LEARNing Landscapes

Journal

Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Practices Grounded in Theory and Experiences

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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 30)

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Editor's Note

It is hard to believe that 2026 marks the 30th issue of *LEARNing Landscapes* (LL). The journal was conceived and initiated in 2007. Michael Canuel, the CEO of LEARN (Leading English Education and Resource Network), a nonprofit organization funded by the Canada–Quebec Agreement on Minority-Language Education, generously agreed to publish and fund the journal as an open-access, online, free, peer-reviewed publication which merges theory and practice, hosts an inclusive array of voices, and encourages the use of multi-modalities. He endorsed these founding principles and saw the benefits of encouraging scholarly reading and writing among practitioners and academics in Quebec and beyond. We never looked back and worked in partnership with him until his retirement in 2024. We continue to work with LEARN under the capable leadership of the new CEO, Christine Truesdale.

It seems fitting at this juncture to retrospectively mention four other pivotal people who participated energetically and enthusiastically on this journey. They include Mary Stewart, who was managing editor for over a decade until her retirement. Her prompt responses, outstanding communication skills, and support of both authors and reviewers were revered among the LL community. David Mitchell was our brilliant copyeditor until three years ago when he shifted direction to concentrate on his own writing. He ensured and sustained the high quality of the publication. Christine Houde (LEARN) has adroitly managed the important interface between the LL community and the platform, and Rob Costain (LEARN) has capably maintained behind the scenes all the intricacies of the platform. We owe them all a tremendous thank you.

The last two issues of *LEARNing Landscapes* were carried out under the auspices of invited guest editors. In 2024, for the 28th issue, it was a pleasure to work alongside Bronwen Low, an associate professor in my department, and Jessica Ruglis, an associate professor in the Department of Educational Counselling and Psychology in my faculty. They tackled a timely and pertinent topic, "Towards new futures of child and youth development: Critical and sustainable approaches to well-being in complex times," that attracted a wonderfully diverse, informative, and inclusive range of submissions. In 2025, for the 29th issue, Mindy Carter, an associate professor, and Traci Klein, a PhD candidate, both in my department, produced an equally interesting issue that focused on "Transitions: The messiness of just being human." Again, it was a treat to work with them, and I thank both teams for their contributions to the LL community and the scholarship they provided.

This year I have had the pleasure of working with Anna Villalta, a PhD candidate whom I supervise, who willingly and capably took on the role of managing editor, and with Genevieve Downing, a fourth-year English major in the Faculty of Arts at McGill, who actively sought the experience of working on *LEARNing Landscapes* and effectively and efficiently took on the position of assistant managing editor. Their collegiality and enthusiasm for the journal made our work very pleasurable and I thank them deeply. Finally, I would like to thank Eve Krakow, who assumed David Mitchell's role of copyeditor when he left. The transition was seamless. She has been a gem from the outset, extremely skillful, patient, and attentive to detail, and has maintained the high quality of the work.

LBK

Editorial

Inquiry in learning contexts that place the responsibility for learning on the students are based on John Dewey's philosophy that education begins with the curiosity of the learner. Lee et al. (2004) defined inquiry-based learning (IBL) as an "array of . . . practices that promote . . . learning through guided and, increasingly, independent investigation of complex questions and problems, often for which there is no single answer" (p. 9). Frequently referred to as project-based or problem-based learning, depending on the subject or discipline, it is a form of active learning scaffolded by educators to support learners in developing their abilities to ask good/essential questions, determine what needs to be learned and what resources are required to answer the questions, and share their learning with others. Inquiry-based learning builds valuable and transferable skills—goal setting, time and priority management, information gathering, critical thinking, meaningful communication and collaboration, reflection, and self-assessment, and it includes multimodal approaches for the sharing of information. IBL increases learner engagement because it builds learning authentically based on their interests, experiences, identities, and propensities. It does not abdicate direct instruction when needed, nor is it an all or nothing approach to learning. It can be developed incrementally, gradually transferring the responsibility for learning from teacher to students while closely monitoring, scaffolding, and differentiating expectations through formative assessment along the way. Importantly, it is a way of "living in the learning" which helps to develop the fundamental and necessary relational and ethical stance among learners (Perkins, 2009). Despite the fact that IBL and its "cousins" are grounded in evidence-based research that has shown the many advantages of learning this way, IBL rarely gets sustained traction in education systems. Bailey (2025) suggests that the philosophy behind IBL is incompatible with the traditional industrial structures and temporal rhythms of educational institutions. Unless these are changed, IBL will continue to emerge in pockets, only to eventually subside and succumb to the traditional forces so heavily ensconced in the structures of education.

Qualitative inquiry (QI) refers to the holistic and inductive processes of research used to explore how people make meaning of their lived experiences and social worlds in context. QI relies on open-ended observation, interviews (and frequently other genres of expression), and textual analysis to build deep, conceptual understandings of complex phenomena (Butler-Kisber, 2025). Rigorous QI is methodologically detailed and transparent. Results are considered trustworthy when they come from rich and multiple sources of data in which they are clearly grounded, create a plausible explanation of experiences or phenomena from the perspectives of the participants, and demonstrate the reflective, relational and ethical stance of the researcher. QI is a way of "living in the research" (Butler-Kisber, 2018) and can best be learned through active engagement in the "doing" of the research, not in "armchair" theorizing or by a "sage on the stage" presenting how to conduct research. The interesting submissions in this issue focus on examples of inquiry in teaching, learning and research. They should provide windows of possibilities for encouraging other educators to embrace a relational, ethical, and active inquiry stance in their work and foster it among those they teach and their colleagues.

The contents of this issue include two invited commentaries which address inquiry from the point of view of higher education research and secondary school teaching and learning. The peer-reviewed articles are then arranged alphabetically by last name of the first author, but for the purposes of this editorial are addressed thematically.

Commentaries

We invited two highly respected educators to provide commentaries for this issue. **George Belliveau** is a professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and **Christianne Loupelle** is a PhD candidate in education at McGill and a secondary school science teacher in Montreal. Both have distinguished themselves in developing and sustaining inquiry in their work. Belliveau discusses Research-based Theatre (RbT) which he uses as a critical form of arts-based inquiry. He shares how, in a four-part workshop with a diverse range of 18 educators, he creatively and actively, in the imagined context of an airport, scaffolded a layered and braiding of identity memories of the participants, which they each created in one line and one gesture and then transformed them into short monologues. These converged with and built on Belliveau's own memories of his French Acadian youth which he had shared with the participants in "Baggage Carousel," a poem he used to ignite the activities. This individual story became refracted into multiple ones disrupting his personal narrative as new stories/memories were discovered by the participants. Belliveau argues that what emerged in this relational, co-created space were ways to "invigorate collective humanity." His commentary attests to the power of arts-based performance inquiry to actively, meaningfully, and collaboratively embody the meaning of memories/identity while retaining the "signature" of each creator.

Loupelle describes how, feeling stagnated and dissatisfied with her high school science teaching, she evolved from an authoritative and teacher-centered "teaching as taught" approach to an exploration of a collaborative and facilitated learning called Student Directed Inquiry (SDL). She maintains that this evolution in her teaching emanated from formative, informal learning she acquired in sports and summer camp, not in hallowed halls of higher education. It was further inspired by the maker movement, a pivotal STEAM conference she attended, and an invitation from a university professor to participate in an SDL research project. For the past decade, Loupelle's students have chosen democratically a topic of focus by pitching proposals and then voting for their choice, validating agency and voice and stimulating engagement among them. These projects have had a wide and varied range while at the same time maintaining a connection to the science curriculum she teaches. They have included, for example, planning for, shopping, preparing and implementing a "dinner evening" for their families; changing their science classroom into a studio as they researched with the help of Indigenous community expertise and created attire to portray Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls; and the Graphical Storytelling Project, which expanded to incorporate mathematics and visual arts, and subsequently, English language arts teachers, forging connections and interdisciplinarity among subject areas. Loupelle offers advice to teachers, school leaders, and researchers for getting started in inquiry and the cognitive shift necessary for "living in the learning" alongside students. Her work has created a ripple effect that has permeated her school and beyond and offers hope for pushing and tweaking traditional structures and mindset to allow inquiry to flourish.

Reflective Inquiry

Avril Aitken, a professor in education at Bishop's University in Sherbrooke, Quebec, shares how she worked with five groups of undergraduate students in their final year during the program's capstone course over four years and gave them responsibility for and agency in assessing their learning and growth and assigning their final grade, a cornerstone of inquiry learning. This ruptured the traditional structures expected by students who misinterpreted and resisted the assignment to reflect upon and assess their learning because of their historical investment in grades. Aitken argues for continued pushback against an increasingly competency and grade-oriented accountability in institutions and society by fostering student reflection and responsibility for the assessment of their learning to create critical thinkers and doers. **Stephanie Ho**, a course lecturer at McGill University and an English Language Arts secondary school teacher in Montreal, describes how she used a compendium of daily photographs to analyze her professional identity and practices as a teacher. Ho categorized, then "played with her photos," and ultimately created themes that highlighted the importance she places on celebrating triumphs, on protecting and connecting with students, and on developing a critical stance among them. Her work suggests that in this digital age the ease of taking photos and their compelling portrayals auger well for a practical and powerful means of reflective inquiry. **Ty Riddick**, a PhD candidate, and **Douglas Gleddie**, a professor, both at the University of Alberta, co-constructed vignettes with Grade 8 physical education (PE) students to track and portray their experiences over time. They show with three examples how meaningful PE experiences were shaped by opportunities for choice, for social expression, identity expression, and engagement in outdoor activities. All were predicated on inclusive and democratic practices that enhanced belonging, motivation, and relevance. This study underscores how co-constructed vignettes contributed to reflection and identity shaping. It deepened teacher-student relationships as well as a greater understanding of Riddick's teaching practice. **Aleesha Noreen** and **Kashaf Noreen,** two University of Toronto PhD candidates, and **Mariam Al Ramadhan**, an MA student, used poetry to reflect upon and portray experiences shared by students affected by global conflict. Each poem reflects facets of conflict-induced experiences. The first addresses dealing with anxieties in the classroom created by conflicts. The second highlights the impact of conflict on learning. The third suggests that teachers must understand their own stories to enable them to empathize and support students affected by conflict. These authors conclude that poetry and collective reflection can create important spaces to process complex emotions, facilitate authentic and responsive teaching, and provide opportunities for diverse perspectives to co-exist. **Aimée Myers**, an associate professor at Texas Woman's University, shares how she used Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) Reflective Inquiry to empower teachers from marginalized backgrounds, more specifically women of color from immigrant families. She used free-writing based on Dewey's notion of the power of reflection in an MA course on literacy for diverse learners. These graduate students identified and subsequently categorized forms of cultural capital that are often overlooked or dismissed for marginalized populations. Their work highlighted experiences of marginalization and produced potential forms of resistance which they then shared. This study advocates for pushing back against social and cultural messages, looking to the past to change the future, and shifting the mindset from discouragement to critical hope.

Inquiry Pedagogies

Brittany Ouellette, a K–12 educator in Alberta, and **Trudy Cardinal,** a professor at the University of Alberta, explored the existing Indigenous scholarship that can support non-Indigenous educators in rethinking their approach to literacy education and decrease the gap that results from pedagogical structures that fail to support Indigenous learners. They share with examples how Indigenous literacy is fostered in community and land-based learning rather than isolated classroom practices. They advocate for pedagogies that honor Indigenous students' lived experiences, cultures, and traditions, and a relational space for "living in the learning." **Sharla Mskokii Peltier** is an associate professor at Lakehead University and **Janice Huber** is a professor at the University of Alberta. Alongside each other and community members, they share with wonderful visuals how they have built on Peltier's previous work in *Odenang* (heart place) inquiry, an Indigenous pedagogy rooted in Anishinaabe culture. Odenang nurtures the "individual and collective growth of critical thinking in response to colonial, taken-for-granted beliefs, values, and discourses." They show with helpful details how they implemented Odenang practices while working with pre-service students in social studies and citizenship education. Central to their work was attending to truth-telling and relationship-building to honor the key constituents of reconciliation and resist the Eurocentric, colonial, and assimilative approaches so embedded in social studies and multicultural curricula. **Kathleen Hare**, an associate professor, and **Gitanjaly Chhabra**, an assistant professor, both from Canada West University, share how their responsibilities as settler educators inspired them to create an "arts-based praxis" for international undergraduate students to learn about Indigenous knowledges in Canada and decolonizing educational practices. They braided together literature material, shared narratives and experiences and practices, such as erasure poetry, which they had implemented with students to carry out a collaborative inquiry. A highlight of their inquiry was that the selection of a source from a text is not simply material for shaping later teaching, but rather "living" and "being" sites of teaching and learning. Instructors are present in the sources they choose. Course sources shape students' epistemological access to the discipline, understanding, and subsequent applications. They concluded that "our task was not to frame the stories into pedagogical use, but to remain present with them through story, accountable to what they asked of us, and open to the ways they shaped our relations with students and with each other." **Danielle Butville** is assistant director for the Hammel Family Human Rights Initiative at Pennsylvania State University, **Logan Rutten** is an assistant professor at the University of North Dakota, **Alyssa Hockensmith** is a social studies teacher in Florida, **Melissa Kreider** is an English language arts teacher in Pennsylvania, and **Farrell Kelly** is an English and history teacher in Virginia. **Melissa Bryan** is an English teacher in New Jersey and **Boaz Dvir** is director of the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative (part of the Hammel Family Human Rights Initiative) at Pennsylvania State University. They posit with narrative examples that the "hard stories" of history are best taught using inquiry pedagogy to foster an engaging and dynamic context for learning while maintaining the integrity of content knowledge. This is illustrated by Kreider who used survivor and victim accounts to show how diverse experiences intersected during the Holocaust, strengthening historical knowledge accuracy and student empathy. Hockensmith's students designed research projects to connect Holocaust experiences to current ethical concerns nuancing the subject matter more deeply. Bryan had students select, design, and implement social justice projects to deepen

their individual understandings of the world. Kelly pivoted from a representative approach to engage students in projects on the Holocaust through the lenses of human cruelty, abuse of power, and responses to injustices. They argue that these approaches to inquiry pedagogy transform Holocaust education into ethically engaged and dynamic learning but do not eliminate the emotional responsibilities and intellectual uncertainties in teaching "hard history." **Theresa Christine "Techie" Benitez-dela Torre**, one of the pioneers of the Deaf program of De La Salle College of Saint Benilde in the Philippines, shares her journey and learnings she gleaned using signed English in her interaction with her Deaf Filipino students. They resisted signed English and communicated in Filipino Sign Language (FSL), leaving her outside their conversations. She came to realize that the humiliation she felt when having to use signed English far outweighed the importance of her teaching approach; so, instead of relying on her interpreter, she relied on her Deaf students. She began the process of learning their language with them. This transformed the interaction between them as they opened their personal worlds to her and produced learning opportunities for all of them. Benitez-dela Torre's advocacy did not end there. She began teaching hearing students FSL through Deaf-led teaching and created materials with her students that were products of successful communication. She argues vehemently and advocates for the linguistic and cultural rights of Deaf learners and for practices that dismantle oppression and support empowerment.

Collaborative Inquiry

Teresa Troyer, a doctoral student at Ohio State University, **Sally Coons**, an English educator, and **Rosalinda Godínez**, a postdoctoral researcher at Cleveland State University, examined how multilingual learners in a high school English language arts classroom engaged in a School-based Youth Participatory Action Research (SchYPAR) project. It integrated arts and narrative-based practices connecting English language development to collective meaning-making and agency. The results of their work show the importance of using arts-based approaches to create multimodal avenues for meeting the needs of language learners. The project provided active and meaningful engagement among the learners, building confidence and a critical perspective. This collaborative inquiry required risk taking by the educators but also allowed them to test new ideas and connect with each other in supportive ways. **Deborah Toope** and **Marie-Christina Edwards** are assistant professors at Acadia University, while **Darlene Barr**, **Nisha Langford**, **Emily Fultz**, and **Jessica Martin** are elementary teachers in Nova Scotia. Their article reflects upon their collaborative action research (CAR) inquiry between a university and a rural school. Their results show that a trusting community is necessary to shift pedagogical perspectives among teachers, who need to relate to and be active participants in the change process. Collaborative inquiry fosters professional growth and enhances professional identity agency when grounded in shared knowledge and lived experience. **Linda O'Donoghue** is a teaching and learning advisor at Okanagan College in British Columbia, and **Beverlie Dietze** is an early childhood education consultant. They share how they moved from a top-down pedagogy and actively pursued the interests of and engaged alongside young children in sustained outdoor play. Collaboratively, the educators, in a dynamic of mutual empowerment, respect, and shared control, gave agency to the children to lead creative exploration as the educators responded attentively and reflectively, valuing the evolving nature of play.

