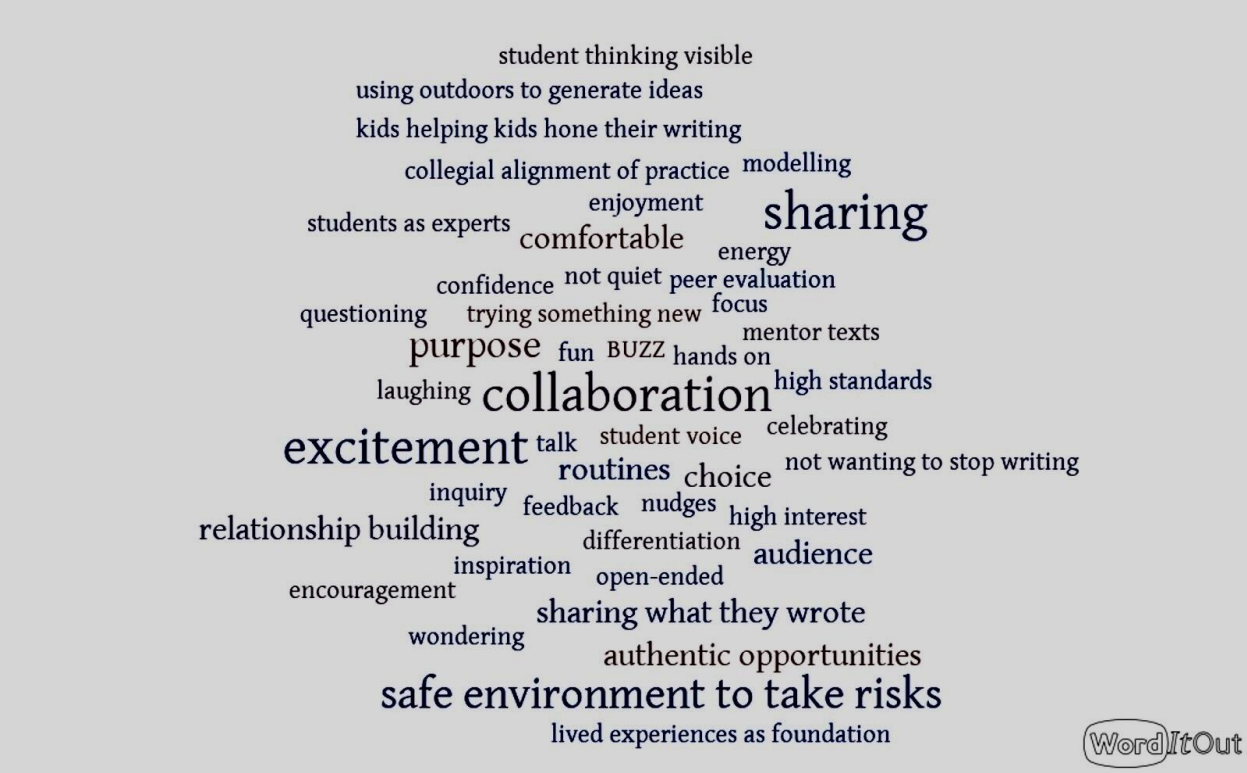


Fig. 1: Keywords describing engagement

Image: https://worditout.com/word-cloud/4167528/private/24b05586d228fbe8f588702edab0820e

In Figure 1, the words repeated most often are larger in size. Key repeating words included *collaboration*, *sharing*, *excitement*, and *safe environment to take risks*, followed by *purpose*, and then *comfortable*, *choice*, *routines*, and *authentic opportunities*. In a previous study with Grade 8 students (Scheffel, 2017), students used different words such as *teamwork*, *participation*, and *involvement* that held similar notions of collaboration and sharing. Perhaps not surprising, students in the previous study also placed emphasis on thinking and listening, while educators were focused on environment and routines.

Shifting Conceptualizations

> I feel like educators' ideas or thoughts on engagement have really shifted to a more meaningful spot… as a group we are growing… it's been a huge shift. (Whole-group discussion)

After hearing about Tara-Lynn's previous (2016) study, discussion quickly focused on what was different now versus when the research took place. It was suggested that engagement is more than a "hook" on a lesson plan or goal to "do something fantastic right now … that's not engaging" (a difference from the teacher in the original study; see Scheffel, 2016). Instead, educators felt they had moved to "a more meaningful spot … as a group, we are growing." Educators acknowledged that "usually you look for the overt things. The kids that clearly look like they're engaged but again it's just a look of it." At the same time, one educator questioned, "But, what does it mean?" They recalled examples of learners who did not appear to be focused (e.g., playing with their hands or lying upside down on carpet), yet were in fact attending to the information and could respond to questions.

For this group of educators, what jumped out in relation to their current practice was having a growth mindset: "It's okay to make mistakes. Before, I think the idea of making mistakes was, 'No, it's wrong.' It's a huge paradigm shift for us." Greater choice was also mentioned as educators reflected on how "we've gone towards giving the kids more choices" such as during writing where "they can come in at any point on the continuum of ability and they are still doing the same activity, but at their interest level." Also discussed was the need to create a space to know and understand students. One educator connected this to the co-teaching model in Ontario Kindergarten classrooms where there is both a teacher and a Registered Early Childhood Educator: "In the ELK [Early Learning Kindergarten] environment, that's your whole realm in there with your partner, and it's a beautiful thing when it comes together."

Educators emphasized the need to align practices across the primary grades, and they expressed excitement for "a professional and pedagogical stance that spans the day that takes into account these pieces of engagement." We are reminded here of Harris' (2010, 2011) distinct approaches to facilitating student engagement, all of which were evident in our discussions with educators as they spoke to ways they were delivering the curriculum, modifying the curriculum, and aligning curriculum with student goals through collaboration. However, participants also raised the question of how educators are similarly engaged in learning. Educator engagement became a key point of discussion, in terms of both "[giving] myself permission to be a learner" and finding what engages educators in the course of their practice.

Deepening Conceptualizations

> Engagement is much more complex than the visual characteristics. (End-of-day reflection)

Examples of this complexity stood out as educators acted upon the invitation to create an image of an engaged student and an engaged educator (Clandinin, 1986). Working in small groups, they used a combination of role-play, photography, and written brainstorming to create multimodal representations. Educators pondered how engagement "is different for all learners." Each group (separate from one another) emphasized that it was difficult to distinguish between learner and educator in their viewpoint. We share three examples below.

Example One: On the Same Level

In this first example, educators created a series of photographs titled, "Who is the teacher and who is the student?" The first photograph depicted the educator at the board in a traditional teacher-presenting-information stance. The group explained, "As a teacher, you don't want to be just talking, talking, talking. You want the kids to be talking, otherwise, it's so much more difficult for them to engage." The second photograph depicted the educator sitting on the ground reading a book to learners. In the third photograph, the educator was sitting beside a learner reading a book together. The group emphasized how this third depiction "shows that we're on the same level—equal."

Example Two: Beyond Appearance

Another group of educators lingered with the notion that engagement can look differently for different learners. They also sought to distinguish between student engagement and teacher engagement through mind mapping (Figure 2). While some words can be found in Figure 1, others arose from the day's collaborative conversations. The only word that crosses both maps is "growth mindset," though elements of Cambourne's (1988) condition of approximation, and taking risks, are found in both (e.g., safe, challenged, risk taker, trial and error). The teacher being present and also taking a learner stance suggest that engagement is not passive for learner or teacher.

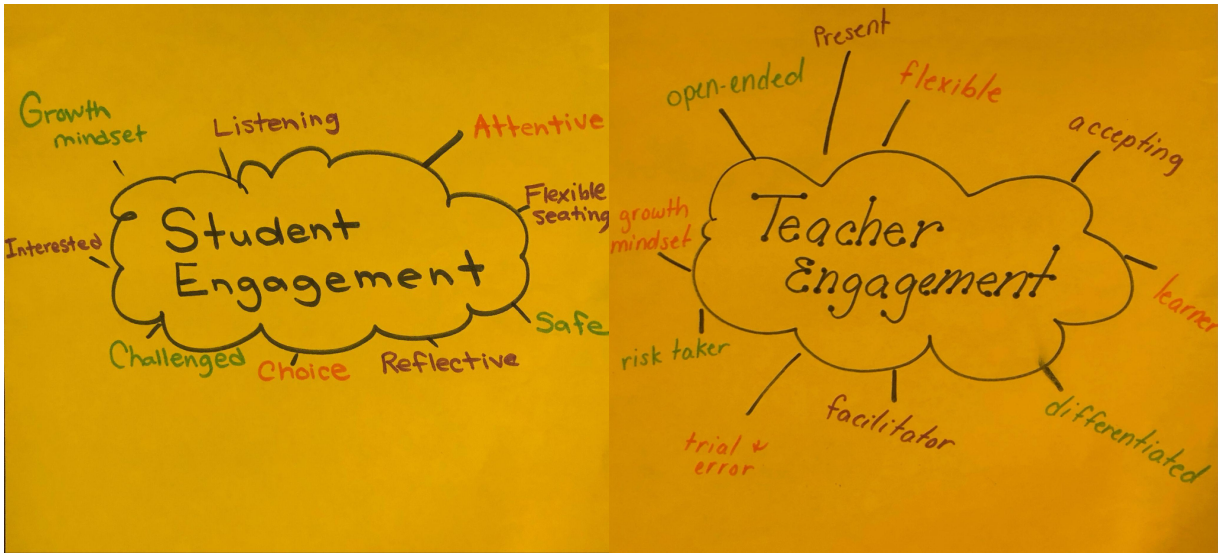


Fig. 2: Mind map of engaged learner/engaged educator

Example Three: Blurred Roles

The final group strategically took photographs outside in the hopes that others would not be able to tell who was intended to be the learner or educator (Figure 3). They used Pic-Collage to share back a series of photos saying, "We were hoping … you would just see deep engagement." Unlike the first two groups, they did not specify who was role-playing each role. Instead, they explored, observed what one another was doing, asked questions, and documented their noticings. Though they did not name pedagogical documentation, their visual and explanation was reminiscent of a tool used to assess learning in Kindergarten in Ontario.

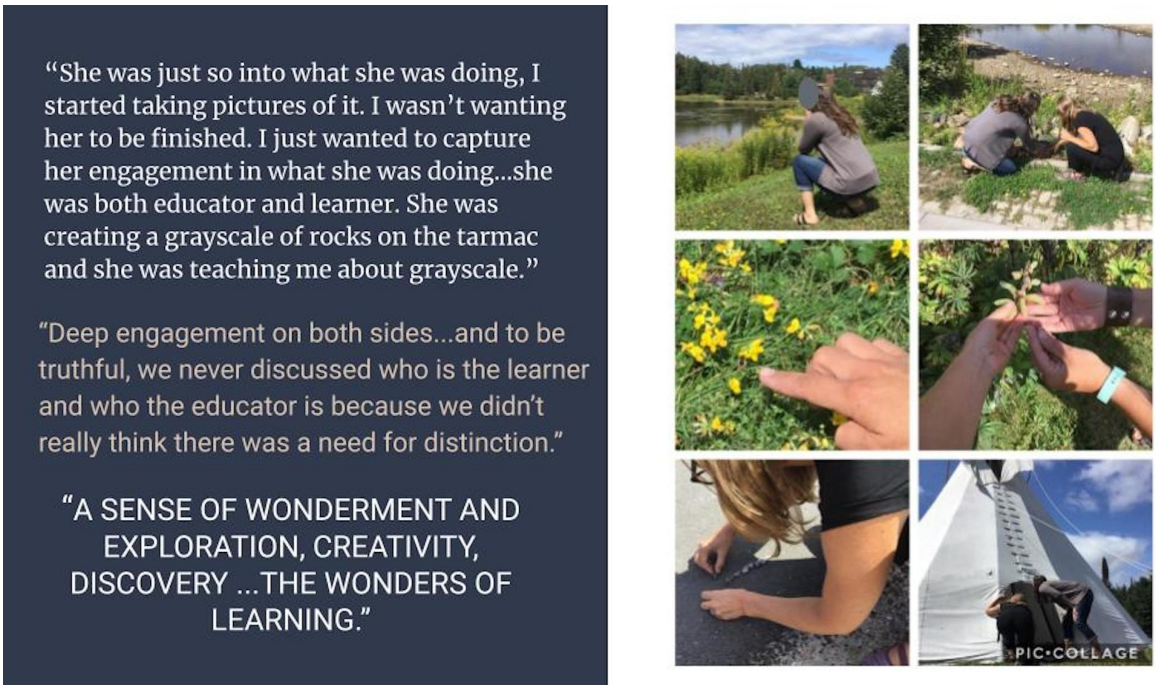


Fig. 3: Visual of engaged learner/engaged educator

Looking Across Examples

> It's neat to finish the day looking at the lens of teacher/student because you quickly realize the roles are interchangeable, but so valued. (End-of-day reflection)

Each of the representations challenged the observable nature of engagement found in the literature (Turner et al., 2009). In this way, participants were deepening the question of not only what educators need to do to engage individual learners but how our curricular approaches (e.g., inquiry-based learning in Kindergarten) can foster a shared sense of engagement in literacy learning.

At the same time, Sarah noticed a tension as educators took up this multimodal invitation when overhearing one group speaking to not feeling comfortable acting it out. Interestingly, it seemed there remain areas educators are uncomfortable venturing into, despite their admonition that it is important not only to create a safe risk-taking environment where their learners just try, but also for their learners to step outside of their comfort zones (Vygotsky, 1978). How, then, do we push educators to do this as well within their own engagement?

Thinking about why this matters, we turn to a quote by hooks (1994) that reminds us that engaged pedagogy seeks to empower both students and teachers where "teachers grow and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (p. 21). As educators, we can recognize the need for teacher engagement but must also be willing to see ourselves as learners, which Example Two's mind map emphasized. When we do, we meet learners, and ourselves, in the here and now and gently nudge each other into the discomfort of not knowing, of suspending judgment, of leaning in while learning alongside each other. In doing so,

we begin to name and unravel the complexities of not only literacy or student engagement, but also the human and non-human interactions embedded in teaching and learning. This brings us back to the theme of messiness as we try to disentangle the interconnected relationships between educators' perceptions and enactment of literacy engagement. Adding to the messiness, looking across the data supports a multi-dimensional aspect of engagement with a focus on how both educators and students need to be engaged. Figure 4 presents a graphic visual of the key themes arising from the workshop discussion about the ways in which educators saw or sought to build engagement during literacy learning in a primary classroom.

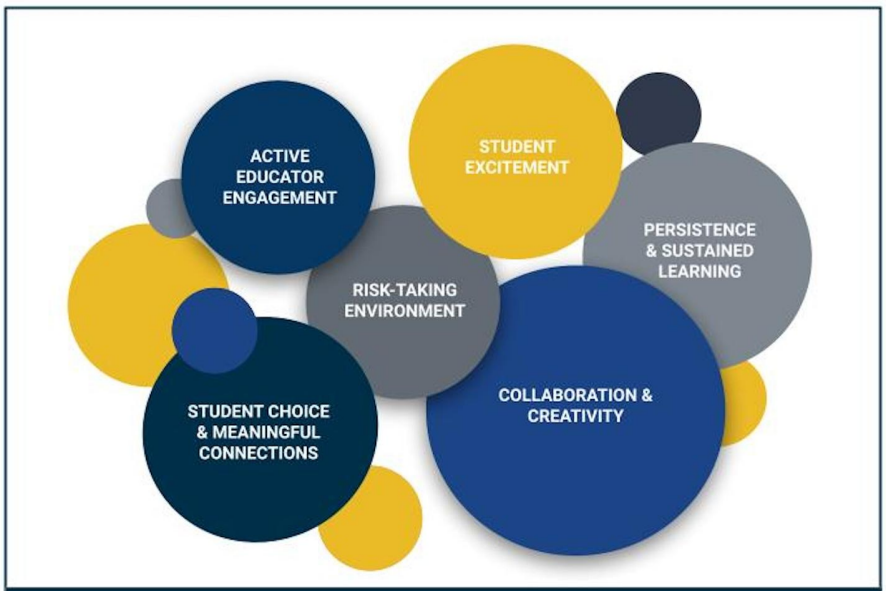


Fig. 4: Ways in which educators sought to build engagement

Table 1 offers a description of each theme that both captures and is grounded in the educators' reciprocal conversations throughout the day. The themes are not mutually exclusive nor intended to be linear.

Table 1

Overview of Themes Arising from the Day's Discussion

Theme	Description
Student Choice & Meaningful Connections	Opportunities for students to choose what they love and what interests them, write about personal lived experiences, and read informational texts with real-world value and authenticity.
Student Excitement	Opportunities for students to demonstrate excitement about taking ownership, learning outside, reading recipes, and shifting the energy in the classroom.
Risk-Taking Environment	Opportunities to learn in a safe, judgment-free environment with multiple entry points for students to jump in where they are, be challenged and supported, and feel successful.
Collaboration & Creativity	Opportunities for a collaborative space where students write for multiple audiences and purposes; share their writing, thoughts, and ideas; and experience authentic creative moments.
Persistence & Sustained Learning	Opportunities for sustained writing that inspire and catalyze further learning; seeing children as capable.
Active Educator Engagement	Opportunities for educators to be fully present learning alongside their students, creating shared experiences, teaching with authenticity and intention, and providing continuous feedback through conferencing.

Over the course of this professional learning workshop, the teachers unpacked their initial conceptualizations of student engagement. Through insightful conversations and reflections, their conceptualizations shifted and deepened beyond observable indicators. The teachers identified the complex, interchangeable nature of the teacher/learner roles, highlighting that literacy learning engagement is a shared, vulnerable, and human experience.

Conclusion

I loved today and I am very fortunate and grateful to be here. (End-of-day reflection)

The complexities of human interactions emerge when educators attempt to conceptualize student engagement in literacy learning contexts. Like Bobis et al. (2016), thinking through the topic of engagement as part of a collaborative professional learning workshop led educators to broaden conceptions about student engagement beyond simple observable behaviors. This re-thinking highlighted the complex, and sometimes messy nature of literacy engagement. It also led educators to redefine what engagement looks like and what teachers look for within the classroom. Initially, educators focused on reading and writing as they spoke about engagement artifacts and ways they saw or sought to build engagement. However, by day's end, participants deepened their thinking around literacy engagement and embodied hooks' (1994) belief that engaged pedagogy is a "place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process" (p. 21). For example, "Engagement allows the learner to share in the planning and delivery of content. To be able to sit back as a teacher and watch students become the driver of their learning is amazing" (End-of-day reflection). Another participant echoed the importance of empowering learners to "take responsibility for their own learning and choose what is best for them" (End-of-day reflection). Discussion around Tara-Lynn's research, with voices of the students included, prompted greater discussion around engagement across the language arts dimensions as educators were reminded of how multimodal opportunities were also infused in their conceptions of engagement, such as when exploring the visual of an engaged learner/engaged educator.

As we debriefed the day's events, what became important was, rather than telling teachers what they needed to or should know about student engagement, we took the stance suggested by Nolen & Nicholls (1994) to better understand "what teachers already know—and want to know" (p. 67) about engagement within school. In this way, our research adds to the need for a greater presence of teachers' voices within the student engagement literature. This approach helps to illuminate the practical application of a theoretical concept, along with the ways in which educators make sense of and implement practices to foster higher levels of student engagement. We continue to see the need for researchers to collaborate with teachers to develop a greater understanding of student engagement within the classroom, rather than simply offering prescriptive frameworks.