Enhancing Literacies

Erin Reid is an assistant professor at St. Mary's University in Calgary. She explored how religious diversity is included in social justice teachings within undergraduate teacher preparation programs in the context of a small, liberal arts, Canadian university where she interviewed a group of five instructors. Her results suggest that there is a big gap between personal religious knowledge among preservice teachers and what they will encounter in the diverse classrooms in which they will work. Second, preservice teachers experience a dissonance when faced with a religious perspective that does not align with their own. Finally, there was a sense among the participants that religious beliefs do not have a place in post-secondary institutions. She argues for safe and equitable spaces for difficult discussions in teacher education programs and the need to integrate religious literacy into preservice courses to help navigate social justice practices for teaching increasingly diverse student populations. **Karen Larwin** is a professor at Youngstown State University and **Joshua Sektnan** is a fourth-grade elementary teacher. Building on the premise that spelling is an important component of literacy learning, they surveyed 168, K–6 teachers in suburban Pennsylvania. Their results showed that teachers struggled to differentiate spelling instruction for the wide range of needs of their students, suggested that ongoing targeted spelling instruction is needed particularly for multilingual students who struggle with the inconsistencies in English spelling, and indicated that hands-on, multisensory activities increased student engagement. They argue for culturally responsive, multisensory spelling instruction to ensure equitable results for all learners. **Mireille Ukeye** is an assistant professor at St. Mary's College of California whose work responds to the need for stronger and more equitable literacy instruction to increase confidence and engagement among English-language learners who face learning challenges. She discusses the interrelated nature of oral language, language development, and reading comprehension and suggests the need for explicit vocabulary and syntax instruction, the inclusion of multisensory spelling activities, scaffolded writing approaches, and ongoing assessment practices. She urges educators to move beyond the "one-size-fits-all" pedagogy to instead "create inclusive, language-rich, and culturally affirming classrooms to support the complex needs of students with learning challenges."

Ethical Inquiry

Strong themes that emanate from the articles in this issue are the relational, connecting, and collaborative dimensions that are fundamental to all approaches in inquiry teaching, learning, and research. Active, meaningful, and authentic approaches build reciprocally on these dimensions and provide an ongoing, ethical means of "living in" the learning and/or research. The authors provide a host of interesting, helpful, and multifaceted ways in which teachers, learners, and researchers implement ethical inquiry. **Sandra Gibbons** is a professor, **Kenna Miskelly**, a research ethics facilitator, and **Eugenie Lam**, the manager of human research ethics, all at the University of Victoria. They share how their university is implementing experimental learning strategies across course assignments in which are embedded the core principles—Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice—of the Canada Tri-Council Policy Statement on ethics. They advocate strongly for embedding ethics early in curricula and revisiting it regularly through scaffolded assignments and using diverse modalities such as interviews, surveys, and

reflective writing. They provide a helpful lens for thinking about ethics in all contexts and the ways in which we can carefully and consistently monitor and sustain ethical practices of living through truly equitable practices.

We hope you enjoy the read and wish you a joyous summer.

LBK & AV

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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 a selected member of the Harvard Graduate School of Education Alumni Council (2025–28). She is the recipient of the Canadian Society for Studies in Education Arts SIG Lifetime Achievement Award (2026) for contributions to arts research and of the McGill Faculty of Education, Distinguished Teaching award in 2022. She is past chair (2021–23) of the Elliot Eisner Special Interest Group at the American Educational Research Association. 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. 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.



Anna Villalta is the managing editor of *LEARNing Landscapes Journal* and a PhD candidate in Educational Studies at McGill University. An academic educator, researcher, and practitioner, she also serves as a faculty lecturer in the Department of Education at Concordia University, where she teaches in the ECEE program. Her more than three decades of experience across Québec's education system, including roles as teacher, principal, school administrator, and system-level leader, inform her applied scholarship and her commitment to relational, equity-driven educational leadership. Her governance experience includes serving as vice-chair of the Dawson College Board of Governors and participating in multiple provincial and national administrative associations, contributing to research-informed policy dialogue and system-level decision-making. Her teaching and research examine equity, culturally responsive pedagogy, and social justice education, with a focus on how educators cultivate inclusive, culturally sustaining learning environments. As a scholar-practitioner, her doctoral research investigates decolonizing leadership, critical race theory, and abolitionist frameworks, analyzing how leaders can disrupt colonial structures and advance restorative, antiracist, and humanizing practices. Anna contributes to provincial educational policy as a member of the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE-CELA) and serves as vice-president of Alliance Donne, Femmes Italiennes du Québec, a cultural women's organization dedicated to advancing the visibility and contributions of Italian-heritage women.

Mon histoire, ton histoire: Entangling Research, Pedagogy and Theatre

George Belliveau

Abstract

In this article I explore ways Research-based Theatre (RbT) entangles pedagogy, scholarship, and art-making through embodied, relational inquiry. Drawing on the evolving autoethnographic play *Mon histoire, ton histoire*, I reflect on a theatre-based workshop in which participants co-created personal and ancestral stories through movement, monologue, gesture, and dialogue. Centering the monologue "Baggage Carousel," I share how theatrical practices invite rhizomatic forms of knowing that blur boundaries between performer and audience, research and teaching, individual and collective memory. The workshop illustrates how arts-based inquiry can foster relational meaning-making, cultural reflection, and collaborative storying within educational spaces across diverse learning communities globally.

Mon histoire, ton histoire

Forty years ago I was in first year of a BA in Acting at Dalhousie University, expanding my creative self. I had no idea how that theatre training would play itself out or, as my parents were no doubt thinking, how this degree would get me a job! Over the years I have had opportunities to apply my training in traditional theatre, though for the most part I have woven this artform within pedagogical and research spaces. At a time when teaching, learning, and research are primarily experienced through screens and sitting at desks, dialogue around ways to consider embodied theatre-based approaches for pedagogy and scholarship seems critical.

Theatre, like other disciplines, has an array of theories and practices, though at its core it invites stories to be heard, seen, and felt through aesthetic approaches. Research-based Theatre (RbT) as a form of arts-based inquiry "shows" what was (and continues to be) discovered within research endeavors using theatre (Shigematsu et al., 2022; Belliveau & Lea, 2016). To illustrate ways that theatre enables rhizomatic forms of inquiry, I describe a moment within a workshop that featured monologues from the emerging RbT play *Mon histoire, ton histoire* (Shigematsu et al., 2025).

Mon histoire, ton histoire loosely traces my ancestral narrative as a French Acadian. The autoethnographic play shifts from past to present, weaving stories that span over four centuries of Acadian identity, culture, and language. It draws on historical documentation about the Acadians,[1] including scholarly articles and books, archival material, and expert interviews. Additionally, the play incorporates relational perspectives through ongoing conversations with relatives, personal journals, and engagement with contemporary Acadian culture (Belliveau, 2024). For the past three years, I have been sharing monologues from the evolving script as part of university classes and workshops (masterclasses) locally

and globally to explore creative pedagogical and research approaches. Each offering has provided rich opportunities to discover further meanings within the monologues and, just as importantly, to inspire co-creation with participants to tease out the *ton histoire* (your story) element. The particular moment I share in this article took place during a multi-day workshop in 2025,[2] where I facilitated a series of four 3-hour sessions (12 hours total) over the course of a week that inquired into the possibilities of theatre as a form of pedagogy and research.

The participants knew the sessions would be interactive and that they would be invited to share small performative moments in groups. Woven within the facilitation and as part of the scaffolding, I offered "performed" examples to show this embodied methodology in action. I selected three monologues from *Mon histoire, ton histoire*, including "Baggage Carousel" shared below. By now, excerpts of the Acadian play have been performed over 20 times in different configurations in various teaching contexts in both English and French. Nonetheless, I am still exploring how to make this piece about cultural identity relevant and meaningful to the diverse audiences and participants I encounter.[3] Also, one of my goals is to keep seeking ways to seamlessly weave aesthetic examples of theatre into workshops without it turning into a performance that completely separates performer(s) and audience. Ideally, the monologues bridge and forge connections for participants, evoking an entanglement of pedagogy, research, and art-making.

The moment I elaborate upon took place during the first 3-hour session of the four-part sequence. Describing this moment, or most creative, embodied experiences for that matter, is like trying to catch the wind with your hands. You can feel, sense, and hear it, though it's often intangible and ephemeral. As such, the descriptive retelling only conveys glimpses of the experience. With formal research about the experience coming from participants, we would no doubt gain deeper insights around how the co-creation fostered unique ways of knowing and doing. Alas, the description comes solely from one lens—my observation!

Context

The workshop, facilitated in English, is set within a typical classroom, yet as we push the tables and chairs aside it creates an empty playing space for creative invitations. The group of 18 participants includes K–12 and tertiary educators, community artists, and graduate students, coming from various cultural and linguistic contexts. The participants willingly engage in a variety of initiating activities that are scaffolded, which leads them to eventually engage with a personal ancestral story through theatre-based inquiry. An hour into the workshop, they are asked to select a *positive moment* they recall about an ancestor, friend, or acquaintance, preferably someone at least a generation older than them.[4] I provide an example of a memory of my grandpa showing me *la source* (water spring) on the family farm property when I was 10 years old. They are asked to look through an imaginary window to recall this (positive) moment from the past. Then, they free-write about this moment in their learning journals (which I ask them to bring for the workshop), engage in tableaux, and carry out a variety of embodied activities to tease out the memory. The engagement is done individually and in small groups as they begin to inquire and remember that moment. Through the process they hear snippets of each other's stories as the

activities allow for intersecting and exchanging of memories. Listening to small moments of one another's stories and engaging in collective physical activities enables participants to situate and re-imagine their own memory, knowing that memories can shift with time and that their story is part of a larger story.

Intertwining memories with one another allows for unexpected discoveries, gentle imprints, and new insights to emerge. Amidst the collective group "doing" activities, I strategically weave in two monologues from *Mon histoire, ton histoire* to provide examples of bringing memories to life through text and embodiment. One of the monologues, "Empty Rocking Chair," offers memories of my grandparents as I return to visit the family farmhouse as a young adult; the second, "Theatre School," explores language identity and how I desperately wanted to learn and perfect English (and lose my French accent) during my acting degree. These five-minute monologues resonate with Maillet's (1971) Acadian storytelling approach as glimpses of character, place, language, and culture surface and intermingle. The short poetic monologues make use of simple though precise gestures and sparse set pieces (e.g., a journal, two chairs). They invite participants into a blurring of a theatre/pedagogical space, as the workshop momentarily shifts from their co-devising inquiry to witnessing a storytelling theatre piece that uses similar objects and devices utilized within their own exploration. For instance, the "Empty Rocking Chair" has my grandma looking through an imaginary window, and my personal journal is set on one of the chairs.

Moment

Nearing the end of this first workshop, I share the monologue "Baggage Carousel" as a way to begin braiding our stories and stimulating a collective narrative. However, just before sharing it we engage in a short activity called *stepping in, announcing*. I propose an environment: the airport. I model stepping in and announcing: "I am the ticket counter" as I lean forward and stretch out my arms, representing a counter while staying frozen in place. Participants are asked to one by one enter the space and announce what they are within that environment and freeze into a gesture. I encourage them to consider the micro and macro, objects, non-objects, more-than-human. So, in this airport environment, participants came in as "a lost passenger, a passport, an announcement, a recycling bin, a canceled flight sign," and so on. It concludes once everyone who wishes to step in has done so, creating a dynamic imagined airport space. With most groups, like this one, everyone jumps in, and the activity lasts just over two minutes. Keeping with the airport environment we move on to something slightly more specific—a baggage carousel—using the same prompts of stepping in and announcing: "I am the rotating belt, noise of the suitcase hitting the floor, flashing red light, impatient traveler." The third and final one is even more specific—the suitcase—using the same protocol: "I am the broken wheel, zipper, name on the tag, pajamas inside the suitcase, a vibrating air tag." Their collective, creative doing breathes life into the space, helping set up the monologue at the airport.

Baggage Carousel

It's 2022
My new favorite author is Acadian writer France Daigle
Queen Elizabeth II dies at the age of 96
COVID-19 starts to ease in most countries in the second half of 2022
Which allows me to begin researching my Acadian play and travel to France

I'm in the Toulouse airport walking towards the baggage carousel
In conversation with le gars qui étudie l'aviation
He shares his insights about the next generation of aircrafts
And how studying hummingbirds have shifted his way of thinking about flight
On parle en français, so he asks about my French background
'J'chu Canadien'
'Ah, du Québec!'
'Non, j'chu Acadiens'
'Acadiens, bon! Moi, je suis Occitan!'
He goes on to share the history of Occitan language and culture in the South of France
'Ma grand-mère, elle me parle tout le temps en Occitan.
I understand her, 'dough can't speak it'

The suitcases begin to make their way on the carousel
Across from me on the other side
I notice the woman from Pondicherry, India
She sat beside me on the flight
Her first time on French soil, though she's spoken the language since birth
She is coming to Toulouse to visit her grandson who works in aviation
Does everyone in Toulouse work in aviation?
The young couple who sat a row ahead of me
And were on their phones for the entire flight
… are still on their phones

Suitcases are bumping up against one another on the carousel
Different shapes, sizes, colors
Some have stickers, tags, taped corners
Oh, the woman from Pondicherry has picked up hers
A large one, with a multicolor ribbon on the handle
'Bringing lots of gifts and spices, don't tell anyone'

I tell le gars qui étudie l'aviation
'I plan de faire du vélo along le Canal du Midi'
'Mes ancêtres, it's dem dat dug de Canal, you know,
Peut-être your ancestors too?'
This famous Canal connects the Mediterranean and Atlantic Ocean near Bordeaux

The young boy who sat behind me
Constantly kicking the back of my seat
Picks up his small Batman suitcase
Immediately opens it up
And pulls out what looks like a transformer batmobile

There's my suitcase
It's stuck underneath another one
'There we go
A few more knicks
Wheels are still intact
All good'

I make my way towards the exit
With several other passengers pulling or pushing their suitcases
I pause to look back towards the carousel
Still churning out suitcases as people eagerly await them

All these suitcases shared space
Hugged one another in the cargo hold
Jostled in harmony with the movements of the plane

Parting now, going their separate ways
Each containing stories, glimpses, snippets
Of the passengers

My suitcase holds my well-traveled folding bike
Snuggled by clothes and necessities
Ready to encounter new stories

'Ah ben, c'est vraiment nice ça'
Le gars qui étudie l'aviation offers me a drive to my hotel
Our suitcases reconnect for a little longer
'Ma mère vient me chercher.
Elle aime bien les Canadiens du Québec!'
'Ben, how about les Acadiens!?'

As the monologue concludes, I invite the participants to think of a word, phrase, image, or gesture they recall from the monologue, or what it made them think about—a memory from their lives, perhaps. Then, I ask them to step forward and place themselves (without speaking) inside the baggage carousel "theatrical" space where they imagine that word, phrase, image, or memory might sit. Once everyone has stepped inside our fictional airport space, I ask them to turn to nearby participants, and in groups of three they talk about the image, phrase, or memory. What resonates from the monologue, what connections did they make? Then, I ask them to recall the moment they have been developing around an ancestor or friend. Using the metaphor of the suitcase, baggage carousel, or the environment of this place of arrival/departures, they are asked to generate a sentence or so (short text) and a physical gesture about their emerging monologue/story. I give an example from the monologue I just shared: *My suitcase holds my well-traveled folding bike, snuggled by clothes and necessities ready to encounter new stories* while looking intently at the contents of what my suitcase might hold, then gradually look up towards new adventures. I ask them to devise and explore their short text and gesture(s) with (or without) their partners for a few minutes. I share how this inquiry is in-process, and not fixed, encouraging that ideas, their text might be discovered through physical gestures and movement within our creative space.

When ready, we decide an order for (voluntarily) sharing these short snippets of their moment. Once a sequence is established, one by one they offer their short text and gesture(s) of an emerging story with the group. All is executed slowly and with a sense of discovery and curiosity. Some speak in first person, others narrate their event, though all are invested in their moments. Stories of individuals included: opening the suitcase to take out a special gift handed down—binoculars; taking a tea set out of the suitcase then sitting having tea with their grandmother; being at a distance from the suitcase then gradually coming closer to hug the suitcase/aunt. As they share their moments, I step out of the playing area, creating space for their stories (*ton histoire*) to emerge. From the witnessing space, I can feel the burgeoning possibilities, stories waiting to be explored in a collaborative, co-creating space.

Once everyone has shared their moments, I ask them to slowly, silently walk in the space to recall various moments they just witnessed, and acknowledge (without speaking) one another. As they gently walk, I repeat the following passage from the monologue:

> All these suitcases shared space
> Hugged one another in the cargo hold
> Jostled in harmony with the movements of the plane

I then ask them to quietly form a large circle (the way we began the workshop) to prepare debriefing today's unfolding. While they are moving to create a large circle, I continue:

> Parting now, going their separate ways
> Each containing stories, glimpses, snippets

We debrief the session, then discuss next steps for our upcoming days.

In the final workshop of this series, these budding one-line and one-gesture stories were transformed into their own short monologues. The scripts the participants developed continued to be relational, as they were generated in constant group discussions, *performing* what arts-based educational practices like research-based theatre invite, to "set in-motion" (Irwin, 2013, p. 211).

The development and sharing of their 18 stories now live within the next iteration(s) of "Baggage Carousel." Their gestures, journeys, and discoveries through text and movement have offered further layers, imprints, and insights for my monologue. The initial story depicted within the "Baggage Carousel" monologue becomes diffracted into multiple stories, and disrupts a set narrative as new stories are invited to be shared. Because of these deliberate creative interactions with others, the diasporic Acadian story continues to grow amidst and in relation to other stories/memories about identities, cultures in flux, in states of becoming. Through this arts-based pedagogical inquiry, we (re)discover stories that were buried, yet to be told, and in the relational co-creating space we find ways to invigorate our collective humanity.

Notes

1. French Acadians (as they eventually became called) are a group of people who came from various parts of France to present-day Canada in the early 17th century. Today, they are largely based in the Eastern Canadian provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island—though the diaspora of Acadians reaches across the continent, with many residing in Louisiana.

2. In consultation with the individuals who invited me, I will keep the location anonymous, though participants did give their consent for me to write about the unfolding.

3. To date the monologues have been performed several times in Vancouver, Hong Kong, Norway, Sweden, France, Switzerland, and the United States to undergraduate and graduate students, faculty members, artists, and community members.

4. I emphasize selecting a story that is not activating for participants. The invitation is also open for a moment that *might* have happened, as for some a semi-fictional realm is best. Some of the scaffolding activities invite a space between fiction and so-called fact.

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The Beautiful Chaos of Inquiry

Christianne Loupelle

Abstract

This autobiographical narrative details a veteran science educator's transformation from a traditional teacher into a scholar-practitioner within a long-term research-practice partnership (RPP). Prompted by mid-career stagnation, the author embraced the STEM-to-STEAM movement, integrating project-based learning and critical making. A 2017 collaboration with McGill University on student-directed inquiry (SDI) served as a critical turning point, forcing her to navigate imposter syndrome and cede classroom control. Over nine years, this work evolved into a robust cross-curricular framework that dismantles subject silos. Now a McGill PhD student and RPP mentor, the author models a "fail forward" mindset, demonstrating how shifting from an all-knowing expert to a curious co-creator enriches student agency.

The Beautiful Chaos of Inquiry

Where It All Began

My teaching career began long before I first stepped into a classroom of my own. Like many who grew up in the 90s, my early résumé was a patchwork of part-time jobs: cashier at a grocery store, making Dilly bars at the local Dairy Queen, and even a stint at my mother's dry cleaners where I was, admittedly, her least effective employee. However, my university summers revealed a clearer calling. Looking back, the true foundations of my pedagogy weren't laid in a lecture hall or a formal field placement, but on t-ball fields, tennis courts, and summer camp cabins. It was in those roles as a coach and counselor that my career as an educator truly began.

While I have always been a curious learner, nearly all of my science and education courses were taught traditionally. The teacher stood at the front, disseminating information while students frantically transcribed slide decks or recorded every spoken word. My undergraduate science labs were equally rigid; they were prescribed in such a way that a specific outcome was mandatory. We followed a procedure to attain the correct answer, and anyone who took a shortcut or diverted from the beaten path was penalized.

By 2015, I had been teaching sciences for ten years. My teaching load was stable, and I had mastered the curriculum. But while I felt at ease with the content, I was beginning to feel stagnant, and, if I'm honest, unchallenged. Despite the occasional lively discussion in class or field trip we took, I was still the person at the front of the room, dictating the what, how, and why of science. I realized I was simply teaching the way I had been taught: a "sage on the stage" model that was becoming increasingly boring for my students, and for me.

It was around this time that the Maker Movement was gaining momentum in North American classrooms. Our school librarian was particularly interested in making as a concept, and I jumped in wholeheartedly. It brought back memories of my wood shop and home economics courses in junior high and high school and how much I had loved them because the desk-bound passivity of a traditional lecture was replaced by working with my hands and creativity. As we began implementing small "maker" activities at school, I felt a spark of excitement I hadn't felt in years. I started diving into the literature, looking for ways to officially weave making and design thinking into the fabric of my science curriculum.

Recognizing my enthusiasm, my Head of School at the time suggested I attend a professional development conference on the transition from STEM to STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics), hosted by the International Coalition of Girls' Schools. I didn't even know educator conferences were a "thing," let alone that I could attend one! The experience was transformative. While I was already experimenting with design thinking, the scale of innovation I witnessed blew me away. I returned home wide-eyed and inspired, ready to overhaul my entire approach to teaching.

Thinking back, the most surprising takeaway wasn't just what I learned from others; it was the realization that my own work with STEAM was just as robust as the projects being presented at the conference. Upon my return from that conference, I met with both my retiring Head of School and the incoming Head to debrief. As I described the high caliber of work I'd seen, I mentioned to the incoming Head, a former science educator herself, that our school was already doing work worthy of these national stages. She stopped me mid-sentence. "Why aren't we presenting what we do, then?" That question stopped me in my tracks. It was a pivotal shift in my professional identity: Why not us?

As I dived deeper into the principles of design thinking and project-based learning (PBL), I felt a strong conviction: I didn't want my students to engage in projects for the sake of making. I wanted them to acquire tangible life skills through the curriculum. To bridge the gap between my ideas and my technical limitations, I formed partnerships with community makerspaces and local sewing ateliers, bringing in the equipment and expertise I lacked.

This collaboration transformed my classroom. The classic "cell model" project, where students typically glued craft supplies to a Styrofoam base to create an animal or a plant cell, was replaced by a garment-making challenge. Students learned to follow a pattern and sew a dress, which they then "mapped" as a cell model. The academic requirement remained, they still had to demonstrate a mastery and understanding of organelle function, but they walked away with a functional, hand-made item and a new set of tactile skills.

Similarly, during a nutrition unit, I was struck by how few of my students participated in grocery shopping or meal preparation at home. In response, a colleague and I designed an authentic assessment: the Grade 9 Family Dinner. Students were tasked with planning, budgeting, and shopping for a healthy meal that incorporated specific nutrients from our curriculum. We took them to local grocery stores to hunt for sales and taught them to prep the meal safely in the school kitchen. The turnout was exceptional; nearly every family attended. Seeing the students explain their nutritional choices to their parents while serving

a meal they had made from scratch was monumental. What began as a lesson in biology became a milestone event that those former students still mention years later when they visit the school.

These successes gave me the evidence I needed to answer my Head of School's challenge. By the summer of 2017, I sought to formalize this intuitive shift in my practice by participating in a professional development boot camp focused on critical making and playful learning. It was a revelatory experience; I realized that I had already been unknowingly incorporating these frameworks into my pedagogy for years. This academic validation was the final piece of the puzzle. My confidence grew from experimenting in my own classroom to leading the conversation, and I eventually took that leap of faith to present my work at an international conference. I no longer had to ask, "Why not us?"; we were finally there. I have since presented my work at numerous conferences locally, nationally, and internationally, always hoping that there is at least one person sitting in on my presentation that walks away inspired to take something they saw in my work home to create something of their own for their students.

However, the real turning point in my journey occurred in the summer of 2017, when I received an email from a friend and professor at McGill University's Faculty of Education asking if I was interested in participating in a potential research project. I answered with an enthusiastic "yes," not yet knowing the scope of the research but curious to learn more. I didn't realize then that this innocuous email reply would set my career as both a teacher and a student on a new trajectory that has invariably led me here, to this point.

Student-Directed Inquiry: A Turning Point

The proposed research project focused on implementing student-directed inquiry (SDI) in my Grade 7 Science and Technology class. To be honest, I had never even heard the term "SDI" before the project was mentioned. A frantic, surface-level internet search suggested it was a model where students chose what they wanted to learn—a definition I now realize was a massive oversimplification, but at the time, it was all I had to go on.

Beyond the definition, I was paralyzed by a more practical question: what was my role supposed to be? For over a decade, my value as a teacher was tied to my ability to lead, to explain, and to maintain a tight grip on the narrative of the lesson. If the students were now the ones in the driver's seat, did I even belong in the room? Was I just a passive observer, or was there a different kind of leadership required that I hadn't yet discovered or mastered?

I would love to say I asked these questions out loud, but I didn't. I was a senior teacher with a decade of experience, and a certain level of professional pride kept me silent. I didn't want to disappoint the researchers by appearing out of my depth, nor did I want to admit that I was essentially "faking it" while trying to facilitate a project I barely understood. I nodded along to the jargon, masking my confusion with enthusiasm, all while privately wondering how I was going to hand over the keys to my classroom to a group of 12-year-olds.

I remember that first session as if it happened yesterday. I brought my Grade 7 class to McGill University, where researchers led an exploration activity designed to prompt students to observe scientific phenomena and formulate their own questions. To keep myself busy, I took photos of the students at work, documenting their progress from a distance. When a student approached me for help or clarification, I responded with vague, evasive questions of my own. I was terrified of overstepping; I mistakenly believed that for SDI to be authentic, students had to struggle through every answer alone. I worried that any teacher intervention would somehow diminish their experience. I spent most of that first class literally sitting in the corner with my hands tucked under my thighs, physically restraining myself from getting in the way.

We laugh about it now, but I still remember how frequently the researchers checked in on me during those early days. They reminded me often that we could pivot or stop the SDI work at any time, but my stubbornness, a trait I carry to this day, pushed me forward. I was determined to see this through.

Every two weeks, the researchers visited my classroom to lead activities that helped them get to know the students and encouraged the kids to identify their own scientific interests. Looking back, I realize I wasn't the lead teacher in those early stages; I was a co-participant. I was learning the rhythm of the room alongside my students, slowly becoming comfortable enough to drop the mask of the all-knowing expert and finally ask the researchers for the clarification I so desperately needed.

I happened to be away the day the students pitched their SDI ideas and voted on a direction for the year. When I returned, they were buzzing with excitement; they had collectively chosen to investigate and raise awareness about the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). I managed to slap a smile on my face, but internally, I was reeling. As a non-Indigenous educator, I was terrified, not only that we wouldn't do this gravity-laden topic justice, but also because I couldn't see the path forward. How did MMIWG fit into a science curriculum? It felt like a profound social justice issue, not a problem that could be solved in a lab with controlled experiments.

To find our way forward, we brainstormed with the students and the researchers. One researcher introduced the class to the work of Jaime Black-Morsette, the Indigenous artist behind *The REDress Project*. The students were deeply moved; they wanted to create their own dresses to raise awareness. To bring a scientific lens to the project, I suggested we construct the dresses entirely out of paper. We began experimenting with material strength, structural integrity, and various ways to manipulate paper.

I reached out to a local designer who taught the students the technical art of pattern-making, helping them scale their ideas into life-size paper sculptures. We also invited a member of the Indigenous community to share her story; she spoke of her sister's disappearance, the discovery of her remains on the South Shore, and how her sister's case remains unsolved to this day. She listened to each student's idea for their dress and offered suggestions and so much encouragement. My 12- and 13-year-old students handled her testimony with a level of grace and maturity that made me incredibly proud.

My classroom had truly transformed into a studio. The project culminated in a public vernissage where students suspended their paper dresses for their families, the school community, and university researchers. Alongside these works were artist statements, crafted with the support of the English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, which gave voice to the students' choice of design and the symbolism they incorporated into their creations. This collaboration was a revelation for me; it proved that while our project was rooted in science, there was definitely potential for our SDI work to become interdisciplinary.

Curriculum Connected to the Real World

Fast-forward to today, and our SDI project is in its ninth year. We have covered topics ranging from MMIWG that first year to fast fashion, escape rooms, hair, and marine biology, to name but a few. Much has changed since those uncertain days in 2017. I have grown far more comfortable ceding control. While I still act as a disseminator of knowledge when necessary, I have primarily embraced the role of facilitator. I've seen firsthand that learning outcomes are just as robust, if not more so, when students are granted genuine agency. This comfort has allowed me to better support my students in moving their own inquiries forward, and I now incorporate varying levels of inquiry across all my classes.

Most importantly, I no longer view myself as a mere participant in this research; I have evolved into a lead collaborator. As my mastery of SDI and my confidence in this role grew, I began to move beyond implementation and started posing my own scholarly questions about the pedagogical shifts I was witnessing. To find those answers, I am now in my third year of a PhD in Educational Studies at McGill University, where I am investigating the long-term impacts of SDI on student learning.

Today, I spearhead our bi-weekly planning meetings, using student reflections to strategically shape our next steps. We even experienced a "full circle" moment earlier this year with our newest research assistant. During a planning session, I noticed he seemed hesitant and unsure of how to engage with the students during the inquiry blocks. When I checked in to see how he was doing, my veteran colleagues stopped the meeting to laugh. The tables had completely turned: the teacher who once sat in the corner on her own hands was now the one mentoring a researcher on how to navigate the "beautiful chaos" of an inquiry-led classroom.

Our work with SDI has caused a paradigm shift in my teaching and in how we treat our junior school years (Grades 7 and 8). Over time, teachers from math, ELA, and visual arts have all joined the inquiry process. Welcoming them into my room sends a powerful message to my students: I don't have all the answers. By modeling this partnership, I show them that collaboration isn't just something teachers force them to do—it's how the real world solves problems.

I also try to "speak the language" of their other classes. When we look at graphs in science, I use the exact vocabulary they are learning in math to show them that those skills aren't just for a textbook—they are tools for life. The same applies to their writing; I'll often use the RAFT technique (identifying Role, Audience, Format, and Topic) to ensure their scientific communication is clear and purposeful. By constantly pulling threads from their other subjects, I'm helping them see that they don't learn in silos. Everything is connected.

Modeling the interconnectedness of the curriculum has paved the way for seamless collaborations across our junior grades. Several years ago, the arts department head introduced me to the work of Mona Chalabi, a data journalist for *The Guardian*. Chalabi is known for her hand-drawn, vibrant reinterpretations of bar, line, and circle graphs, using them to communicate complex, and not so complex, statistics to the general public. After a few brainstorming sessions with the math and visual arts teachers, we developed the Graphical Storytelling Project. This initiative synthesized units on the scientific method, statistics, and color theory, topics each of our courses traditionally used to open the academic year.

In the project's early days, students chose a topic of interest, researched relevant statistics, and embedded their findings into a whimsical, Chalabi-inspired visual. Students are incredibly observant; they pick up on far more than we often realize. I vividly remember one student's excitement when they realized their math lesson was taking place in the art room, led by their science teacher. That moment was a true testament to the power of breaking down traditional subject silos.