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Relationality and Learning: Insights from Undergraduate Student Research Assistant Experiences

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of Emirati undergraduate research assistants in the United Arab Emirates through journal reflections to understand their motivations, challenges, and the role of mentorship in their growth. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we explain how mentorship, relationships, and team dynamics influence identity and confidence. Findings indicate the importance of culturally responsive mentorship, inclusive environments, and leadership opportunities in fostering resilience, critical thinking, and career readiness. By embedding research assistantships and culturally aligned mentorship into university programs, institutions can create supportive environments that empower students and enhance skills, inclusivity, and academic success.

Introduction

Innovation and excellence in education are central to the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) Vision 2021, emphasizing the development of a strong research culture (United Arab Emirates Cabinet, 2024). While the culture of knowledge production is increasing, higher education institutions in the UAE have traditionally disseminated knowledge (Ryan & Daly, 2019). This is also reflected in the large number of undergraduate programs (1,636 accredited programs; Commission for Academic Accreditation, 2020). However, increasing expectations for publication have motivated faculty in the UAE to involve undergraduate-level students in research. The benefits of undergraduates engaging in research are widely acknowledged, yet how these outcomes are achieved in the UAE remains unclear.

While some universities in the UAE offer undergraduate research assistant (URA) opportunities (Khalifa University, n.d.; New York University Abu Dhabi, n.d.), no research specifically examines URA experiences in the region. Related research on Emirati undergraduate students serving as research assistants shows that relationality—a core aspect of Emirati culture—influences their academic and professional development (Patka et al., 2022). This cultural emphasis on interconnectedness shapes their engagement with faculty and peers, with the potential of fostering environments rich in collaboration and mentorship. As Emirati students evolve from learners to active participants in knowledge production as research assistants, they engage in networks that value collective growth and social responsibility. This study explores the transformative experiences of URAs through journal reflections, offering insight into the complexities of interactions within UAE higher education. In cross-cultural academic settings like the UAE, Western-educated faculty often introduce individualistic mentorship models that can clash with

local values of relationality and interconnectedness. This dissonance reflects the broader messiness of teaching and learning environments and sets the context for this study's exploration of mentorship of URAs.

Benefits and Challenges for Research Assistants

Research assistants, traditionally graduate students, have become more prevalent among undergraduates following the recommendations of the Boyer Commission in the U.S.,[1] which advocated for integrating research into the undergraduate experience as a means of enhancing learning and preparing students for future careers (McKinnon-Crowley & Voyles, 2024). However, URAs require more structured training and mentorship than graduates due to limited experience and competing academic demands (Shanahan et al., 2015).

Research—mainly in Western contexts—shows that URA roles offer academic and professional benefits, such as higher graduation rates, graduate admission success, and career clarity (Hernandez et al., 2018; Wood, 2019). URA experiences build self-efficacy, academic development, autonomy, critical thinking, and motivation (Pawlow & Meinz, 2018; van Blankenstein et al., 2018). They also build technical skills (e.g., data analysis, research methodologies, and academic writing), interpersonal competencies (e.g., teamwork, leadership, and time management [Landrum & Nelsen, 2002]), and scholarly motivation (e.g., boosts confidence and long-term academic interest [Landrum & Nelsen, 2002; Skorinko, 2019]).

Students often face challenges, such as managing repetitive tasks and balancing time commitments (King & Imai, 2023), misaligned project goals, and resource limitations, requiring careful oversight and tailored feedback (Wood, 2019). In contexts like the UAE, barriers may include language proficiency and cultural norms that inhibit student assertiveness. By addressing systemic barriers and providing holistic support, institutions can create transformative research opportunities that advance student development and institutional goals (Becker et al., 2021; Foster & Usher, 2018). Institutions should therefore establish formalized mentorship programs that provide faculty with resources and training, maximizing URA experiences (King & Imai, 2023) and implementing culturally responsive, context-aware approaches, particularly by non-Emirati and non-Arabic speaking faculty.

Furthermore, the unpredictable nature of student-led research often reflects the "messiness" of human experience as students navigate evolving interests, changing methodologies, and unforeseen challenges. The ambiguity of the URA role often leads to initial confusion when accepting the position. These difficulties can be compounded by students' limited research experience and uncertainty about academic expectations. However, defining learning outcomes can help align expectations.

Mentorship for Research Assistants

Mentorship is key to URAs' success, enhancing experiences and outcomes through intentional support (Landrum & Nelsen, 2002; Becker et al., 2021). Effective mentorships foster critical thinking, communication, and research enthusiasm by aligning tasks with individual strengths (Foster & Usher, 2018). Inclusive lab cultures boost satisfaction and productivity (Ahmed et al., 2019). However, mentors must balance training and supervision amid time constraints, ensuring students develop resilience and adaptability—skills essential in academic and professional transformation (King & Imai, 2023). In settings like the UAE, mentorship strategies must also be attuned to students' sociocultural backgrounds, recognizing how collectivist values shape motivation, collaboration, and decision-making—thereby building culturally responsive mentorship approaches and strengthening student engagement and performance.

Culture and Relationships

The interconnectedness of educational spaces, culture, and pedagogy underscores the importance of relational approaches in fostering inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments (Reynolds, 2022). Moving beyond neo-colonial models of education—models that often prioritize Western knowledge and teaching methods while marginalizing non-Western perspectives—requires embedding Indigenous wisdom, relational concepts, and cultural adaptations into educational design. In this relational framework, education is viewed as a collaborative, reciprocal process that values mutual respect and interconnectedness among students, teachers, and communities. Educators can create supportive learning environments by encouraging student leadership, strengthening community ties, and fostering meaningful student–teacher connections. These approaches challenge traditional power dynamics and promote knowledge co-construction, enhancing student participation and ensuring greater cultural relevance in the learning process.

Equally important is the role of peer relationships, bonds, team culture, and friendships in enhancing student retention, motivation, and professional development, with many students identifying social connections as the most rewarding aspect of their involvement (Rademacher, 2022). Empowering and inclusive cultures help students develop ownership, essential research skills, and social capital to support their future success. Recognition from both peers and faculty strengthens students' research identities, fostering confidence, persistence, and deeper integration into academic communities (Baker et al., 2024). Learning, therefore, is not merely an academic pursuit but also a relational process in which peer interactions play a crucial role in knowledge generation and skill development (Deuchar et al., 2024).

Teacher–student relationships are similarly critical to student success, influencing confidence, engagement, and academic performance. Relational pedagogy fosters interactive learning environments where students feel supported and valued (Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2023). When educators demonstrate care, respect, and fairness, students are more likely to engage actively, contribute meaningfully to discussions, and take ownership of their learning, further enriching the academic experience and promoting holistic student development.

The UAE Educational Context

Higher education in the UAE has evolved alongside its growth since its founding in 1971. The first university, United Arab Emirates University, was established in 1976 (United Arab Emirates University, 2025), followed by federally funded institutions like Higher Colleges of Technology and Zayed University. In the early 2000s, international branch campuses emerged. Notably, the government provides free education at public institutions for all citizens (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

The present study was conducted at Zayed University, federally funded and accredited by the UAE Ministry of Education and accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, with campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. During fall of 2023, the university enrolled 8,519 students, the majority female (77%) and enrolled in an undergraduate program (98%). In the fall of 2023, the university had 572 faculty members, with the majority (68.36%) holding a doctorate, and half of the faculty members were female (53.32%). Most faculty are from the United States (n = 70, 12.24%), United Arab Emirates (n = 62, 10.84%), United Kingdom (n = 60, 10.49%), Jordan (n = 50, 8.74%), and Canada (n = 42, 7.34%; Zayed University Fact Book, 2023).

Current study

Much of the existing research is rooted in Western contexts, which may not fully capture the experiences of URAs in other cultural settings. Expanding research globally and emphasizing localized examinations provides a more comprehensive understanding of URA benefits and challenges. This study builds on previous research identifying the benefits and challenges of being a URA. By examining the lived experiences of URAs in the UAE, we examined motivations, challenges, and experiences with mentorship to guide and inform policies to improve URA programs and create meaningful, supportive, and equitable opportunities.

Methodology

Research Context and Author Positionality

As researchers' perspectives shape qualitative findings, disclosing motivations and assumptions is essential (Dodgson, 2019). The study was a collaboration among three expatriate faculty members (two psychologists, one counselor) who are the first three authors. These faculty members recruited URAs based on professional disposition and research interests. URAs worked for a year or more, meeting weekly or bi-weekly, and trained in data collection, analysis, and literature reviews. They were paid AED 39–55 (US$10–15) per hour through grants or on-campus employment. The fourth, fifth, and sixth authors, full-time student URAs, participated in the study and contributed to analysis and writing.

Participants

Across the three research teams, we had a total of nine URAs. All URAs voluntarily participated in this study. Seven major in Psychology, one in Social Innovation, and one in Accounting. All URAs are Muslim and Emirati. The participants were primarily female (66.66%), aged 19 to 23. Most URAs were in their third year of university, except for one in their fourth. While all URAs spoke both Arabic and English fluently, their work on research was primarily in English, and they completed all phases of this study in English. All participant names used in this paper are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Materials and Procedures

Before starting the research process, we obtained ethical clearance from Zayed University's Ethical Review Committee (Application ZU24_124_F). In December 2024, students completed four to five journals reflecting on their experiences as a URA in 2024. They were asked to respond to the following questions:

(1) What were your motivations for working as a URA? What challenges did you experience? If you have taken a leadership part in a study, what motivated you to lead, and how was the experience?

(2) How has working as a URA supported your education? In what ways has it helped you? Are there any ways it has hindered your coursework?

(3) What goals do you anticipate reaching through your work as a URA? Are there any goals you have already reached?

(4) How do you describe your experiences with the mentorship you receive? What are your expectations of the mentorship you receive?

(5) (Optional) What else would you like to share about your experience as a URA that has not been addressed in the previous journals?

Data Analysis

The authors conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) using Braun and Clarke's (n.d.) six-phase approach with NVivo 14 (QSR International, 2023) for data organization and coding, supplemented by manual paper-based methods. We began the analysis by independently familiarizing ourselves with the data through repeated readings, documenting initial thoughts and reactions. Next, we independently generated codes and collaboratively developed a codebook by discussing initial codes, merging repetitive ones, and organizing them into a hierarchy, resolving disagreements through shared interpretations. The initial codes were driven from the data and the journal questions. During our meetings, although we brought our perspectives, the process was highly collaborative, with no major disagreements; discussions served to enrich interpretations, and to identify and refine themes through iterative dialogue. Member checking was conducted to ensure accuracy and clarity of the themes; no significant changes were required.

Findings

Using reflective thematic analysis, we identified five themes: (1) Benefits and learning: "This serves me and my future"; (2) Successes and challenges: "Burning out, but I managed it"; (3) Mentor–student relationship: "I didn't want my supervisors to think they hired a fraud"; (4) Co-learning and peers: "My new academic family but with more individuality"; and (5) Culture and belonging: "We supported each other through it all."

Theme 1: Benefits and Learning: "This serves me and my future."

We define *benefits and learning* as how URAs perceive and experience personal and professional growth. This includes their goals, achievements, and impact on future aspirations. URAs refined research skills, developed academic identities, and viewed the role as a stepping stone for future opportunities.

A key benefit repeatedly emphasized was the development of academic and research skills. Many URAs sought to understand the research process and reported improvements in research, writing, and confidence in presenting their work. This shift from passive learners to active contributors was a significant milestone, as Amna noted, "a big achievement for me." Beyond skill development, URAs recognized the long-term benefits of enhancing their CVs and strengthening academic profiles for future opportunities. Khalid stated, "I needed more than an exceptional GPA to get into a good doctorate program." The experience also shaped their academic identity, fostering self-awareness, intellectual curiosity, and a sense of belonging in academia. As Reem reflected, "Being an RA helps you discover more about your identity … I want to spread my wings and see where they take me." Financial compensation was acknowledged but secondary to academic and professional growth. While some found it valuable, Theyab noted, "The second motivation was the money. Although it was less than expected, it was still a good side hustle."

URA experiences helped bridge the gap between theory and practice, improving coursework performance. Ahmed shared, "Applying classroom theories to real-world research solidified my understanding and improved my critical thinking." The role also enhanced their ability to navigate research tasks efficiently, with Khalid stating, "Basic statistics courses were a breeze. I could complete tasks like finding an empirical paper in 10 minutes." URAs gained valuable skills beyond traditional coursework; as Reem noted, "There was much I learned that university courses alone wouldn't teach." Many developed leadership skills, problem-solving abilities, and confidence in balancing responsibilities. Anwaar shared, "Being in a leadership role as an RA forces you to think critically." For most RAs, the experience inspired future leadership aspirations: "Maybe one day, I'll take a leadership role—this feels like mini practice for that."

For many, the experience was about contributing to a larger academic purpose. Anwaar stated, "At the end of the day, we are all working towards the same goal: publishing impactful papers." Presenting at conferences validated their efforts and strengthened their commitment to academic pursuits. A recurring theme was personal growth. Many described increased confidence, resilience, and a stronger sense of

identity. Khalid shared, "I don't know what to anticipate, but I'll embrace challenges and come out better." For some, the experience reshaped their approach to collaboration. Reem admitted, "I always worked alone, even in group projects. After being an RA, I started seeing things differently." The role also pushed many out of their comfort zones, enhancing social skills and confidence.

Theme 2: Successes and Challenges: "Burning out, but I managed it."

URAs transitioned from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. Initially driven by family expectations and external validation—common in the UAE's collectivistic culture—their focus shifted to personal, academic, and professional goals. This transformation emerged as they engaged in research, developing a deeper appreciation for the process. Khalid shared, "I started with mundane tasks, but eventually, the work became meaningful. I realized I was not just working for my family or the stipend but for myself." Many found their curiosity and passion for research deepening over time, with Amna stating, "I've always wanted to do something that could make a difference in my community, and I thought research might help me do that."

Despite positive experiences, URAs faced challenges that tested their resilience. Balancing research with coursework was a common struggle, especially during peak academic periods. Ahmed reflected, "Learning complex data analysis tools and managing time to meet project deadlines required strong communication and organizational skills that I still struggle with." Over time, they developed strategies to manage their workload, contributing to their growth.

Navigating unfamiliar research concepts was another hurdle. Most RAs initially felt overwhelmed by technical terms, as Khalid humorously noted, "The weird terms never stopped coming—'Chi-Square,' 'ANOVA,' or 'T-Test'—but we persevered." Seeking clarification was also challenging, as URAs feared appearing incompetent. Khalid also shared, "The biggest challenge was asking for help. Another RA and I would text after every meeting, 'What … are they talking about?!'" However, they gradually recognized research as a learning process requiring guidance and collaboration. Many overcame these struggles, becoming more confident in managing complex tasks. Khalid summarized this transformation: "We adapted and improved. Now, I can take on challenging tasks, manage them well, and even know when to say no to avoid overcommitment."

Theme 3: Mentor–Student Relationship: "I didn't want my supervisors to think they hired a fraud."

This theme explores the mentor's role, their impact, and the relationships formed, comparing initial expectations with actual experiences. Mentors were described as more than research guides; they provided encouragement, support, and inspiration while balancing academic rigor with relational care. Khalid reflected, "The mentorship I received was IMPECCABLE! I don't think others understand how lucky I am to have my mentors. I received guidance beyond mere academia." Anwaar shared, "The mentors I have worked with in this RA role have honestly set the standard for how mentors should be. They have fostered a healthy environment where research and creativity can flourish."

Mentors transformed students into confident researchers through constructive feedback, intellectual challenges, and emotional support. Reem noted, "They've always shown me that I'm a valued part of the team. That support has given me so much confidence and has made this experience even more meaningful." Khalid added, "They never aimed to change who I was but to refine who I am and develop skills that will equip me to succeed in my future occupation."

Students valued the balance between structure and autonomy, which boosted their confidence. Theyab shared, "Our mentor took my fellow RA and me through the research process step by step, while also giving us space to provide feedback and thoughts, which I greatly appreciated." These interactions made them feel like valued contributors, not just assistants. Amna emphasized, "I've never had trouble communicating with my mentors—whether I'm struggling, need help, or just have a ton of questions. They're always approachable and willing to guide me." Many appreciated detailed critiques that refined their skills and encouraged independent thinking. Ahmed reflected, "My mentors provided guidance, constructive feedback, and support, fostering an environment conducive to learning and growth." Several credited their ongoing passion for research to the intellectually stimulating environment their mentors created. Reem noted, "She goes beyond the 'standards' by making it educational yet intriguing." The non-hierarchical structure fostered open dialogue, collaboration, and interactive learning.

Despite admiration for their mentors, some URAs struggled with expectations and the fear of disappointing them. New tasks, personal insecurities, or self-imposed pressure often made them hesitant to ask questions or admit uncertainty. Khalid admitted, "I was simply too afraid to ask how to do it. I didn't want my supervisors to think they hired a fraud." However, none mentioned actual disappointment from mentors, suggesting these fears were self-imposed. Ultimately, many overcame their insecurities through continued mentorship and support. Amna expressed deep appreciation:

> My current mentors are everything I could wish for and more. They've set such a high standard that I only wish other mentors could learn from them. Their support, teaching style, and passion for research have made this experience not only educational but something I look forward to every day.

This transformation highlights the power of mentorship in shaping students' academic and personal growth. While challenges arose, the support and guidance from mentors helped URAs build confidence, refine their skills, and develop a lasting passion for research.

Theme 4: Co-Learning and Peers: "My new academic family but with more individuality."

Given that they all worked within teams, this theme encompasses all the URAs' reflections on their peer relationships, learnings, and struggles.

Many felt a strong sense of responsibility toward the team and mentors and expressed a deep commitment to contributing meaningfully. A defining aspect of their experience was the opportunity for co-learning. They appreciated their team members and found them a support and source of motivation; as Maitha shared, "Having a friend who was also with me along this journey has motivated me greatly, as we kept

on pushing each other to do more, regardless of any doubts we had." They also reflected on how their peers made challenging tasks more manageable; as Amna explained, "Of course, there were some tough moments, but having a partner made a big difference. We supported each other through it, so I never felt like I was carrying all the pressure alone." This camaraderie and shared experience created a collaborative and compassionate work atmosphere, reinforcing that research was not an individual endeavor but a collective pursuit, which helped them develop a stronger sense of community, personal responsibility, and confidence.

Despite the support and peer learning, the competitive and high-achieving environment led to feelings of intimidation for some, especially when working alongside peers with more experience, causing self-doubt. Theyab reflected, "I didn't want to just be satisfactory to my fellows or just complete tasks—I wanted to excel. But at times, I felt intimidated by others who were more experienced." Amna admitted, "Sometimes being surrounded by amazing and more experienced RAs can make me feel less confident about even taking part in some tasks. I feel pointless like I won't be much of a help." However, over time, students transformed their perspectives, embracing challenges and appreciating the presence of others with different strengths as a contribution to a more prosperous and dynamic research environment. Amna eloquently summarized, "Instead of comparing myself to others, I've started learning from them and seeing it as an opportunity to grow." Anwaar reflected, "I truly do believe employing students with different levels and skills helps to foster productive work dynamics." This shift is noticeable in reflections such as, "At the end of the day, we are all working towards the same goal, but we can all learn from our differences." Over time, students began to reframe this comparison as an opportunity for growth.

Theme 5: Culture and Belonging: "We supported each other through it all."

The interplay between community and individuality emerged as a defining theme. While students deeply valued the sense of belonging and collective identity within their teams, they recognized the importance of individual contributions and self-reliance.

Many described experiencing internal conflict between collectivist cultural values—prioritizing team success and group harmony—with the more individualistic demands and responsibilities. They initially approached their research work with external motivations, like fulfilling family expectations or enhancing their CVs. However, as they became more involved in research, their motivation shifted towards personal fulfillment and academic growth. This shift from external validation to intrinsic motivation sheds light on the essence of cultural aspects.