Now in its fourth iteration, the "Mona Project" has become a staple of our curriculum. Each year, the participating teachers meet, often over lunch or before school, to debrief and refine the process. One significant improvement has been the integration of the ELA teacher into the project. While students begin by formulating questions in science class, they now dive deeper into the mechanics of inquiry in ELA. Instead of simply searching for existing statistics, students now design their own surveys for the student body, gaining a practical understanding of sample size and population demographics.

In math and science, they learn that data representation is a shared language, utilizing tables and graphs to convey specific messages. They must actively reflect on which type of graph best serves their data's "story." While the final product remains a colorful, artistic data visualization, the process now culminates in a comprehensive report written in ELA. To mirror this unity, we now grade the projects jointly, discussing each student's progress as we complete a shared rubric. This collaborative assessment ensures that students see their work not as four separate assignments, but as a singular, cohesive intellectual achievement.

Lessons Learned

I am often asked what advice I have for those looking to weave inquiry, SDI, or PBL into their own pedagogy. The truth is, I have no "one-size-fits-all" blueprint to share; the path depends entirely on who you are and where you are starting from. Instead of a map, I offer these starting points for the different voices in our community:

- **For the preservice teacher:** Find a mentor in your school building. Pick their brain, shadow their "chaos," and don't be afraid to try, and fail at, new things while you have the support of an experienced hand.
- **For the inservice teacher:** You don't have to do this alone. Find a "pedagogical buddy," a colleague you trust and work well with, and commit to trying one new thing together. There is safety, and often a lot of laughter, in numbers.
- **For the administrator**: Identify the curious, restless educators on your staff and invest in them. Send them to that conference. It may seem like a costly item in a budget, but I guarantee the ideas and energy they bring back will pay dividends for your school culture that far exceed the cost of admission.
- **For the researcher**: Reach out to the practitioners in the classrooms. Teachers possess a localized expertise that cannot be replicated in a lab. With the right partnership and guidance, they can become unbelievable collaborators and researchers in their own right.

My own journey has been paved with ambitious, if occasionally half-baked, ideas that failed more often than I care to remember. But I kept going because we all fail; it is the most fundamental way we learn. As educators, modeling the "fail forward" mindset is worth more than a thousand pep talks to a student.

When we stop being the "all-knowing experts" and start being the "curious co-creators," we don't just teach science; we live it. It has been nine years since I first sat on my hands in the corner of that room at McGill, and while I have finally found my voice, I hope I never stop finding new ways to be a student of the beautiful chaos that is true inquiry.



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When Inquiry Leads to the Unexpected: "Ungrading" With Preservice Teachers and the Struggle With Reflection

Avril Aitken

Abstract

While the alternate assessment movement known as "ungrading" is increasingly common in K–12 classrooms, it has only recently reached higher education, and very little has been written about its use in teacher education classrooms. This article describes the organization and repercussions of one teacher educator's classroom inquiry, through which a gradeless approach was implemented and adapted in a capstone course over four years. Given the degree of difficulty the future teachers appear to face when reflecting on their learning, the author considers their challenges in relation to changing perceptions and government expectations of how and why teachers learn, once in the field.

Introduction

Four years ago, I began questioning my evaluation practices when a colleague suggested we look into trying something new in a teacher education capstone course that we both teach. She had been following the growing discussion around "ungrading," and based on our conversations, my interest was piqued. I began my own search and found that much of the discussion was springing up in blogs and podcasts.

While the rationales for going gradeless vary, I was interested in what is being written about the benefits of having students think deeply about their learning processes. Despite the increasing popularity of this practice in K–12 classes, I found that only some of the sources were related to post-secondary contexts at the time (Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2020), and notably few addressed teacher education. While some might imagine that "ungrading" refers to Pass/Fail models of evaluation, which are not uncommon in our field, that is not the case. Proponents of ungrading have suggested practices that include student self-grading (López-Pastor et al., 2012; Schinske & Tanner, 2014), portfolios (White, 2021), formative feedback for revision and resubmission (Dawson et al., 2019; Hasinoff et al., 2024), involving peers in feedback processes (Holmgren et al, 2018; Wanner & Palmer, 2018), using complete/incomplete in assessments (Hasinoff et al., 2024), negotiated grading (Stackstein, 2015), and labor-based or contract grading (Gaudet, 2022; Hasinoff et al., 2024; Inoue, 2022). Over the years, I had used all of these approaches; yet, they had not been the primary focus of any of the classroom-based inquiries I had undertaken. When it came to evaluation, my overarching intention with the future teachers had been to maximize ways to provide meaningful formative feedback—to influence their learning—while modeling the practices they would be using in their own classrooms in the future. I also accepted grading as a natural feature of my teaching.

When Faulty Assumptions Are the Impetus to Reinvest in Inquiry

In that first year of inquiry, I decided to opt for what felt like a minor addition to my regular practices. Alongside my colleague, we introduced negotiated grading for each of the students' assignments. I was already prioritizing professor and peer feedback and opportunities for revision and resubmission. As a new feature, students completed assignment evaluations using agreed-upon criteria in associated rubrics. They wrote explanatory texts that included a description of their learning, comments on features they felt to be pertinent, and a rationalization for the grade choice. I had follow-up conversations with some of the students. The discussions and their written rationalizations of their grades revealed a range of issues. There was uneven use of criteria, despite prior discussion and agreement; suggested grades were frequently connected to effort and completion; and some students expressed that their identities were associated with particular grades, such that attaining a certain percentage range is "just" who they "are."

It struck me as significant that while every student in higher education is confronted with evaluation and assessment policy, students in schools and faculties of education are in the unique position of learning *about* evaluation and assessment, as they will become evaluators of their own students. While these students were in the fourth or fifth year of a program leading to certification, their evaluation practices were not well reasoned. By that point in their studies, they had spent approximately 300 hours in three practica and had taken courses dedicated to student-centered evaluation, some of which I had taught. I had assumed that at this point, they would be well equipped to use guidelines, follow learning intentions, apply evaluation criteria, use formative feedback, and carry out a reasoned assessment. I was wrong. Another assumption was that they would find that the process positively shifted the power in the classroom, thus making the evaluation processes more just and equitable, which the literature on ungrading suggests. This was particularly important to me as our program has an aspirational outcome statement claiming graduates will act critically and contribute transformatively through their professional practice. I believed a year of "ungrading" would deepen their understanding of alternate assessment and related equitable repercussions. Instead, I discovered that many—if not most—of the students were not well equipped to participate fully in the process.

I found myself questioning the students' "assessment literacy," which Rogers et al. (2020) have described as having the knowledge and practical skills to create assessment opportunities that involve the teacher in analyzing student work, providing feedback, using the information to shape further teaching, and reporting on learning. Given the significance of these skills to effective teaching and student learning, and given what had been newly emerging in the ungrading literature around learner self-awareness and self-direction (Gibson et al., 2022; Gorichanaz, 2022; Guberman, 2021; Koehler & Meech, 2021; Meinking & Hall, 2022), I became committed to continuing the classroom inquiry the following year. I did so for three more years, and during that period, I secured ethics to survey students and run interviews with them. Their insights augmented what I was learning through classroom practices, through my reflective processes, and from the growing body of literature.

Questions have fueled my thinking and experimentation, including: How might ungrading contribute to a more equitable classroom? To what extent is non-hierarchical assessment achievable in higher education? And what is disrupted through ungrading practices? In the process of working through these questions, I have troubled over our dependence on the frameworks of evaluation that grade, rank, or classify learners at all levels of education. In what follows, I take a look at what brought me to engage in studying my own practice early in my career, I provide a snapshot of the current "ungrading" inquiry, and I share what I have learned about the challenges the future teachers experience when called on to reflect on their learning. I connect this to changes in the way reflection and reflective practice are represented in the regulatory frameworks we use in teacher education and point to why we should be concerned about this, at this moment in time.

When Inquiry Became a Habit of Mind

Studying my classroom practice is something that I began well over three decades ago, when I was a K–12 teacher who had headed to graduate studies with a host of unanswered questions. Documenting an initial year-long inquiry as part of my program was a pivotal experience for me as a teacher. Thinking critically about what was unfolding in the class, sitting with my questions, gathering forms of data to consider, and taking a systematic approach to decision-making became natural features of my practice. During the period that followed, I learned of Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) notion of "inquiry as stance," which effectively captured a defining feature of my life in education. These authors have described it in a later text fully dedicated to the concept. It is

> a worldview and a habit of mind—a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across educational contexts and various points in one's professional career and that links individuals to larger groups, and social movements intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. vii)

Approximately 15 years after my first classroom attempt at inquiry, I made the shift from working in the youth sector to working with preservice teachers. In the interim, after leaving classroom teaching, I worked on different collaborative inquiry projects across our large jurisdiction. These had focused on building communities of reflective practitioners and contributing to practice and policy change in K–12 schools. After having worked in diverse educational contexts and completing a doctoral program, I imagined that the transition to higher education would be relatively smooth. It was not. I found myself being questioned about what counts as research. My academic colleagues outside of the education department were not familiar with action-focused, context-driven, and collaborative forms of inquiry (Aitken, 2010). Times have changed since that initial period, and meeting the university's expectations has been readily achieved. I have been studying my own practice and adapting my courses, while also seeking ethics to involve students in the inquiries, which has led to academic publications. For nearly half of my years working in a school of education, working independently or with a colleague, I have used an iterative inquiry-based approach to increasing my understanding of how multimodal productions might foster future teachers' commitment to social responsibility and equity-driven teaching (Aitken, 2013; Aitken & Radford, 2012, 2018a, 2018b; Radford & Aitken, 2014, 2016). Contributing to

this area of study through classroom-based inquiry has been as important to me as continuing to improve my teaching practice.

Dealing With Disruptions of the Mind

In the academic publications my colleague and I produced, we often included some observations about the significance of the process for our sense of self; however, I have not written at length about the deepest personal repercussions of classroom-focused inquiry since my first efforts at it, which date back to over three decades ago. At the time, I was a young settler teacher and graduate student working in a remote First Nation community. The curious, thoughtful, and sometimes frustrated 11- and 12-year-old Naskapi youth in my class directly and indirectly pointed out the urgency of questioning the purpose of schooling. They prompted me to think about my own and their own histories. As a part-time student in a master's program, I worked my way through readings that helped answer some of the questions that were dogging me (Darder, 1991; Freire, 1972; Grundy, 1987; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; Schön, 1983; Weiler, 1988). Still unsure how to move forward in my classroom, I encountered a text by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) which opened up a world of change. Using *The Action Research Planner* as a guide, I carried out that first year-long, classroom-based inquiry. The framework of critical pedagogy and critical literacy approaches resulted in conversations with the youth that led me to question my beliefs, my privilege, my purpose, and the problems of schooling (Aitken, 1993). I wrote about how I experienced a sense of immobilization at different points over the course of that year, and how I emerged with a new set of questions. I came away from that experience still committed to the enterprise of schooling, and belief in the possibility of change through education, which has continued to motivate me throughout my career. However, what I have been learning through the inquiry into the gradeless classroom with preservice teachers has left me unsettled in ways that I haven't experienced since that very first effort at researching my own practice, described above.

The "Ungrading" Inquiry: Years Two to Four

Mapping the Growing Field of Study

The early writing I encountered about "ungrading" largely emphasized benefits for learning and student engagement without explicitly naming the underlying theory behind the particular practices. As the body of literature has increased, I have attempted to track the theoretical lenses behind claims of benefits. I have identified four tentative theoretical stances that call for ungrading practices. Some approaches can be connected to cognitive science, with claims of metacognitive awareness (Dosmar & Williams, 2022); improvements in skill, memory, and comprehension (Hackerson, et al. 2024); increased motivation and self-regulation (Koehler & Meech, 2021); and growth mind-set or acceptance of struggle as a sign of learning (Guberman, 2021). There is overlap between the stance of those who emphasize cognitive benefits and a second group, who have written about how ungrading increases equitable access in higher education. That literature has linked commonly used evaluation practices to the bolstering of white supremacist structures that serve the dominant groups. Writers who have emphasized the need for equity

for BIPOC students have foregrounded benefits of ungrading such as increased harm reduction, risk-taking and creativity (Stommel, 2023); capacity building (Emergence Collective, 2022); student voice in the process and outcomes (Rapchak et al., 2023); and reduced stress and fear of failure (Crogman et al., 2023). The third perspective is connected to the goals of dismantling institutional structures; it is less frequently evident but can be found in reference to disruption of institutional grading systems (Gibson et al., 2022; Inoue, 2022). Finally, there is a small body of writing that has connected ungrading to the absence of colonial-driven hierarchies of power. In this vein, St'at'imc and Sto:lo educator Carolyn Roberts (2023) has pointed to relationships as fundamental to learning, and awareness and self-awareness as part of the conditions for co-creation of knowledge.

"What if…?": The Importance of Conversations with Critical Friends

For those involved with action-driven inquiry, it's not uncommon to have a critical friend. In the summer following my experiment with negotiating grades with students, that friend was Curran Katsi'tsohrónkwas Jacobs, a Kahnien'kehà:ka colleague and research collaborator who is a member of the Mohawk Nation of Kahnawake. The summer after my first attempt, we had the first of many "ungrading conversations" that have followed. Curran's careful listening and questioning led me to think about my intent with this evaluation practice and my relationships with students. We talked about what sharing assessment with students means, and what is possible in a setting that structurally serves colonizing interests. "What if we thought of ungrading as a decolonizing process?" she asked. Interestingly, the Emergence Collective (2021) has referred to common grading practices as part of the "colonized mindset in evaluation." In light of my conversations with Curran and reflection on my early experiences of learning alongside members of the Naskapi Nation, I turned to the question of how to ground my evaluation processes in relationships. I wanted to draw attention to how this might create a "more equitable classroom environment" (Rapchak et al., 2023) and wanted to attempt a "non-hierarchical approach" (Kehlenbach, 2023), to the greatest degree possible. I wanted the process to support the students' personal aspirations and draw their attention to how this can contribute to the equity of their own practices.

In the course introduction and in the syllabus, I emphasized the significance of a gradeless course as a means to mirror what would be their own processes, once employed: they would be making decisions about all aspects of their professional lives without grades. From pedagogy to personal growth, these would happen largely on their own terms, with feedback from those around them. In terms of the course, I emphasized that they would reflect on and assess their own learning, growth, goal-setting related to elements of the course, and, ultimately, they would assign their own final grade. However, I would accompany them throughout the process, providing support and constructive feedback in a range of ways. I was also committed to not policing them.

Expanding the Inquiry: Securing Ethics to Better Understand Student Perspectives

In these last three years, I have worked with five groups of students in the capstone course. I have continued to keep a researcher notebook, documenting my observations, analyzing students' self-assessments, and making anecdotal comments. However, better understanding students' perspectives became a priority. I obtained approval from the institutional research ethics board, so that once the students' final semester was complete, they would be invited to participate in an anonymous online survey. If they were interested in being interviewed, they were directed to contact me. Over the three years, 163 students in five sections have completed the capstone course and have been sent a link to the online survey. This represents 90 individuals who were in secondary education programs and 73 who were elementary education candidates. Of the 163 students sent the link, 49 completed the survey, and nine participated in interviews.

The survey remained the same over the three years; it included ranking and array questions and open-ended prompts grounded in ungrading-related studies. These included perceptions of the impacts of the ungrading processes on learning, on work produced, and on participation; current and past uses of peer and professor feedback; and concerns about grades, grading, and ungrading. The interviews focused on expanding comments about these areas. In several cases, the duration of the interviews exceeded the anticipated time. The nine interviewees included individuals who had completed the elementary education program, as well as secondary education program participants with disciplinary specializations in English, social studies, English as a second language, and science education.

What I learned from the survey and interviews complemented what I was learning in an ongoing way through structured reflection in the class. The data analysis process informed revisions of my assignments and refining of my classroom approaches. With each successive running of the course, I sought to shift student attention from grades to the learning process. My written and oral instructions became clearer; feedback was provided in increasingly diverse ways, based on students' interests; and guiding activities and prompts were refined to support reflection and their reflective self-assessments. In the most recent iteration of the course, I introduced the body of research informing my decisions and spoke about my own inquiry process more frequently.