The collectivist mindset shaped how they saw their contributions as integral to the team's success, reinforcing a sense of duty and responsibility. Reem admitted, "I don't want all to go down because of me." Maitha articulated this struggle: "I constantly feel like I'm not good enough, but I don't want to let my team or mentor down either." Amna shared, "I don't want to disappoint my mentor. I don't want to disappoint my teammates." These fears may have also contributed to their feelings of inadequacy and impostor syndrome, primarily as they worked alongside more experienced peers. Some struggled with self-perception, feeling they were constantly falling behind. Amna shared, "Many times, I've felt like

I'm lacking something—like I don't know enough, or I'm not good enough compared to others." Others described feelings of self-doubt and impostor syndrome, particularly when assigned leadership roles. "I have taken a leadership part, where I am a team leader. This mainly happened due to others in the team assigning this role to me. However, I feel inadequate and that I am doing a lacking/subpar performance," admitted Maitha.

Although they struggled with tasks and self-doubts, they reflected on how their teams were a source of strength and support. Many overcame on-the-job struggles and self-doubt by leaning on their research team. Research teams became more than just academic spaces—they became support systems that helped navigate professional and personal challenges. Reem shared, "We supported each other through it all." Having mentors, teammates, and friends to rely on helped mitigate self-doubt and reinforced a sense of belonging. Anwaar noted, "Luckily, the team was very understanding and forgiving." Friendships formed through collective struggles, helped navigate challenges, and contributed to a positive sense of community. Amna expressed, "We created a specific atmosphere where we not only learned from each other but also supported one another through the process."

Although students did not necessarily use the word *gratitude*, many reflections expressed gratitude, possibly due to their culture, which encourages the expression of appreciation. Many expressed gratitude for the opportunities, guidance, and friendships gained through their experiences. As noted earlier, Khalid reflected, "The mentorship I received was impeccable! I don't think others understand how lucky I am to have my mentors. I received guidance beyond mere academia." Anwaar shared, "Honestly, I was overwhelmed by all the support from both professors. I am eternally grateful for all the advice and time it took to teach all of us RAs."

The findings of the experiences of Emirati URAs align with previous research yet add a unique cultural dimension. They reiterate valuable educational benefits, enhancing students' research skills, confidence, and professional growth. Participants reported that their experiences helped them apply classroom theories to real-world research and develop critical thinking and skills, aligning with previous studies on the benefits of undergraduate research (Hunter et al., 2006; Lopatto, 2007). Additionally, mentorship played a significant role in fostering success, autonomy, teamwork, professional socialization, and leadership development (Eagan et al., 2013; van Blankenstein et al., 2019). The benefits of their experiences were due to the exposure to the research process, the mentorship, and the sense of community within the research teams.

Discussion

Similar to findings from Western research, URAs in the UAE faced time constraints and skill-based challenges; however, they did not experience challenges such as logistical and financial barriers, limited institutional support, and a lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (Orton et al., 2025), given they were all Emirati who attend a public university that fully funds their education and were approached for recruitment by the faculty members. Despite challenges, students developed resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptability through their experiences, reframing challenges as learning opportunities, mainly as they learned to ask for help and developed on the job, transforming confusion into competence. Nevertheless, they also struggled with the dual role, as mentioned in previous research (Weeks et al., 2015), but realized that it enhanced their time management skills and made them assertive and adaptable.

A unique aspect of this study is the cultural dimension, as Emirati URAs navigated their roles within a collectivist society and Western-modeled academic structures. Applying an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991) highlights how overlapping identities—such as nationality, gender, and student status—influenced their experiences, revealing how cultural norms, institutional structures, and mentorship intersected. Emirati culture emphasizes collaboration over competition, hierarchy versus equality, and collectivism rather than individuality. The URAs' strong sense of duty to mentors and peers reflected individual dispositions and broader cultural norms around respect and group harmony. They prioritized group success over individual responsibilities and built confidence through collaboration, friendships, and mentor support. Interestingly, their reflections on some of their experiences revealed a deep appreciation for the mentors, opportunities, and friendships they gained; these may be due to cultural factors that reinforce gratitude and hierarchical values. As students progressed, their motivation shifted from external rewards—such as stipends and family pride—to intrinsic purpose, aligning with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, the collectivist context and the interplay of their student-in-a-Western-modeled-institution and Emirati identities heightened pressure to support the group and avoid disappointing mentors, contributing to self-doubt and imposter syndrome. The intersectionality influenced their motivations, pressures, and sense of belonging, and the findings reiterate the need for culturally responsive mentorship and pedagogical models that reflect students' intersecting identities and sociocultural realities.

Mentorship played a significant role in shaping their growth. Rather than being hierarchical, these relationships were described as affirming and supportive, echoing hooks' concept of engaged pedagogy (hooks, 2010), which centers relationality, connection, and holistic development, as students expressed gratitude for the mentors and acknowledged their investment in their personal and professional development. Ultimately, their experiences led to self-actualization and self-development. The students' autonomy and sense of responsibility which lead to their achievements while collaborating with their peers and mentors reflects the essence, trust, and commitment. Students also described learning through iterative, collaborative processes—"figuring things out" alongside peers and mentors—reflecting the engaged pedagogy further, fostering learning from one another, and embodying Freire's (1970) notions of dialogue and praxis: learning through cycles of action and reflection. URAs emphasized their

development through their continued trials, implementing the theories, experiential learning, peer support, and mentor feedback. These experiences suggest that research assistantships grounded in relational, culturally responsive mentorship that supports academic and personal development can cultivate competence and confidence, particularly in cultures that value interdependence.

The findings reinforce existing literature on undergraduate research by demonstrating that research assistantships cultivate academic identity, critical thinking, and professional preparedness (Thiry et al., 2012). However, the study uniquely highlights how intersectionality and relationality shape students' motivations, challenges, and responses to mentorship, suggesting that research programs should consider cultural contexts when designing support systems for URAs and rethinking traditional roles in education.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

This study highlights the crucial role of URAs in fostering research skills, confidence, and academic identity within the UAE. The findings are particularly relevant for non-Western societies transitioning from collectivism to individualism, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive research programs.

To enhance URA experiences, universities should enhance their policies to establish structured programs with clear expectations, mentorship training, and defined career pathways (Shanahan et al., 2015). Research assistantships should be integrated into curricula as credited courses or paid internships, ensuring accessibility. As our data suggested, expanding financial support through stipends and dedicated research funding can further encourage student engagement. Furthermore, faculty should be incentivized to involve undergraduates in research projects, co-authorship, and conference presentations. Encouraging student participation in international research opportunities can broaden academic and professional horizons.

Culturally responsive mentorship is essential, especially in the UAE's Islamic society where most faculty are Western-educated or from Western countries. Faculty mentors should be trained in balancing academic rigor with emotional and social support while fostering collaboration. Developing mentorship models with multiple faculty and peer mentors can create a supportive research community. Given Emirati students' collectivist background that shapes their motivations, emphasizing collaboration and group harmony over competition (Chen et al., 1998), mentorship should align with these values by promoting teamwork and social responsibility. Furthermore, mentorship models that include multiple faculty and peer mentors can help build supportive research communities.

Additionally, strengthening institutional support for undergraduate research will support student learning and career readiness. Universities can further support students by offering peer networks, mental health resources, and recognition programs to reduce stress and imposter syndrome, ensuring students feel supported by trusted systems rather than relying solely on the recognition expected from busy mentors who may not necessarily be aware of their needs.

The results of the current study should be viewed with limitations. The small sample size and reliance on self-reported reflections introduce potential biases, particularly as mentor involvement in reviewing journals may have influenced responses. Additionally, the study's focus on a single institution restricts broader applicability. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative studies across institutions and cultures to examine URAs' long-term experiences, trends, and challenges. To mitigate biases, future studies could explore anonymous reflection methods or reduce mentor involvement in reviewing student reflections. Nonetheless, this study addresses a critical gap in understanding the experiences of Emirati research assistants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that collaborative learning, culturally grounded mentorship, and support shape Emirati undergraduate research assistants' academic growth, highlighting the need for relational pedagogy and culturally responsive research environments to foster confidence, motivation, and resilience. As UAE institutions navigate the space between collectivist values and Western academic models, tailored support systems and inclusive research environments remain essential for empowering undergraduate researchers.

Notes

1. The Boyer Commission was a panel of scholars in the United States which, in 1998, issued a landmark report calling for a transformation of undergraduate education at research universities.

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Going in Circles: Transitions, Connections, and Identity-Building through Venn Diagrams

Natalie Thibault

Abstract

Through a doctoral experience that altered my personal and professional identities, I developed an unexpected fondness for Venn diagrams. They meaningfully transformed my ideation, self-reflection, and research processes. More than logical figures, Venn diagrams are inspiring, embracing, and empathetic zones that offer room to grow and space to think, and where commonalities and differences can be celebrated. This paper is an homage to the inspirational circular shapes of the Venn diagram; not only have they transformed me, but they can ignite ideation, nurture connections, and foster growth for all teachers, students, and scholars out there.

Introduction

When starting my doctoral studies at age 40, I could not have imagined how much this transition would transform me. Beyond the impact the experience has had on my personal and professional identities, it has instilled in me an unexpected fondness for Venn diagrams.

While I remember learning about Venn diagrams in elementary school, they did not make a great impression on me; while they made sense, I never used them in any meaningful way. How did my graduate school journey lead me to becoming a Venn diagram aficionado? How have my transitions from teacher to student, then from doctoral candidate to doctor, been shaped by intersecting circles usually reserved for mathematical and logic problems? Those are questions I never thought I'd ask, but well, here we are.

From the beginning of my doctoral studies in 2018, I found myself drawn to the Venn diagram, and I have been consistently using it since. Could my newfound passion have been fueled by its increased presence in the public consciousness through viral memes and parodies in recent years? While it is difficult to prove, this possibility cannot be excluded, considering that I began my doctoral studies in August 2018, the same month the famous "Put your hands up" Venn diagram meme went viral (Know Your Meme, 2023). Regardless of how they penetrated my mind, Venn diagrams and their rounded intercepting shapes became a reassuring template for wandering thoughts, a framework for making points. I found myself drawing them instinctively, stretching and moving them around to make sense of messy thoughts or undisciplined arguments. At first, I was making lists draped in surrounding circles, like a net flung around a flock of birds. With time, their impact on my ideation process changed.