When Hoped-For Outcomes Intersect With Unexpected Responses to Change

There are encouraging findings related to student perceptions of the impact of gradeless practices. Nonetheless, I am concerned about an issue that I believe is particularly pertinent for teacher education. It is the unexpected discovery that emerged early on: the difficultly students experienced when asked to engage in reflective processes related to identifying and assessing their own learning. Before turning to this, it is worth looking at how features of the gradeless classroom were perceived. For example, 27% of respondents agreed fully that the processes were beneficial to them as learners; that number rises to 75% when we take into account those who agree mostly (33.5%) and agreed somewhat (14.5%). Findings related to student perceptions of the impact on the quality of their work were similar. Their explanations for this are diverse.

The language of cognitive science was evident in comments about experiencing "internal motivation," "deeper learning," along with references to it as "a good metacognitive practice that helps me reflect on my learning." One participant commented, "Ungrading made me ask myself, 'What did I learn or take away from this assignment'. It felt like a stronger conclusion than what I had been used to." The discourses of equity, access, and control were used by others to describe its impact. I have included the participants' statements in full, as they point to how they may have otherwise experienced assessment practices as stressful, inauthentic, outside of their control, and possibly demoralizing:

> I really feel that I was encouraged to take ownership of my performance in this course.
>
> I felt like I was in full control.
>
> Doing the work and putting in the effort wasn't the concern during this process but rather recognizing my own worth and praising myself.
>
> [It] provided me with less stress.
>
> It allowed me to give my full attention and commitment to the assignments that felt most personally relevant which, in the end, ended up leaving me with a more personalized and authentic experience of the course.

While fewer respondents indicated the process was not beneficial to them as learners, their comments focused on the need for incentives to get work done, the primacy of the number grade, and the commodification of education. As one participant explained, "I felt accountable only to myself which didn't push me enough." Another described the process as being "upsetting to those who are paying so much for this course and want the opinion of a professional."

This last comment is reminiscent of an encounter I had with a student, in a year other than the one in which the above comment was made. As had been the case for each assignment, I did not assign a numeric grade to the work but provided feedback at intervals, and on demand. The student and I met in person to discuss their progress, and I provided video feedback. I described the thoroughness of the research, the clarity of the content, the effectiveness of the organization, and precision in the use of the codes and conventions of the format. A few days after I had sent the video feedback, the student asked me how they had "done." Despite having seen the video file, they implored me to tell them how they had "really done." A response to an open-ended prompt in the survey captured the heart of the issue: "I can't pull myself away from the marks/grades that I want. It's difficult to put aside the grades." Another respondent wrote, "It is difficult for students to switch their mentality so suddenly." I had not anticipated how deeply disruptive the change would be for some students.

Unpacking Assumptions About Reflection on Learning

The focus of the remainder of this article is on two issues related to the practice of reflection on one's learning. First, I will share what emerged about the students' responses to the call to do so. I will follow this with a consideration of how governmentally driven regulatory frameworks for teachers and teacher education may indirectly contribute to this phenomenon.

In the first year of this inquiry, as I traced students' responses and reviewed their written explanations of thinking about their learning and the negotiated grading, I was struck by how novel self-reflection seemed to be, and how it challenged students in unexpected ways. In the following three years, the surveys and interviews provided a wider picture of their perspectives and why it posed challenges. Early on, I learned that the request to reflect on their learning was understood by some to refer only to the transfer of the grading role from me as professor to the students themselves. This was despite discussions and provision of materials that I believed explained it as a process of learner self-reflection. Students used terms like reflect, self-reflect, assess, self-assess, evaluate, and self-evaluate interchangeably. I propose that my use of the term "ungrading" appeared to lead students to focus to a greater degree on numbers, rather than on whatever processes might be involved prior to that point. In the most recent year, I have used the term "a gradeless class" as a means to mitigate this.

Students linked their prior experiences to current perceptions. As one early interviewee explained,

> We don't have a lot of in-depth experience with self-reflection, I find it's a lot of like those, you know, little surface-level reflections that we get [pause]. We've encountered aspects of it [pause], but it was never fully scaffolded or structured, or called ungrading. We just kind of encountered it in like, you know, not fully implemented ways [pause]. Where here it was really the focus of the entire semester.

The following year, a related point was made on the survey.

> I believe that having ungrading as a "norm" THROUGHOUT [their emphasis] the education program would help students develop the quality of their metacognitive reflections. In other words, we were introduced and "raised" in the BEd program to fit the criteria and needs of the course instructor. Ungrading is such a different mentality, and I think that my peers and I could have internalized the practice if it was exposed to us throughout the course of the four-year program.

These comments are illuminating, and troubling. I incorporate moments of reflection in all the courses I teach, and believe that reflective experiences are common in my colleagues' classes. Additionally, all students encounter a tool for reflective discussion, which is part of our practicum handbook. Yet, the students' written and spoken comments frequently characterized "reflection" as an object for the professor, rather than a process for the learner. As one student claimed, "I don't necessarily see *these* as highly helpful except for if the teacher needs or wants feedback" [emphasis mine]. More problematically, another student commented on the survey, "I felt it lost its purpose, and we were writing our evaluations based on what the teacher wanted to hear." Significantly, "figuring out" what professors from across the university departments "wanted," in order to secure a desired grade, arose in multiple interviews. It was described as a practice of figuring out "invisible" expectations and "tailoring" to fit those requirements, which would not be evident in instructions or tools.

What Are the Implications of the Inquiry, to Date?

When I consider what might be achieved through a year-long course at the end of a four- or five-year program, it is gratifying to find that representations made in the most recent survey have been overwhelmingly positive. Equally, each year more survey respondents have reached out to be interviewed. Some have commented on how they are considering what their own gradeless classroom might look like. This might suggest that I have been able, over the course of four years, to better accompany my students as they think about their learning, and help to shift emphasis in the course from grades to the process. However, this does not change the fact that reflection on learning continues to be characterized as new, unusual, or "really eye opening," as one interviewee remarked. As someone whose life in teaching has been profoundly shaped by maintaining a reflective stance, this is tremendously concerning.

The Contribution of Regulatory Frameworks to Changing Perspectives

In the first few years after beginning to work in teacher education in the mid-2000s, it was common to discuss the importance of reflective practice. When our faculty revised our program at that time, we chose critical reflection as one of two transversal abilities that we would develop. Since reflection had been the focus of a faculty member's research, our discussions were well grounded (Beauchamp, 2006). The students' second school placement experience was named the "Reflective Practicum"; students would spend a half-day each week over fall and winter in schools. Weekly seminars with a professor focused on developing observation and reflective abilities through a feedback process. In that practicum, teaching a class was limited to two experiences over the course of the year. However, in the early- to mid-2010s, our accrediting body determined that the "Reflective Practicum" inadequately developed the competencies that were named in the ministry framework that fell under the teaching act (MEQ, 2001). This involves the complex work of beginning to know the curriculum documents, understand how and why feedback matters, and draw on this knowledge to create and implement plans in the classroom, while ensuring that the environment is conducive to learning. Increasing the emphasis on opportunities for teaching was a significant change for everyone. Until that point the practicum prioritized the section of the competency framework that I recall referring to as the "reflective competency," number 11. It was expressed as, "To engage in professional development individually and with others" (MEQ, 2001, p. 113). Its five features described characteristics familiar to those who engage in classroom inquiry: "Discusses the relevance of his or her pedagogical choices with his or her colleagues; Reflects on his or her practice (reflective analysis) and makes the appropriate adjustments; Spearheads projects to solve teaching problems" (MEQ, 2001, p. 114–115). In subsequent years our accrediting body called for other program changes, including increased hours for courses in disciplinary teaching methods; this necessitated removal of reading and seminar courses, through which students may have engaged in critical reflection.

Given what I had been uncovering, I turned my attention to the most recent competency framework (MEQ, 2021), the updated career-long expectations for teachers. The wording of Competency 11 has been rephrased as "Commit to own professional development *and to the profession*" [emphasis mine] (MEQ, 2021, p. 74). The description states:

> The professional development of teachers is bolstered by the opportunity for continuing education that meets the highest quality standards consistent with the objectives of the school's educational project. School administrations, educational bodies, unions, universities and the Ministère are also responsible for the continuing education of teachers, by creating the necessary conditions for teachers to participate. (MEQ, 2021, p. 75)

While the previous framework connected professional development to self-directed learning and individual and collaborative solving of teaching problems (MEQ, 2001), the current framework has foregrounded accountability, competency development, and prescribed professional development. There is an echo of the importance of reflection, as one of the nine features of Competency 11 refers to adopting "a reflective stance" (MEQ, 2021, p. 76). Nonetheless, with its clear emphasis on externally provided professional development, which "bolsters" one's status and shapes public opinion, it is fair to say that very little weight is currently given to reflection as a feature of teacher learning.

Can We Be Hopeful? Aim for Problem-Solving Over Solution

Earlier in this text, I mentioned that the ungrading inquiry had unsettled me in ways that I had not experienced since my earliest attempts at classroom inquiry. Like that first experience over 30 years ago, I am left with many questions. Do I feel hopeful, as I did at that point? I'm not quite certain. In a recent volume on the importance of responsive teaching and the types of thinking that are required at this moment in time, Willison (2024) has highlighted the problems of the increasing availability and promotion of codified approaches to improving practice. They have made the point that the world is increasing complex, which requires even greater teacher adaptability and flexibility than previously expected. Similarly, Hallman et al. (2022) have pointed to the inadequacy of "packaged practices" and "scripted and solution-oriented" teacher professional learning. They have emphasized the importance of one's own inquiry.

> Knowledge-in-action positions teachers in agentive ways in relation to their students and classrooms. It orients them toward challenge and problem solving rather than "solution." How fitting it is in these times to urge preservice and in-service teachers toward embracing challenge, despite the uncertainty of the era. (p. 127)

How fitting, the authors have rhetorically stated. My experience suggests that it is very fitting and it is a call to teacher educators. If we are to effectively prepare future teachers, then we need to recenter reflection and reflective practice in our programs, even if the regulatory framework with which we are working has not prioritized this. We need to ensure that our students develop the capacity to critically reflect. Going gradeless in teacher education may provide some hope, particularly if it lives up to the promise of helping our students manage, direct, and assess their own learning.

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“Ask Us, and Not the Interpreter”: A Critical Pedagogy Inquiry on Deaf-Led Empowerment in Filipino Sign Language Teaching

Theresa Christine “Techie” Benitez-dela Torre

Abstract

This autoethnographic reflection explores the author’s journey of learning Filipino Sign Language from her Deaf students and how Deaf-led actions led to conscientization and empowerment. Inquiry through critical pedagogy revealed shared self-doubts about abilities and a fear of challenging dominant negative narratives about Deaf people. The article illustrates how Deaf inclusion is fundamentally an inclusion of human rights in education, making it Deaf-centered. It also highlights the importance of creating a safe space for healing from the impact of linguistic and cultural oppression, which becomes an empowering process. This study recommends concrete actions to sustain linguistic and cultural justice for Deaf learners in education.

Context

Recognition of the rights of Deaf people has come a long way in the Philippines. While their natural sign language, now known as Filipino Sign Language (FSL), was first documented in 1590 by Jesuit priests in their interactions with Deaf people from Dulac, Leyte, in the eastern Philippines (Chirino, 1604/1904), it was only in 2018 that a law was passed recognizing the rights of Deaf people and mandating the use of FSL as the primary medium of instruction and communication in education, the justice system, and employment settings (Filipino Sign Language Act, 2018). Earlier laws were silent on Deaf rights and focused on encouraging government agencies and private organizations to comply. This changed with the FSL Law of 2018, which clearly mandates that decisions and interventions to change and facilitate the improvement of the Philippine Deaf situation must respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of Filipino Deaf people as a linguistic and cultural minority. This articulation reflects a Deaf-centered understanding of inclusion, where the law acknowledges that in any endeavor involving Deaf people, it is imperative that their perspectives, their lived experiences, and their insights on improving practices are recognized and integrated into planning, decision-making, problem-solving, and action-taking. In essence, Deaf people must be able to fully participate in conversations and decisions, especially those affecting their lives and the lives of other Deaf people—what they say matters.

However, such inclusion was nonexistent in 1991. That year, De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, Philippines, opened a Deaf vocational program for two reasons. First, historically, the saint after whom our school was named had taught a deaf boy in the 1600s (Salm, 1987), and it was only fitting to continue his legacy. Second, as explained to me by my Deaf program head, many unemployed Deaf high school graduates lacked sufficient employable skills, and vocational training was seen as a solution to this social problem. This marked the first Deaf program in the history of De La Salle Philippines,[1] an institution whose educational legacy in the country dates back to 1901. Benilde’s initiative was shaped by historical

responsibility and by the pressing social issue of unemployment. It opened opportunities to nurture the growth of youth and adults in the Filipino Deaf community and its allies. In the process, Deaf-led and Deaf-centered innovations and advocacies emerged and evolved, helping to defend, promote, and fulfill the rights of Deaf people, particularly the inclusion of their linguistic and cultural identity in education.

As one of the pioneers of this program, I look back on the beginnings of my journey toward advancing Deaf rights in education. This autoethnography focuses on my reflection on the shared journey with my first Deaf students, whose sincerity and bravery shaped my transformation. This experience awakened me to the realities of their oppression. Through conscientization, I began learning their language directly from them, which opened access to deeper conversations. These conversations helped me realize that their shared experiences of exclusion were neither incidental nor coincidental, but rather the result of negative beliefs about Deaf people that had been accepted as truth. In reality, these were prejudices that justified patterns of discrimination at home, in school, and in society.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate, through the lens of critical pedagogy, the following: first, to describe experiences that reflect my participation in discrimination practices against Deaf students. Second, to analyze the realizations and actions that emerged from the practice of critical pedagogy (e.g., conscientization, dialogue, Deaf-led problem-solving, and praxis), which empowered both the author (me) and the Deaf students, as an ally and as advocates, respectively. Third, to identify concrete ways to advance Deaf-centered and Deaf-led teaching that sustains linguistic and cultural justice for Deaf learners and supports their authentic empowerment in education.

Discussion

Discrimination: Outcomes of Audism and Dehumanization

Bauman (2004) describes discrimination against Deaf people in three ways: “The notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears; a system of advantage based on hearing ability; and a metaphysical orientation that links human identity with speech” (p. 245). The ability to speak and hear is often equated with evidence of ability and capacity, such that those with hearing loss are viewed as inferior. The emphasis on the non-functioning, impaired, or “broken” aspects of their hearing, often associated with the medical view, reflects a metaphysical orientation that positions Deaf people as less fully human. As a result, Deaf people are frequently viewed from a deficit perspective. This is a dehumanizing act. When individuals are viewed through a deficit lens, they are deprived of their “human qualities, personality, or dignity” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), which gives rise to discrimination. For Paolo Freire (2000), dehumanization is

> any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person . . . . Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human. (p. 55)

Without my awareness, my interaction with my Deaf students reflected these dynamics. In certain instances, entirely unaware, I was condoning the same dehumanizing beliefs through my actions.

Signing and Speaking the English Word Order

I was six months into my job as a junior mental health counselor for hearing college students when my program administrator instructed me to learn sign language because we would be accepting Deaf students the following year. I learned to sign from a hearing sign language interpreter who provided classes for hearing people like me. I was confident that I would not have difficulty communicating with my Deaf students, as I had completed my sign language classes and had been recognized as the best student in my class. I did not anticipate any challenges with my abilities, and as a designated mental health counselor, I felt ready to teach and guide them to become the best versions of themselves.