The Power of the Circle

The circles—or boxes, or ill-shaped blobs deformed by excessive text and lack of symmetry—have had a reassuring quality I cannot deny. They gave me confidence that messes would get sorted out. They freed me from rigid dichotomies and opened a path towards intersectionality. Placing ideas in virtual bins on the page helped make sense of the chaos I was trying to write or think about. Eventually, Venn diagrams became part of my scholastic identity; their evolution echoes the transitions I have been through in the last few years. I used them in most of my papers in the doctoral program, my dissertation and doctoral defense, as well as nearly every work I have since published. In short, I found myself *going in circles*.

Venn diagrams, and their attractiveness discovered and nurtured through my studies, are the perfect vehicle to *illustrate* the transitions I have been through since starting my doctoral journey six years ago, and will guide me through the ones to come.

The circle is an incredibly powerful shape. It embraces, flexible and elastic. There is always room for more. It is not a box, rigid and sharp; it is a hug, welcoming and forgiving. Circles are connections, communities. Aren't circles symbols of openness? In Korea, where I live and teach, circles are used to say "yes" (while Xs are used for no). Ripples, too: circles that expand, echo, and generate change. Circles can be affirmative *and* affirming.

From Organizing Ideas to Attracting Them

In my first attempts at Venn diagram making, guided by nearly forgotten remembrances from grade school math, I tried to visually express thoughts that were already on my mind. I aimed to sort them out, organize them in a logical and visually coherent way: *Thoughts, then diagrams*. With time, my conceptualization shifted and so did my habits; I started to draw Venn diagrams as templates to be filled, hoping to *attract* and generate ideas: *Diagrams, then thoughts*.

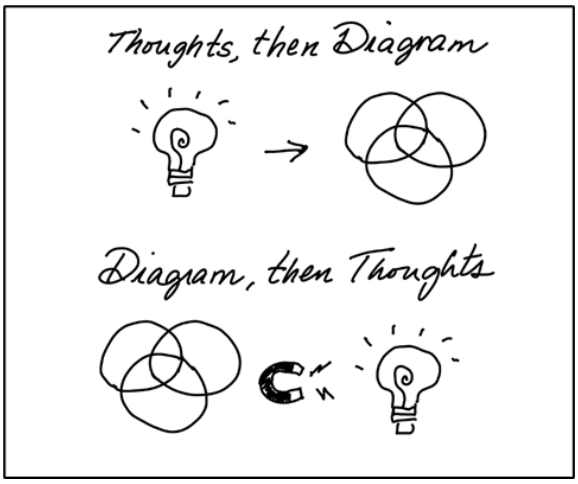


Fig. 1: Thoughts and diagrams

This shift from a desire to illustrate already formed thoughts to the usage of a visual template that attracts thoughts was significant. The Venn diagrams were no longer the result of my ideation process, but rather their ignition point.

The power of the converging space cannot be denied. Convergence sometimes feels like a buzzword with not much meaning. I prefer to think of Venn diagrams as "come together" figures, where space is *created* to allow possibilities. To make room for growth. A Venn diagram intersection creates a luxuriant zone, like ecotones in nature; after all, there is often more life and greater density in an ecotone than in the zones that constitute it (Kark, 2024).

One of the important aspects of the Venn diagram is the space it leaves for possibilities, allowing intersections to remain empty while acknowledging their potential. That is what distinguishes Venn's diagram from Euler's, as it offers *propositions* rather than solely reflecting realities (Edwards, 2004).

Transitions and Converging Identities

Schlossberg (2011) reminds us that "everyone experiences transitions, whether they are events or non-events, anticipated or unanticipated. These transitions alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p. 159). Going back to school in my 40s was a consequential transition, and it impacted my role, relationships, routine, and, perhaps most importantly, my identity.

While theorizing adult transitions, Schlossberg et al. (1989) identified three stages of transition, namely "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out." With those in mind, I reflected upon the various shapes my transition took, from the moment I enrolled in the doctoral program to today. More clearly than ever, I could see it morphing into overlapping circular shapes.

Since a transition is usually marked by the passing of time, a timeline or other chronology-based visual representation might seem more suitable to depict it. In my case, my multiple identities did not succeed one another but, rather, merged and converged into a new one (see Figure 2).

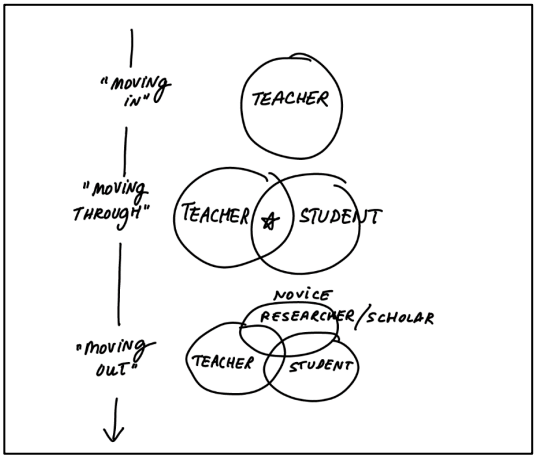


Fig. 2: Transition through graduate school

The natural tendency to describe a transition as a line snuck into my doodling, with an arrow showing the growth and expansion of Venn diagrams. The evolution from one diagram to the next marks a change, a growth in the multiplication of the potential zones of convergence, or propositions (Edwards, 2004).

My enrollment in a doctoral program did not pause nor end my teaching career but, rather, marked the opening of a parallel path for me to pursue simultaneously. While multiple roles and responsibilities came with an increased workload and mental burden, they opened up a new converging zone where my new identity could develop and take root.

Juggling multiple personal and professional duties led to stress and a toll on my health, as is often the case for doctoral students (Gonzalez et al., 2021). While deadlines multiplied and workloads grew, the number of hours in a day did not. Thanks to family members and friends' championing efforts, I received strong support that made a positive difference (Schlossberg, 2011) and softened the blow of a demanding transition.

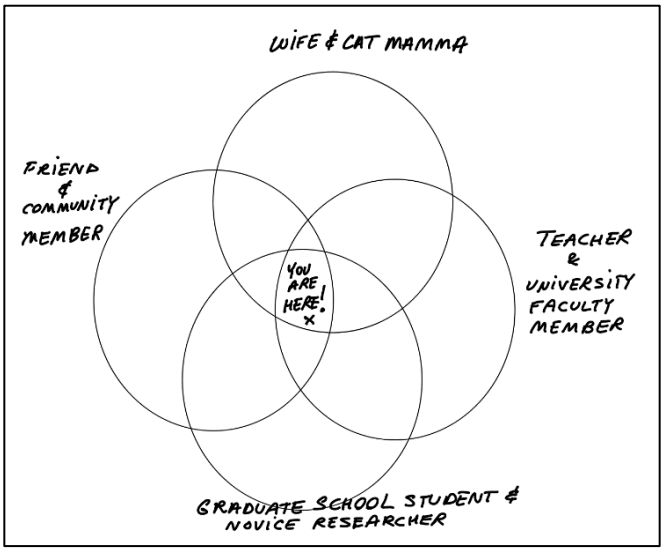


Fig. 3: "Multifaceted identity": so many roles, so little time

Being a Teacher, Being a Student

I have been teaching for a long time. My return to school, to pursue a doctorate in educational leadership, ended a 10-year scholarly enrollment gap. The transition from teacher to student—or rather from teacher only to teacher *and* student—was significant and gave me new insight into my profession (see Figure 4). It shifted my perspective and gave me a fresh outlook on education, from a didactical *and* relational stance. Being at the receiving end of instruction felt as reassuring as confusing; eager to learn and be guided, I was also fighting "teacher's instincts" pushing me to take the lead.

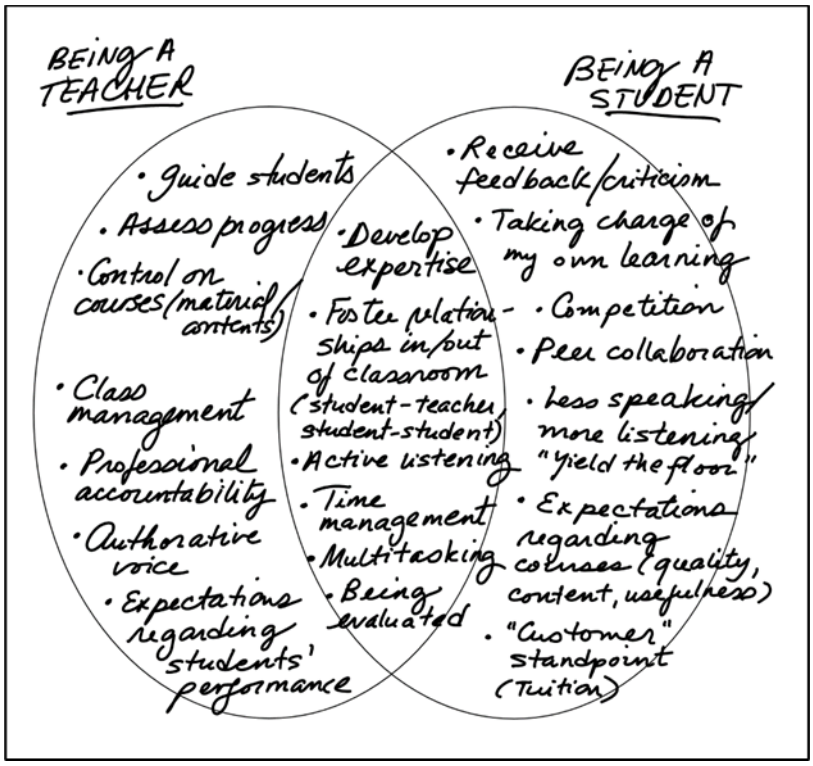


Fig. 4: "Moving through": being a teacher and being a student

My two roles—my two *identities*—converged to create a hybrid identity that incorporated existing elements from both, yet felt new. Rather than old thoughts, needs, and realities being replaced or erased, they were complemented.

My journey of exploration and meaning-making related to my identity and transition cannot be detached from my role as an educator. My transition from teacher to student, then from doctoral candidate to doctor, has always remained connected to my relationship with my students and my role as an educator. I feel that studying and learning, (re)becoming a student, made me a better teacher. Like ripples on water, my process of learning and discovering new aspects of my professional and personal self impacted my teaching and, naturally, my students (see Figure 5). As time passed, the impact of students, and my relationships with them, had an impact on my scholarship, creating a cyclic sense of give-and-take that propelled me.

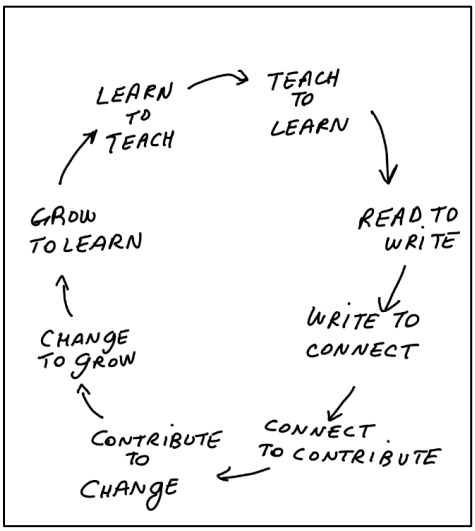


Fig. 5: Cyclic give-and-take (being a student and being a teacher)

Empathetic Figures to Illustrate Relationships

It is often said that human relationships and connections are rooted in commonalities. Venn diagrams can be powerful tools to illustrate how people connect through similarities while embracing differences. They can be a tool for connection building, as they offer space where people can be both similar and different, where they can share attributes while remaining distinctive. In that sense, Venn diagrams are empathetic figures.

Becoming a student again as a middle-aged woman offered me new insights into my profession and, more importantly, into my students. It made me realize what I have in common with them, and it made me question and re-examine my assumptions regarding my role and theirs (see Figure 6).

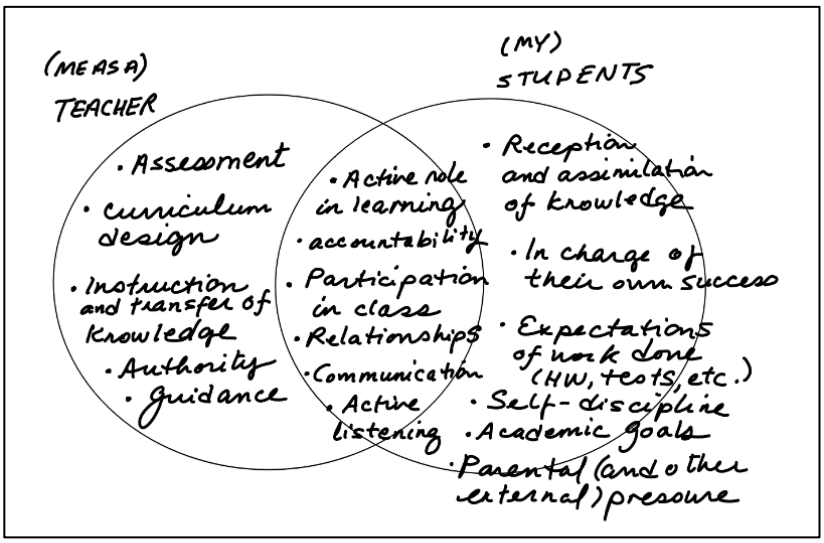


Fig. 6: Connections and relationships between my students and me

Beyond the window Venn diagrams offered me into personal identity and transition, they gave me a chance to examine how my relationships and connections are developed and maintained. I explored my existing relationships with university students I teach and advise, and then I turned to the new personal connections that were born in the transitional space of my doctoral studies: with my classmates, and with my professors and advisor (see Figure 7).

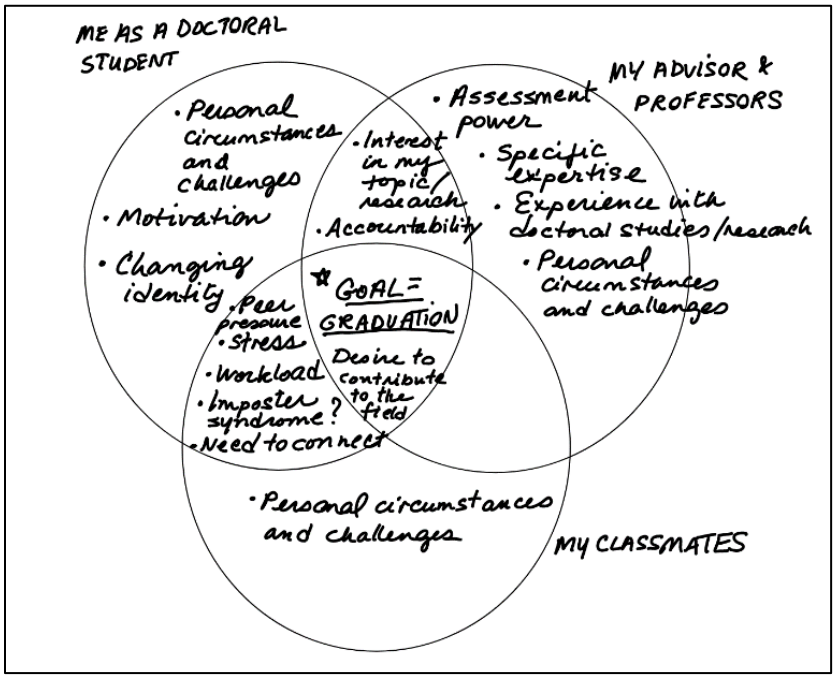


Fig. 7: Relationships in the doctoral program

The relationships I developed with professors, and especially with my advisor, were pivotal in my transitional experience. Relying on my professors' experience and expertise was beneficial and reassuring, but I also felt a tension that Gardner (2008) described as a "constant need for support and guidance from faculty … often tempered by the need to feel competent and independent from them as well" (p. 344). I had to perform and often figure things out on my own, as the development of expertise and self-reliance was expected, yet I was expected to abide by strict guidelines that left little room for independence or creativity.

While the intersection between my classmates and my professors remains empty, it does not mean that no relationship exists; to the contrary, the diagram allows for room, ideas, *propositions*. While I cannot extrapolate on the commonality of their relationship, I can and should acknowledge the crossroads they share. Here lies the power of the Venn diagram in illustrating relationships: it leaves space for growth and change, for different perspectives, for *possibilities*. *Empathy* can be defined as the ability to understand and share someone else's feelings (Cambridge, n.d.)—the key word being "share." Venn diagrams offer a shared space, where commonalities are celebrated without sacrificing distinctiveness.

What Does It Mean to Be a Doctor?

Through my doctoral studies, my quest and questioning regarding identity continued to grow, taking the Venn diagram of my identity in new directions. Step by step, the questions continued to push the diagram outward, creating more zones of congruence, more possibilities, more propositions. At first, trying to explore these questions through the medium of Venn diagrams felt overwhelming. With some zones overpacked with thoughts and others blank, was I over-complicating things? Was I looking for connections and convergences where there weren't any?

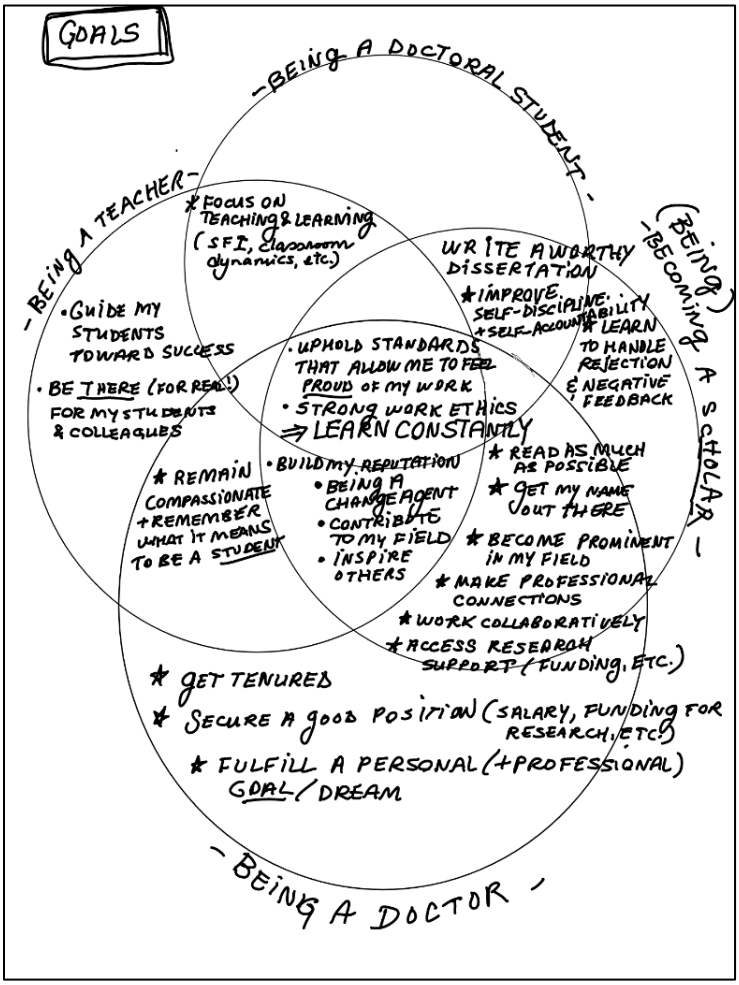


Fig. 8: "Moving out": multiple converging identities and goals

The transition from graduate student to scholar is difficult, especially in terms of developing independence. In a context where doctoral candidates are expected to find an equilibrium between a certain level of independence and strict research-related requirements (Gardner, 2008), how could I find my footing?