But on day one, I failed. I could not understand them, and they could not understand me. I attempted to communicate using choppy spoken words while signing, and at the same time, they responded with quick movements of their hands synchronized with body movements and facial expressions. My mind went blank. I frowned and signed "again," and they replied with slower movements of their hands and fingers, their faces showing frustration, and sometimes a blank expression, as if simply going through the motions to complete a strained conversation. I did try to communicate with my students. I signed and spoke simultaneously, not realizing I was further widening the gap in our communication. Simultaneous communication was widely used in Deaf education by hearing teachers who used manually coded English, borrowing signs from the Deaf community's natural sign language but following the grammatical rules and word order of English (Tevenal & Villanueva, 2009). To visually represent English, the speaker signs following its exact word order while simultaneously speaking so that lip movements can be seen. I believed this was the only way to communicate with Deaf individuals. At the time, I did not know that there was a natural sign language used by Deaf people, what we now know as Filipino Sign Language (FSL), and that it thrived within the Deaf community, "who collectively identify as a linguistic and cultural community which uses Filipino Sign Language and actively supports its goals and values" (FSL Act, 2018). Deaf individuals are recognized as having their own linguistic and cultural identity and shared aspirations, identified as a community with a capital "D" in Deaf. On the other hand, the word deaf (lowercase) is used as an adjective to describe individuals "who are unable to fully use their hearing to process information. They may or may not be signers or identify themselves with the Deaf community" (FSL Act, 2018). This group may include persons who are hard of hearing, use assistive devices such as hearing aids or cochlear implants, and rely on speech and speech reading to communicate. It may also include those who are isolated and use gestural, non-standard signs (FSL Act, 2018). As the law explains, "all Filipino Deaf people are generally deaf, while not all deaf Filipinos are Deaf."

As I watched them converse, I witnessed raw emotions attuned to what was being expressed, whether brief or extended, through coordinated movements of the hands and body, along with the expressive use of the eyes and eyebrows that stretched, contracted, and shifted with meaning. There were pauses, as well as extended sequences of thought, with participants taking turns or sometimes responding

simultaneously in ways that were both coordinated and organized. I had been told that these were merely uncoordinated gestures and pantomime that did not follow a precise flow of thought. While I did not fully understand them, it did not appear so. I knew they understood each other, and I was the one left out. However, when communicating with hearing people, they would slow down, sign with more rigid and segmented movements as if emphasizing specific points, and follow what seemed to be a straight structure, often attempting to mouth equivalent words.

I was misunderstanding their expressed thoughts because I was interpreting their signs through English word order or signing them in an exact English form. While I could identify the individual vocabulary, I could not grasp the overall meaning because they were using their own language, the one I did not yet understand. I responded using signed English, and they, in turn, tried to pick up bits of vocabulary, but the main message remained unclear. This communication method creates discrepancies in information and reduces Deaf learners’ access to comprehensible input. In a study of Tevenal and Villanueva (2009), deaf and hearing participants’ access to information was compared under simultaneous communication conditions. The findings showed that hearing people accessed information accurately, whereas Deaf learners’ access to the same information was compromised. Similarly, in my interactions with my Deaf students, our shared understanding was limited. However, unlike me, a hearing person, their ability to find other ways to access and comprehend information was also constrained. Conversations, which should serve as learning opportunities, and structured classroom environments designed to optimize student learning, often depended on hearing people in families, schools, and society. Those who are proficient in spoken language but have limited proficiency in the natural sign language of the Deaf put Deaf learners at a consistent disadvantage. A system designed to support human development at home, in school, and in society that is only accessible to members of the majority (i.e., hearing people) perpetuates institutional audism. This occurs when prejudices and discriminations in individual interactions are reinforced through policies and practices that privilege dominant groups while oppressing minority groups (Gertz & Boudreault, 2016). At the time, I was not aware of this. Yet I was a perpetuator of institutional audism.

Talking Directly to the Sign Language Interpreter

To communicate and carry out my job responsibilities, I changed my strategy. I stopped making efforts to communicate directly and instead relied on my interpreter to do the “talking” for both my students and me. At the time, I did not realize that my actions were discriminatory. Due to my limited proficiency in their language, I retreated further from attempting to communicate on my own. I lost my confidence and began to see myself as a failure. My sense of self-worth was so low to the point that I believed only my sign language teacher could help me overcome these challenges. I asked my teacher to serve as my interpreter to help me do my job as a counselor and trainer of self-development workshops, as well as to understand my students through the voice of my interpreter. For a while, it seemed to work—or so I thought. I was able to do my job of giving self-development activities over several months, and with the support of my interpreter, I became comfortable listening to and communicating with my students. However, my attention was primarily on the interpreter. Although I looked at my students when I talked, when it was their turn to sign, my attention frequently shifted back to the interpreter. I asked questions

or responded while looking at the interpreter. When I noticed an unfamiliar sign, I would ask the interpreter for clarification. I believed I was being respectful, but my behavior made my students invisible. Not being seen when one is present is a dehumanizing experience.

Dinner Table Syndrome

In one of my sharing sessions about their family experiences, I relied on my interpreter to understand their concerns, and a common theme emerged: they felt unloved and unworthy. For many years, they had struggled to communicate in ways that would allow them to be understood. Yet, in many instances, they felt that the same effort was not given to them, so they, too, could understand family conversations, particularly those that occurred during mealtimes. This experience has been identified as "Dinner Table Syndrome," in which hearing individuals take turns quickly, guided by auditory cues, while Deaf individuals are excluded from the flow of conversations (Hauser et al., 2010; Meek, 2020). My Deaf students shared that in these situations, they were often left behind in conversations and were asked to wait until others had finished talking, or they were given only brief, fragmented explanations through choppy signing or speech.

Hearing families of deaf children often lack awareness and guidance regarding the importance of providing a fully accessible language, such as sign language. Instead, they rely primarily on spoken language to communicate. As a result, both the quality and quantity of communication are reduced, since deaf children's auditory pathways are wholly or partially inaccessible (Swisher, 1989). Spoken language remains largely incomprehensible, language development is impaired, communication becomes limited, and overall quality of life is diminished (Hall, 2017). Over time, this lack of communication can damage a child's self-esteem and, in due time, the child becomes a passive learner rather than an active one (Snoddon & Underwood, 2017).

Empowerment: Critical Pedagogy

Critical Pedagogy provides a process to guide individuals who experience discrimination and oppression to understand themselves critically and question the beliefs that maintain their oppressive conditions (Freire, 2000; O'Connell, 2023). Another key process is dialogue with community members, through which individuals recognize each other's personhood, develop empathy, and move toward problem-solving and action that lead to liberation (Harris & Roter, 2024). True liberation is founded on love and cannot authentically happen without it. According to Freire, without profound love, a teacher cannot support the liberation of their students (as cited in Harris & Roter, 2024).

My Conscientization Process

I found myself reflecting on my own struggles as a child, recognizing the impact of my Deaf students’ pain as somewhat similar to mine: rejection, isolation, and feelings of unworthiness flooded me. It was also in that moment when Jose, an older Deaf adult whom I did not yet know but who was a leader in the Deaf community, looked at me and signed:

> You are like the parents of these students. You know very little sign. They have problems, but will they ever go to you? NO! Because they know you will not understand. And you will never understand because the interpreter is always around to help you. If you want to help them, then you must try to do it on your own. If you do not know the signs, fingerspell them and ask us, not the interpreter. Next time, YOU TALK TO US and not the interpreter. (Benitez, 1991)

This message was both a warning and a call for help, and it affected me deeply. Deaf people can be straightforward, blunt, or candid in expressing their thoughts and emotions. Hearing people who are not used to this form of communication may react negatively and perceive such directness as rude (Waech, 2007; Townsend, 2014). This often leads to what has been described as “fragility,” a reactive response of hurt or anger by any person who represents the dominant group, in this case the hearing person, whose good intentions are identified as discriminatory or oppressive. To appease this reaction, “the focus then goes to consoling or disarming this person in power who ‘meant well’ but did not know better” (Thoutenhoofd et al., 2024, p. 66–67). This shifts the focus away from the discrimination itself and its negative impact on Deaf individuals. This becomes another form of discrimination against deaf people, where only the concerns of “hurt” hearing individuals matter.

I responded differently. Although I felt ashamed, I accepted the truth. As a counselor, my role is to help my Deaf students learn how to overcome the barriers that stop them from growing. In that situation, I realized that I was the barrier. I was shocked and do not recall how I handled that situation. But, in my later reflection, I came to realize two things. First, while my pain may have been similar in nature, it could never match the magnitude of what my Deaf students experienced in a world that speaks to them but does not truly listen to who they are or what they want to express. We both suffered from forms of internal oppression. However, mine was an outcome of individual experiences, whereas theirs was an outcome of audism. Second, I was contributing to that pain. The longer I delayed addressing my own internal limitations, the greater the barrier I created for their access to opportunities to learn, a chance that my hearing students could access freely. This, again, is an example of institutional audism.

Jose’s message became a moment of conscientization that prompted deeper self-inquiry, helping me to reflect on my actions critically. While I struggled to communicate with my Deaf students, I continued to participate fully in social and professional interactions and activities, benefitting from both direct and incidental learning opportunities. However, my failure to communicate with them directly prevented them from freely participating in the activities and interactions I was responsible for facilitating. Still, I was unable to change this at the time because of my limited signing skills. As Jose had emphasized, “*They have problems, but do you think they will ever go to you? NO! Because they know you will not understand. And you will never understand because the interpreter is always around to help you.*” My failure to learn to communicate directly in sign language became a barrier to their learning.

In doing so, I was creating the same situation and, in the process, reinforcing the belief that they were not equals. Jose was asking for a direct line of communication, for his peers to be respected and understood, and to learn from self-development opportunities through direct dialogue. This situation would have been different if I had been conducting the same activities with hearing students. Without realizing it, my actions were a concrete act of injustice. While my Deaf students were capable of expressing themselves, they were unable to do so fully because of my limitations to communicate, disregarding their right over my own needs. I created a barrier and justified it by accepting my perceived inability to communicate with them. While the interpreter helped bridge that gap, I realized that my habit of talking to and looking at the interpreter instead of my Deaf students made them feel invisible. My Deaf learners were excluded as a result of the barriers I created. I had created an oppressive space, supported by my own need for comfort and healing, at their expense.

Authentic Dialogue and Praxis With Myself and My Deaf Teachers: The Beginnings of Deaf-Centered Practices

Realizing this, I accepted the call to action, "ask us, not the interpreter." I began meeting with my students without the interpreter. For three months, I faced my self-doubts and fears by learning directly from my Deaf students the language they used, some of which resembled what I had learned from my hearing interpreter, and some of which was entirely different. Although they were my students, during those three months, they guided me into their world, and I immersed myself in it following their lead. The self-doubts and fears I carried, while they were my own, were set aside. This was no longer about me; it was about their right to learn. I worked double time to learn their language because I was the counselor responsible for supporting them. I needed to learn quickly from my Deaf teachers so I could do my job. The first step was to remove the barrier that limited their access to opportunities for growth—my deficit beliefs about them, my dehumanizing practices, and my limited sign language skills.

Soon, deep conversations began, filled with tears, laughter, and the stories in between. I began to understand. When I did not understand, I approached the moment with curiosity and asked them directly. I paraphrased back what I understood to confirm the meaning, showing that I was listening. When I was not part of the conversation, I observed carefully and took a mental note in my mind of what it meant and asked them again for clarification. I did this as part of building trust, showing honesty about what I did or did not understand. Over time, they recognized that I understood them most of the time, and our interactions were filled with learning opportunities for both sides. We became both teachers and students in the classroom and in social situations. These opportunities included shared activities, such as nature walks, creating artworks, and ongoing sharing of their insights as part of their self-development activities. Through these interactions, my understanding of their inner worlds as individuals and as a group deepened.



Fig. 1: A 1992 weekend retreat with the first Deaf students of the Benilde Deaf program, who later became the first Deaf teachers of the Benilde Sign Language Learning Program (SLLP)

My Deaf Students' Conscientization Process

Then the big question came: How could they become friends with the hearing students in their academic department? While they all participated in educational and social events, meaningful conversations rarely took place. Interactions were limited to nods or simple hand gestures for greetings or goodbyes, with little opportunity for genuine peer conversations beyond their Deaf circle. On the other hand, some hearing students asked me the same question: How could they become friends with their Deaf schoolmates? I found myself in the middle, with both groups asking how friendships could be built between these two worlds. In one of those moments of deep conversations, I turned the question back to my Deaf students. Their answer was clear: hearing students needed to learn their language. When I asked how this could happen, there was silence. They were unaware of their own immense power to change the situation, just as they had done for me. I encouraged them to do what they had done for me: teach them. Their initial responses showed a sign of protest: “I’m a student, not a teacher.” “I’m shy!” “I don’t know how.” Their responses eventually turned to “how can we be their teachers? We are deaf.” At that moment, the impact of discrimination on their self-perception was brought out in the open.

My Deaf Teachers' Authentic Dialogue and Praxis: The Beginnings of Deaf-Led Teaching

I told them that I had learned from them, and that I had learned well. It became evidence that their self-doubts about their capabilities were not true. The first step toward their realization was seeing proof of their own ability. I saw this as the necessary step to reduce their self-doubts and to build evidence with their own actions. Convinced, the journey toward Deaf-led teaching began.



Fig. 2: My Deaf students were the first Deaf teachers of the Benilde Sign Language Learning Program (SLLP).
Top row: James Andrabado, Mari-len Martin, Florisa Punsalan, Jesus San Jose, George Lintag, Jose Austria
Bottom row: Juancho Mataranas, Kathleen Joyce Tan, Nina Joy Castillo, Jennifer Lim, Jeng Ramirez, Ma. Teresa Montes, Annalyn Torralba

The journey began with a shared vision. They reflected on the characteristics of their best teachers by creating lists and sharing their stories of joy and inspiration. They agreed on common qualities they felt helped them succeed, including effective sign language communication. These qualities became their standard of excellence and the basis of their practice sessions. They created instructional materials, including cue cards and hand-made resources, and conducted trial runs. My Deaf teachers took turns acting as both students and teachers, demonstrating lessons and giving feedback to one another. I supported the process by inviting hearing students to sign up, and eventually, a class was created. As the opening approached, we met, and my Deaf teachers expressed concerns: "What if they don't learn from us? What if we do wrong and they complain about what we taught them?" In these moments of self-doubt, they needed reassurance. I looked at them and said, "You taught me, remember?" They accepted this and, with great excitement, we opened our first class. They had their sign language sessions for their hearing peers, and at the end of each session, I facilitated reflective discussions with them. These sessions invited them to discover more about themselves as they worked toward the standards they had set, problem-solving challenges they faced and affirming one another's strengths.

During this early Deaf-led sign language teaching, I learned about Visual-Gestural Communication (VGC) from a Deaf artist, Dennis Balan, and Rosalie Macaraig-Ricasa, a sign linguist and ally. They taught me about Deaf culture and that there was a natural sign language within the Deaf community. I invited them to support my Deaf students in their efforts to teach hearing students. We conducted the first VGC weekend workshop, and the Deaf teachers and their students participated. The students, with their Deaf teachers, were introduced to the foundational elements of natural sign language. The VGC workshop empowered the Deaf teachers, while hearing students learned about “non-verbal cues such as iconic gestures which describe certain actions, facial expressions to convey emotions and rhetorical questions, body language, pointing at certain objects or colors, and pantomime within a visual frame from the head to the chest” (Carver & Kemp, 1995, p. 6). Gestures and movements are not merely representations of thought; in signed languages, they may develop into grammatical forms, functioning either as lexical signs or as morphemes (Wilcox, 2004). Students learned quickly, and friendships were built. The formal classes served only as a starting point. The most meaningful learning occurred through social interactions and shared activities among the students. Additional opportunities were opened to support a shared purpose while continuing the primary goal of their self-development: building evidence of their abilities and expanding their ability to learn. They created their own Deaf stories, produced plays, organized bazaars, and hosted ongoing sign language classes.



Fig. 3: The Deaf teachers with their first batch of Sign Language students after the first Visual-Gestural Communication (VGC) workshop, led by Deaf artist Dennis Balan (in blue), and beside him, Dr. Rosalie Ricasa. The author is at the center (in golden yellow). Jeng Ramirez (standing in front of the author) served as the first coordinator of the Sign Language Learning Program.

Originally conceived as an opportunity to build friendships with hearing students, the program became a powerful tool for Deaf empowerment. It challenged the oppressive beliefs that only hearing teachers or interpreters could teach sign language. This initiative became a trailblazing step toward respecting, promoting, and fulfilling the rights of Deaf people. The outcome became a living legacy that advocates for the rights of Deaf people to preserve, promote, and teach Filipino Sign Language themselves. This work challenged dominant narratives that define Deaf people as merely non-hearing or "lesser" versions of hearing people. Instead, it affirmed that Deaf people are defined by their language, culture, and humanity, not by hearing loss. This experience led to the establishment of the institution's long-standing program, originally known as the Sign Language Learning Program (SLLP), now the Filipino Sign Language Learning Program (FSLLP). It has sustained over three generations of Deaf-led teaching of FSL. This is a testament that even before the law formally recognized the linguistic and cultural rights of Deaf people, Benilde's Deaf program, together with its Deaf students and allies, was already protecting, promoting, and fulfilling those rights.

The pioneer coordinator of the SLLP was one of the first teachers, my student Jennifer Ramirez.

Conclusion and Recommendations

My institution opened the Deaf program 35 years ago in response to the recognized needs of Deaf learners based on our institutional history and the social issue of Deaf unemployment. These were the ingredients of what we understood as Deaf-centered education at the time. However, their linguistic and cultural rights were never a factor in deaf-centered education, as we were not aware of their significance. Our efforts were guided by the institutional mission of recognizing and respecting the uniqueness of our learners and the belief that education is transformative. Reflecting further on this journey, it is clear that what was missing was a recognition of the linguistic and cultural rights of Deaf people, an understanding of the extent and impact of discrimination experienced by Deaf learners individually, and awareness of the systemic oppression they have experienced across relationships and systems.

To recognize these crucial characteristics of the shared Deaf experience and to support their empowerment, I offer the following recommendations. First, hearing individuals involved in Deaf education must examine and clarify their beliefs about Deaf people. They must undergo conscientization and actively collaborate to analyze and question dehumanizing practices in their interactions with students and colleagues, as well as the ways in which environments contribute to oppression. Second, to be true allies, they must use their privilege to advocate for change, particularly ensuring the full participation of Deaf individuals in all initiatives for transformation. Third, Deaf adults must be fully present in the lives of Deaf children in schools as teachers and other personnel. They serve as linguistic and cultural models to these children. Fourth, Deaf teachers should be assigned to teach sign language courses. They should take the lead in planning and implementing their courses and actively participate in improving these courses. To support their advancement, Deaf teachers must have full access to professional development opportunities. Fifth, hearing teachers who work with Deaf learners must be proficient in sign language and avoid using simultaneous communication or English word order when

signing. Sixth, Deaf adults must be supported in fully participating in decision-making and implementation within language-rich, accessible learning environments at home and in school. Deaf children must have consistent access to high-quality sign language input through regular interaction with Deaf individuals in both formal and informal settings.

This autoethnographic reflection explored my journey of awakening, as I came to realize that my beliefs and actions contributed to the dehumanization and disempowerment of my Deaf students. Even when I was not doing so intentionally, my lack of awareness and understanding contributed to the perpetuation of audism. I occupied a position of authority as a member of the hearing majority, as well as by my position as an educator within the system that my Deaf students were part of. This position gave me privileges that enabled easy access to learning and communication. However, it placed my Deaf students at a disadvantage because I had not made the effort to learn their language or understand their lived experiences. Although I was not aware of it at the time, the shared journey of empowerment that my students and I experienced reflected the principles of critical pedagogy, inspired by the authenticity and leadership of my Deaf students, who led us to become both teachers and students to one another.

Notes

1. De La Salle Philippines (DLSP) is a member of Lasallian Global Network of schools, whose mission is to create educational communities that demonstrate commitment to young people, especially those who are poor, by providing them with access to a human and Christian education that enables them to participate in the transformation of society. Benilde is one of the 17 schools under DLSP.

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Teaching Hard History Amid Contemporary Challenges: Inquiry Pedagogies for Impactful Holocaust Education

2023 Holocaust Education Initiative NEH Summer Institute

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Abstract

This article examines four secondary teachers' experiences with inquiry-based approaches to teaching the "hard history" of the Holocaust after they participated in inquiry-based professional learning focused on Holocaust education. The teachers' narratives highlight the affordances of inquiry-based pedagogy for overcoming curricular and time constraints, fostering critical thinking, and supporting student agency through studying hard history. The teachers' narratives further suggest that inquiry-based pedagogies can deepen student perspective-taking, promote classroom discussions, and enhance teachers' professional resilience. The article underscores the value of reflective, contextually driven, student-centered instruction, concluding with questions for inquiry that might support efforts to teach hard history in local contexts.

Introduction

Teachers whose professional assignments require that they teach "hard history" (Gross & Terra, 2018)—such as colonization, slavery, internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, or the Holocaust—have long faced distinctive pedagogical and professional challenges (Rutten & Butville, 2025). Furthermore, both internationally and in the United States (Carter Andrews et al., 2018; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Tribukait, 2021), a politically divisive and polarized social climate has, in recent years, deepened the challenges many teachers were already experiencing (e.g., Ranschaert, 2023). Nevertheless, a diverse array of educational benefits associated with teaching hard histories has been posited (Haas, 2020), and traditional pedagogical approaches rooted in transmission of content knowledge have been problematized in the pedagogical literature related to hard history (Lemberg & Pope, 2021). Pedagogy for the Holocaust offers a powerful example because it is emblematic of many of the challenges of teaching hard history amid contemporary times: (re)traumatizing content; cognitive complexity; deep relationships with questions of identity, power, and oppression; and openness to students' potentially (in)appropriate comparisons to current events.

As a promising approach for addressing the complexities of teaching the Holocaust and other hard histories, inquiry pedagogies have been widely cited (Lemberg & Pope, 2021). Inquiry pedagogy, broadly defined for the purposes of this article as an approach to designing curriculum and instruction that are rooted in compelling questions (shown through vignettes in Butville et al., 2021; Grant et al., 2017), has been taken up in a range of contexts for Holocaust education. Prior scholarship has

suggested that inquiry pedagogies can create conditions for students' agency and voice to flourish (Connor et al.; 2022 Schaefer et al., 2024) while supporting teachers to address, rather than avoid, the teaching of hard history (e.g., Rutten et al., 2023).

To offer illustrative examples of how teachers are using inquiry pedagogies to address the many challenges within the contemporary landscape of Holocaust education, the purpose of this article is to present and analyze narratives from four practicing Holocaust educators. Their inquiry-based pedagogy to teaching the Holocaust demonstrates how teaching a hard history can move well beyond transmission of basic facts to foster dynamic learning environments that maintain the integrity of the underlying content knowledge while responding to complexities of local contexts and meeting students' unique learning needs. As each narrative will illustrate, teachers of the Holocaust are simultaneously enabled and constrained by their schools' policies, available curricular resources, and local community expectations. Despite these challenges, each narrative illustrates the potential for inquiry pedagogy when teaching hard history in a relevant way for today's learners.

The teachers whose narratives are presented in this article recently participated in an intensive professional development program in the United States, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), that included a weeklong, residential summer institute in June 2023 paired with a semester-long series of webinars during the Fall 2023 academic term. This program (described in greater detail in Rutten et al., 2025) convened 30 teachers from around the United States in grades 5–12 and focused on supporting teachers' classroom instruction of the Holocaust and other genocides, with sessions modeling inquiry pedagogy and curriculum through use of compelling questions that framed what was being studied (Grant et al., 2017).

Subsequent to their participation in the NEH summer institute, the four teachers taught the hard history of the Holocaust, each in the context of a different state within the United States. Despite these varying contexts, each approached the teaching of the Holocaust using inquiry-based pedagogical methods. The first narrative is provided by Melissa Kreider, an English Language Arts teacher whose students are in eighth grade in central Pennsylvania. The second narrative is from Alyssa Hockensmith, a high school social studies teacher in Jensen Beach, Florida. Following these two narratives is a third from Melissa Bryan, a middle school English educator in northern New Jersey. The fourth narrative is provided by Farrell Kelly, who teaches a middle school course combining English and world history in Falls Church, Virginia. Analysis and a concluding discussion of the four teachers' narratives suggest the enduring, contemporary value of inquiry-based pedagogies for hard histories.

Melissa K.'s Narrative: Efficacy in Professional Decision Making

For decades, Holocaust education has been included in school curricula as both a historical mandate and a moral imperative. Yet in recent years, educators have encountered mounting pressures of community scrutiny, increasing censorship, and curriculum constraints such as time or standardized assessment demands. Within these shifting conditions, today's Holocaust educators are not merely transmitters of content but active decision-makers who navigate complex professional dilemmas (Damşa et al., 2021; Roos & Bagger, 2024). They ask: How do I frame the purpose of this education? How do I make this relevant to students today? How do I meet standards while staying true to the depth of this history?

Melissa K. described the context in which she teaches as a background to understanding the tensions she navigates on a daily basis, not just when teaching a complex historical topic such as the Holocaust:

> I teach in a politically divided suburban district in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, serving approximately 7,000 students. My school enrolls around 500 students—70% White and 18% Hispanic—with over 40% identified as economically disadvantaged. In this climate, curricular choices are highly scrutinized. I navigate these tensions by grounding my decisions in evidence-based pedagogy and prioritizing the ethical responsibility of Holocaust education. Many parents, regardless of political affiliation, are concerned with the material being presented in our classrooms. By using an inquiry pedagogy in my teaching practice, my students can build questioning and research skills that allow them to explore the hard history that is required to read texts about discriminatory actions like the Holocaust. Inquiry pedagogy allowed my students to research the necessary background information on the questions they have about topics, versus me simply lecturing on these issues. Student engagement increases, allowing me to center parent conversations on student choice if there are any concerns. Approaching my teaching through an inquiry stance enables me to engage in systematic reflection on my inquiry pedagogical choices, drawing connections between theory, context, and my students' lived experiences (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana et al., 2025).

In 2025, high-quality Holocaust education must be both historically accurate and encompass multiple interpretive frames. Melissa K. shared, "My middle school students often understand *what* happened, but they struggle to see *how* diverse experiences intersected during the Holocaust." Research suggests that the complexity of engaging multiple voices and perspectives is essential for students' moral and civic development (Gross & Stevick, 2015; Schweber, 2019). Thus, Melissa K. prioritized real survivor and victim accounts over fictionalized portrayals, such as *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which scholars have shown to perpetuate misconceptions (Gray, 2014). Instead, she supported her students to engage with primary and secondary sources such as *Night*, *Maus*, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, and a range of memoirs, poems, plays, and documentaries as a way for students to encounter the Holocaust as a mosaic of human experiences. Below she described this in more detail:

> As an English Language Arts teacher, I design multimedia units that allow students to explore both the literary and historical dimensions of the Holocaust. The stories we teach communicate what we value; by intentionally selecting authentic, diverse voices, I aim to help students confront modern manifestations of antisemitism, anti-Roma sentiments, racism, and ableism. The NEH summer institute transformed how I teach these materials. Before, I felt responsible for providing all the information; now, I engage students through inquiry, so they research and answer their own questions. This shift—from transmission to investigation—has deepened students' engagement,

> empathy, and retention (Zion & Mendelovici, 2012). One of my eighth graders reflected, "Since we dug deep for information, I had more knowledge about what she [Anne Frank] went through."

The students' ownership of learning strengthens both accuracy and empathy, mirroring research that links inquiry-driven Holocaust education to enhanced historical understanding and ethical reflection (Auerbach, 2022; Totten, 2020). Melissa K. shared how utilizing inquiry pedagogy has also strengthened her professionally and personally:

> Inquiry has also strengthened my confidence and professional identity. I now see my instructional choices—centering multiple perspectives, using authentic sources, and prioritizing inquiry—as professional acts of agency that elevate Holocaust pedagogy in my classroom and school (Toom et al., 2015). Still, the greatest challenge lies in curriculum design. My Anne Frank unit is technically a "compare and contrast" ELA standard, which can reduce Holocaust study to literary background knowledge. Since this is often the final mandated encounter students have with Holocaust education, I intentionally expand beyond the prescribed text to provide historical accuracy and moral depth. Although my principal supports this work, official curriculum constraints remain a barrier—a common tension for educators using inquiry to challenge narrow frameworks (Cochran-Smith et al., 2021; Dana et al., 2013).

This teacher's narrative illustrates how educators locate their professional agency even within district structures that define what and how content should be taught. For this teacher, Holocaust education is not an add-on, but part of a larger vision of curriculum that integrates historical understanding with civic engagement and social-emotional learning. Yet achieving this balance is fraught with challenges for this educator as district goals often emphasize skill development and test preparedness.

Because standardized tests and achievement scores are over-emphasized in school systems, many teachers are focused less on the historical and emotional connections to the texts that make literature great (Güloğlu-Demir & Kaplan-Keleş, 2021). Through inquiry pedagogy, Melissa K. is able to teach students how to go deeper with their content understanding while also allowing students to create more robust analyses.

What emerges from Melissa K.'s narrative is a portrait of efficacy, a teacher's belief in their ability to make meaningful instructional decisions despite institutional constraints. Rather than feeling dictated by standards or resources, this educator exercises professional judgment to design instruction that fosters critical thinking, empathy, and justice. Inquiry pedagogy allowed her to encourage students to become questioners and analyzers of the world around them. Students were given the chance to explore and question their material the same way they will do as they become citizens of the world. It is a complex art that embodies the heart of teaching as inquiry: teachers as knowledge generators who use reflection and research to transform practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana et al., 2025).

While Melissa K.'s experience highlights the role of inquiry pedagogy in strengthening educators' professional efficacy in curriculum design, Alyssa demonstrates how inquiry pedagogy can equally empower students to exercise agency within mandated frameworks. Where Melissa K. uses inquiry to navigate constraints from above, Alyssa uses inquiry to open space for students' curiosity and moral voice from within the curriculum itself.

Alyssa's Narrative: Supporting Student Agency With Mandated Curriculum

Another challenge teachers face is the tension between what is required and what can be negotiated within the curriculum. State mandates around Holocaust education vary significantly, and in many places, these policies define only a minimum threshold of content or instructional time. Some school districts treat these requirements as one more thing to add to an already over-full curriculum, yet teachers often see the mandated curriculum as a point of departure rather than a limitation. Alyssa, working in Florida, a state where Holocaust education has been mandated since 1994, embodies this stance of professional and pedagogical possibility.

Florida's statute calls for an "investigation of human behavior" to encourage tolerance and protect democratic values (Required Instruction, 1994). While the mandate provides structure, this educator interprets it as an invitation to cultivate inquiry and civic engagement through her compliance. As she reflected, "Students need to be given the freedom to explore the mandated curriculum in a way that is authentic to *them*, and it's my job to ensure they have the tools to do that." Grounded in an inquiry pedagogy, she offered students the opportunity to collaborate on a shared inquiry through various lenses and perspectives to present a solution to a problem identified in their research. This level of collaboration enabled students to make connections to other courses and current events, which gave them the agency to go beyond the mandates set for them and to embrace the knowledge *they* sought.

In her AP Seminar course, inquiry takes the form of student-designed research projects that have connected Holocaust memory to contemporary ethical concerns. One student, for instance, investigated "how Jewish traditions incorporate Holocaust memory as a form of resilience." Drawing on primary sources and interviews, the student analyzed symbolic practices such as Passover, concluding that remembrance rituals "help communities turn grief into strength" and serve as acts of resistance against modern antisemitism. The teacher described how the student, coming from a Christian background, "pushed herself to empathize with experiences and values that were not her own." This, she noted, was "the goal of this type of inquiry—that students will look outside the cold facts of the war to discover empathy and the nuance that lies within a larger context."

Such examples align with research demonstrating that an inquiry approach to Holocaust education deepens empathy, perspective-taking, and civic reasoning (Gross & Stevick, 2015; Schweber, 2019). When students formulate questions and pursue their own answers, they move from being passive recipients of mandated knowledge to active participants in learning, a shift that has shown to strengthen engagement and retention (Zion & Mendelovici, 2012). This teacher intentionally structures classroom routines to support that transformation. "Even when the state defines *what* I must teach," she explained, "I can still give students the agency to define *how* we learn." Through this design, inquiry becomes both a pedagogical method and an ethical stance.