The Struggles of the Post-Doctoral Transition

Once my doctoral dissertation was defended, I entered a new phase of my life. This stage of the transition, *moving out*, came with unexpected challenges. Transitioning from doctoral candidate to doctor turned out to be difficult, filled with uncertainty, confusion, and guilt. The development of my disciplinary identity (Dressen-Hammouda, 2008), which began with enrollment and continued through my studies and beyond, was more challenging and complicated than expected. To battle helplessness and confusion, I turned to Venn diagrams' reassuring round embrace (see Figure 9). While some people journal to let their thoughts and inner torment pour onto the page, I draw circles and let them catch my wandering thoughts, like fishing nets would swimming fish.

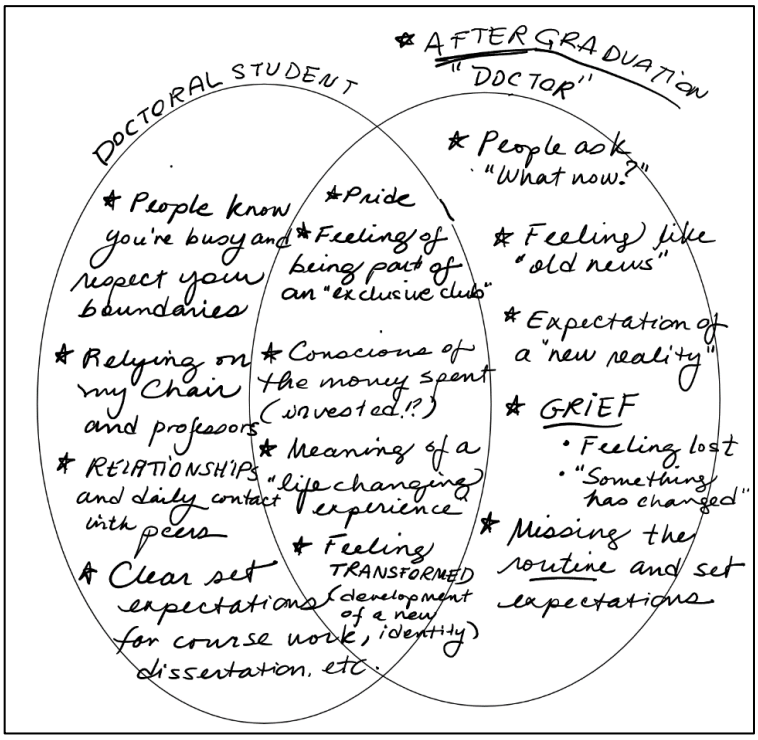


Fig. 9: Being a doctoral student and becoming a doctor

The creation of the converging zone felt reassuring to me, as if some things were changing yet certain key elements remained; a crossroads where things evolve but do not disappear.

Once they reach the end of the doctoral journey, many students struggle with insecurity regarding their future, and the support they receive from their institution or faculty is uneven and often insufficient (Moreau et al., 2022). My transition out of the doctoral program, which I sometimes refer to as "post-doctoral blues," led me to question almost every aspect of my being, my work, and my life. The transition was neither smooth nor chaotic; rather, it felt like a no man's land where my sense of direction was momentarily lost. As Anderson et al. (2011) remind us, "Transitions require coping. Moving through a transition requires letting go of aspects of the self; letting go of former roles and learning new ones" (p. 40). Filling up this "in-between" with thoughts gave me back a sense of control, suggesting not all

was lost after all, and that there were some tangible things to hold on to. The intermediate zone of a Venn diagram is not pure addition nor subtraction, it is expansion: it creates more room, a new space where things from the past remain true but open up to new possibilities for the future.

Transition into Academic Work: Powerful Tools for Qualitative Research

While set diagrams, such as Venn's, are often used for mathematics and quantitative inquiries, they can be powerful tools for visual representation and clarity of findings in qualitative research (Mahoney & Vanderpoel, 2015).

Another transition I underwent was from teacher/student to scholar-practitioner, academic writer, and researcher. Beyond the comfort they gave me through journaling and personal ideation efforts, Venn diagrams became useful tools in my arsenal in terms of data analysis and representation of findings. Naturally, they also guided me through my ideation process, often offering insight that helped me craft research questions or statements of purpose (see Figure 10).

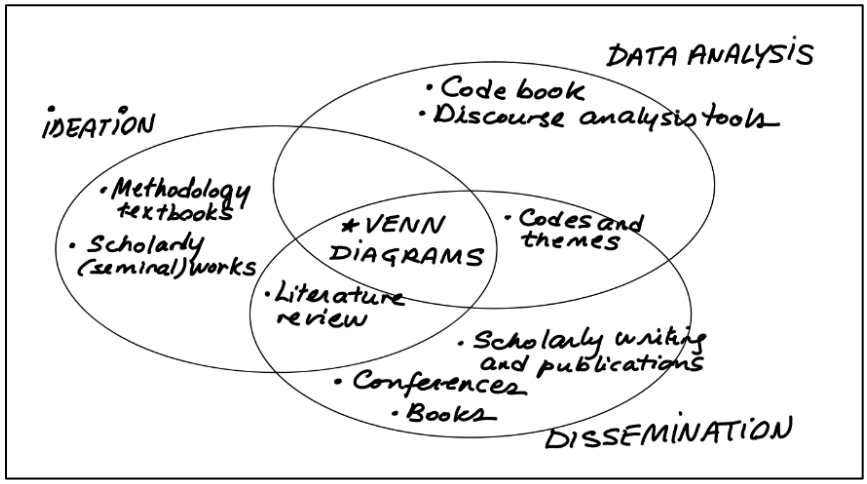


Fig. 10: Tools used in research endeavors

While the Venn diagram is often used to illustrate findings (Mahoney & Vanderpoel, 2015), I have come to use it in almost all steps of my research process. The development of a visually driven research mind is not something I had expected, but it became part of my identity as a scholar as I transitioned from doctoral candidate to doctor, from student to scholar-practitioner. Considering that Venn diagram strategies can be effective in improving students' academic performance (Syafii & Miftah, 2021), their utility for research procedures for novice scholars is evident. In my case, developing Venn diagrams has given me a sense of empowerment, and helped me find and develop my scholastic agency and identity.

Targets Are Circles, Too

Targets are also circles. Goals are circular, ready to welcome a brave arrow or a powerful punch. Venn diagrams are welcoming zones for me, as there is acceptance in the space left for ideas to come, movement, and change. Transitioning from doctoral candidate to scholar-practitioner also meant finding my place in my field, and forging my own disciplinary identity (Dressen-Hammouda, 2008) based on research interests, relevant experience, and professional expertise. Looking for a way to narrow my focus and find a converging point where my expertise, past research experiences, and current scholastic hunger would meet, I designed a Venn diagram (see Figure 11) that feels like an invitation. I smile when I look at the circle of "interests," as it runs wild and free, without fear or judgment. Having room for all possibilities gives me freedom of thought because there is *room for all potentials* even if they never materialize. They are welcome nonetheless, as open propositions.

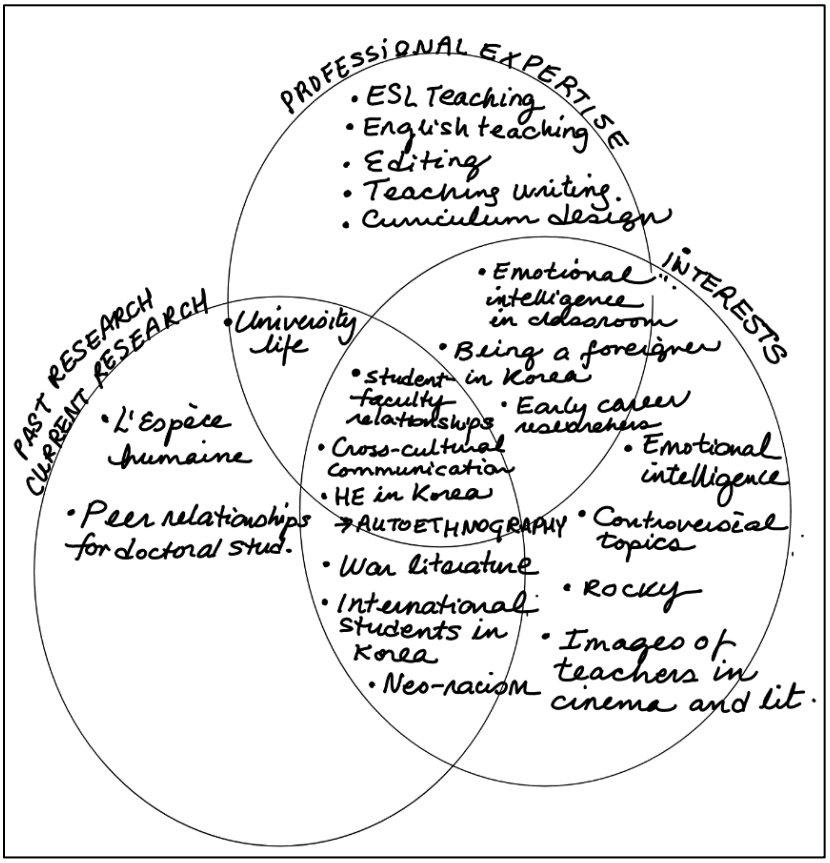


Fig. 11: "Moving on": where do I belong in the academic world?

Concluding Thoughts

Speed comes through circular motions, too. The world goes round and round. There is no progress without motion. Transitions are all about moving. Evolving and changing. Growing and failing. Moving forward. While we are all striving for creativity, I am hoping to transition from *thinking outside the box* to *thinking inside circles*. We often say that going in circles means repeating oneself, wasting time, stagnating. For me, circles have become the opposite. Circular Venn diagrams are symbols of growth and ideation, vessels that welcome thoughts and, more importantly, foster ideation, empathy, and connections.

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