By supporting student-driven research within the state's parameters, Alyssa helps learners fulfill not only the law but also its deeper purpose of understanding prejudice, valuing diversity, and protecting democratic ideals. In this way, the mandated curriculum serves as a foundation for student agency rather than a ceiling that limits it. In reflecting on her own work, this teacher discovered that when students are given the space and agency to engage in sustained research, they often uncover a more nuanced understanding of the subject. This, in turn, allows the teacher to structure the curriculum around the process of inquiry, rather than the results of it, leading to more opportunities for students to learn skills, such as empathy, that will foster growth beyond the four walls of a classroom.

This narrative illustrates how teacher and student agency can coexist within externally imposed structures. Rather than treating Holocaust education as a checklist, the teacher reimagines it as a space for civic dialogue and ethical reflection. Inquiry pedagogy transforms mandated instruction to be less about memorizing facts and more about building empathy through learning. Even within limited instructional time, this educator believes that Holocaust education can be transformative when it centers student curiosity, empathy, and critical engagement.

While Alyssa illuminated how inquiry pedagogy can foster student agency within mandated frameworks, Melissa B.'s story reveals how using it as a pedagogy for hard history can help teachers navigate their own ethical and professional dilemmas amid a turbulent sociopolitical climate. In contexts where public discourse has grown polarized, inquiry becomes both a pedagogical tool and a form of professional resilience—helping teachers reflect, adapt, and persist when their work is under intense scrutiny.

Melissa B.'s Narrative: Dilemmas of Professional Decisions Amid a Turbulent Climate

Classrooms are not automatically neutral spaces as they can mirror the tensions of the wider world through curriculum, banned books, or difficult conversations, priming teachers to be able to proactively take a nonpartisan stance. In recent years, educators have faced heightened scrutiny and even hostility for engaging with topics some deem "controversial." Teaching about the Holocaust, particularly when connecting it to current issues such as antisemitism or hate crimes, can be fraught. Teachers must continually make decisions that balance honesty with developmental appropriateness and trauma-informed practices. Inquiry offers a structured way to navigate these tensions: through cycles of reflection, evidence gathering, and action, teachers can turn uncertainty into learning rather than avoidance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana et al., 2025; Rutten et al., 2024).

As Melissa B. explained, "Two years ago, I designed a multi-week social justice inquiry project for my eighth graders to deepen critical thinking and literacy." She described the heart of the "Genius Hour" project as student choice: "They selected their topics, partners, mentors, research, assessment formats, and even grading criteria." For this educator, inquiry provided a framework for reimagining literacy as a relevant and timely topic. "Students realized literacy isn't siloed," she reflected. "It's interdisciplinary, tied to authentic expertise, and connected to their own lived realities."

The project's design was itself an act of inquiry. The teacher continuously gathered feedback, documented student progress, and adjusted plans in response to institutional and social changes. When the school shifted from trimesters to quarters, she adapted project timelines. When political debates over potentially controversial content intensified, she re-evaluated how to preserve student autonomy while meeting literacy standards. These adjustments, she emphasized, were "not compromises, but professional decisions to honor both institutional constraints and student agency." Such reflection-in-action exemplifies what Zeichner (2003) terms "deliberative professionalism": teachers as ethical decision-makers who reconcile competing demands through inquiry and evidence, not compliance or retreat. Indeed, teachers who enact inquiry pedagogy often approach their own practice as inquiry—posing questions about their teaching, collecting evidence from their classrooms, and refining their approaches in response to what they learn. This recursive stance mirrors the very habits of curiosity, reflection, and responsiveness they seek to cultivate in students (see Dana, 2015).

Melissa B. acknowledged that the social climate heightened her sense of vulnerability. "It's hard," she said, "to create space for honest questioning when the community wants certainty." Yet, inquiry offered a way to stay grounded. By documenting her decision-making process, collecting student reflections, and debriefing with colleagues, she found that inquiry "helped turn anxiety into agency." Scholars note that such reflective inquiry builds teachers' moral confidence and helps them navigate the emotional labor of teaching difficult issues (Rutten et al., 2024; Toom et al., 2015).

Ultimately, the Genius Hour project affirmed for this teacher that meaningful literacy—and Holocaust education by extension—must be integrative, culturally responsive, and sustained across disciplines. She often reminded her students of Freire and Macedo's (1987) insight that "reading the word and reading the world are one and the same process." Through inquiry, her classroom became a space where students could analyze ideology, propaganda, and moral courage not as distant abstractions, but as lenses for understanding both history and the present.

Melissa B.'s story underscores that Holocaust education involves continual negotiation. The dilemmas are not only about *what* to teach, but *how* to safeguard the learning environment: how to make it safe for questioning without eliminating discomfort, how to honor truth without alienating, and how to teach about the past while remaining alert to its relevance in the present. Inquiry provided this teacher with a means to navigate those tensions with intentionality. Her narrative reminds us that Holocaust education is never just about the Holocaust: it is about how societies remember, distort, and respond, and how educators support next generations in the insights from this process.

Melissa B.'s narrative revealed how inquiry pedagogy can help educators navigate ethical and political dilemmas in teaching about the Holocaust. Building on this, the final narrative (Farrell) demonstrates how inquiry not only informs reflection but also drives innovation. Here, inquiry pedagogy becomes a foundation for teacher leadership—fueling the design of curriculum that is responsive to standards yet deeply connected to authentic learning of his students.

Farrell's Narrative: Teacher Leadership and Efficacy in Curriculum Design

Across these narratives, a shared view emerges where teachers approach Holocaust education not simply as a mandate but as a moral and intellectual responsibility. They understand that a subject's relevance does not occur automatically to students—it must be cultivated through thoughtful collaboration, inquiry and design. The following teacher's story illustrates how inquiry can extend beyond classroom reflection to inform leadership in curriculum development, ensuring that Holocaust education evolves with both pedagogical integrity and emotional resonance. Farrell shared more on his understanding of extending curriculum to explore larger goals:

> I teach eighth-grade International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme Humanities, a course that blends English and history through World History I. While the curriculum emphasizes reading, writing, and analysis, the larger goal is to explore what it means to be human and what we owe each other.

During the first four years the course was offered, his students examined the Holocaust through Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*, using the text to grapple with questions of forgiveness, justice, and ethical frameworks proposed by historical religions and philosophies. While discussions were rich, inquiry helped him recognize that the unit lacked a coherent inquiry arc—students reflected deeply but without an explicit investigative framework that promoted ownership of their understanding.

After participating in the intensive professional development program, Farrell reimagined the course through an inquiry pedagogies lens. "I redesigned the curriculum to include a thematic investigation of human cruelty, the abuse of power, and responses to injustice," he explained. He drew upon inquiry cycles—questioning, experimenting, collecting evidence, and reflecting—to test how ethical inquiry could be scaffolded across historical contexts. "I built inquiry-based activities around three ethical crises leading up to the Holocaust unit: Thucydides' *Melian Dialogue*, Caesar's conquest of Gaul, and Ashoka's war against Kalinga," he said. "Early on, I scaffolded questions for students; gradually, they developed their own, moving from teacher-led inquiry to independent exploration."

This iterative, inquiry-driven redesign marked a shift in both student learning and the teacher's professional identity. By documenting student reflections, comparing engagement levels across cohorts, and soliciting feedback from colleagues, he refined his approach over multiple years, solidifying his use of inquiry pedagogy. "By the time we reached *The Sunflower*," he noted, "students had practice framing meaningful questions and applying multiple historical lenses to grapple with genocide, violence, and moral choice."

The results were transformative. Students collaborated to interrogate Wiesenthal's account, analyze scholarly responses, and contextualize their inquiry through a research visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The culminating projects for the redesigned curriculum—sculptures, photo essays, multimedia reflections, and personal narratives—showcased both academic rigor and ethical insight as students synthesized historical questions with personal reflection to create deeply individual outcomes. "Through this work," he reflected, "I've led curriculum design that not only meets content goals for

reading comprehension and historical knowledge but also equips students with tools for ongoing critical inquiry, ethical reasoning and engagement, and human connection."

His leadership extended beyond the classroom. Sharing findings with colleagues, he helped shape a school-wide conversation about designing humanities curricula that link historical study to civic engagement. Inquiry became, for him, a means of professional efficacy, "a way to lead through learning," as he described it. Rather than viewing curriculum design as static or prescriptive, he framed it as an ongoing investigation into how students best learn to appreciate complexity and build empathy through encounters with history.

This teacher's story exemplifies how inquiry pedagogies can empower educators to lead from within and sustain purpose amid turbulence that surrounds them. By redesigning his Holocaust unit as a living, inquiry-based curriculum, directly connected to other strands in the year's progression, Farrell positioned himself not just as a teacher of history but as a cultivator of humanity. His work reminds us that the future of Holocaust education depends not only on preserving memory, but on empowering teachers to design spaces where that memory becomes relevant to students through critical thought, ethical action, and collective care.

Analysis and Discussion

Looking across these narratives, we see convergence with the broader scholarship on inquiry pedagogy. Teachers are not simply teaching off-the-shelf, prepackaged Holocaust curricula; they are approaching their teaching as a growing embodiment of inquiry stance (Dana, 2015).

All four of the teachers' narratives highlight inquiry as both pedagogy and professional stance. Teachers in each narrative engaged students through questioning, reflection, and critical thinking, a mirror of the same stance they themselves adopted toward their teaching. This dual enactment of inquiry supports what Loughran (2020) identifies as "pedagogical reasoning"—teachers' thinking that informs their instructional choices in response to student need and context. These educators also enacted what Mockler and Groundwater-Smith (2015) call authentic professional learning, situating their practice in lived experience rather than external mandates. In doing so, they transformed Holocaust education from a static history lesson focused on transmission of factual information into a dynamic space of inquiry (Short & Reed, 2022).

At the same time, the teachers' narratives reveal tensions that complicate inquiry pedagogy. While inquiry empowers both teachers and students to navigate uncertainty, it can also amplify emotional, political, and ethical complexity (Rutten et al., 2024; Spector, 2018). In Holocaust education especially, hard history evokes discomfort that cannot be easily resolved by reflection alone. Teachers' approaches to teaching the Holocaust illuminate the paradox of inquiry-based learning: the same openness that fosters deep engagement also exposes educators to ambiguity and vulnerability. Yet rather than retreat from this tension, the teachers' narratives suggest that grappling with uncertainty is essential to ethical pedagogy (Schweber, 2019).

Further, the work of these educators underscores how inquiry fosters leadership and curricular efficacy. Through implementation of a professional learning experience, teachers in these narratives embodied inquiry not just as classroom practice, but as teacher leadership (Cochran-Smith et al., 2021; Zeichner, 2003). This work aligns with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's (n.d.) guidelines that emphasize the teacher's role as facilitator and ethical guide. In this sense, inquiry becomes a form of curriculum leadership—teachers using inquiry to mediate between policy, content, and student identity. They demonstrate that inquiry can transform even a mandated curriculum into a space for deep learning (Dana et al., 2013). Teachers featured in this article positioned themselves as co-learners with students in the pursuit of historical understanding and insight into multiple perspectives. By revising lessons, integrating cross-disciplinary sources, and aligning inquiry with historical content, educators positioned themselves and their students not merely as consumers of knowledge but as knowledge creators (Loughran, 2020). However, as these stories also make clear, broader support for such inquiry remains uneven, pointing to the need for research on the conditions that sustain teacher-led curricular innovation.

Finally, these narratives collectively affirm that inquiry serves as a pathway for ongoing professional learning. It sustains teachers in the work of teaching hard histories and bridges the gap between curriculum policy and classroom practice. As such, inquiry not only offers a powerful way to transform pedagogy for hard histories but also nurtures the growth of teachers' leadership and impact over time. This article, and the questions that follow, invite readers to consider how inquiry pedagogies might support their efforts to teach hard history in their local contexts.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1) What are some examples of hard histories that you, or another educator you know, are required (or choose) to teach as part of the formal curriculum? What are some examples of hard histories that may be present in connection with your students' identities or cultural backgrounds?
2) How might an inquiry pedagogy support you in navigating the social and political challenges that can be present when addressing hard histories?
3) From the four teachers' narratives presented in this article, which one resonates with you most? Least? What are some specific aspects of the teachers' inquiry pedagogies that you could use or adapt in your context?
4) When a hard history is invoked in your professional context, how might you address it in a way that promotes students' agency, voice, and development of deeper understanding?

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Embedding Social Justice and Ethical Awareness in Course-Based Research Assignments

Sandra Gibbons, Kenna Miskelly, and Eugenie Lam

Abstract

This article discusses guidelines for embedding research ethics and social justice into undergraduate and graduate coursework through the University of Victoria's course-based ethics review framework. Drawing on experiential learning strategies and the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS 2, 2022), this paper illustrates how instructors can design assignments that cultivate ethical reasoning, research integrity, and social responsibility. Practical examples from several academic disciplines demonstrate how students learn to navigate ethical complexities in real-world contexts. The framework affirms that ethical research education is not just procedural but foundational to inclusive inquiry, offering a scalable approach to teaching responsible and justice-oriented research practices.

Introduction

> I hadn't thought about how asking my roommate personal questions for a class might be ethically complicated. After reading TCPS 2 and writing my reflection, I realized I needed to be more transparent and respectful.
> (Student comment)

Social justice and research ethics intersect critically in university education, particularly when students are asked to consider the broader implications of their research practice. The preceding reflection from an undergraduate student about a course-based research experience indicates that even modest assignments can yield substantial ethical awareness when thoughtfully structured. Embedding research ethics instruction within both undergraduate and graduate coursework offers a practical introductory strategy to foster both ethical consciousness and social responsibility. It is important to note that the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2, 2022, p. 14) is clear that course-based research activities, irrespective of their pedagogical purpose, fall under research ethics board (REB) review.

The core principles in TCPS 2—Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice—are all solidly grounded in the general principle of social justice. The Respect for Persons principle recognizes the intrinsic value of human beings and requires treating them with respect and consideration, including protecting those with developing, impaired, or diminished autonomy. This emphasizes the importance of informed consent and the right of individuals to make their own decisions regarding participation in research. Concern for Welfare focuses on protecting the well-being of participants by considering the impact of research on their physical, mental, spiritual, economic, and social circumstances. Researchers and research ethics boards (REBs) aim to promote participants' welfare and minimize foreseeable risks. The principle of

Justice mandates fair and equitable treatment for all individuals, ensuring that the benefits and burdens of research are distributed equitably. This means that no group should be unduly burdened by the harms of research or denied its benefits. Implementing the three core principles of TCPS 2 in research involves a multifaceted approach that shapes the entire research process, from design to review and implementation. This requires an understanding of how these principles guide ethical decision-making and lead to practical applications like informed consent, risk-benefit analysis, and fair treatment of participants.

Course-based research experiences are often viewed as stepping stones to ensure novice researchers (undergraduate and graduate students) are introduced to these principles of social justice in research early in their research journey. With the implementation of these core principles in mind, university instructors across many academic disciplines have found that engaging with the course-based ethics review framework provides them with the necessary tools to include a range of ethical hands-on research experiences with human participants, allowing their students to connect in-class lessons with real-world situations (theory to practice). Generally, course-based ethics approvals allow students to engage in authentic research within a structured classroom setting. The course-based ethics review framework blends and builds upon the necessary disciplinary knowledge, sound research design, and core principles of conducting ethical research with human participants.

The University of Victoria's (UVic) course-based ethics review framework provides clear guidance for integrating the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2, 2022) into course assignments. It equips instructors with tools to design ethical learning experiences within their courses that are experiential and aligned with the principles of Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice. For example, a political science instructor might require students to conduct an interview-based research project with participants about their political views, prompting reflection on issues such as informed consent, data security, and power dynamics. Another example: An instructor in a linguistics course might have students record interviews, using informed consent protocols. Students then reflect on how the language of choice for the interview influenced participant comfort and power dynamics. These reflections deepen students' awareness of how seemingly neutral research tools can reflect systemic inequities. These types of structured activities demystify the ethics process and reinforce its relevance to diverse research contexts. Thus, when ethics is embedded into both design and debrief stages, it encourages the kind of ethical consciousness students need to navigate future research landscapes. This course-based approach also ensures students not only learn the subject matter but also develop a strong ethical awareness and decision-making capacity.

A growing body of research demonstrates that when students engage with ethical reflection in the context of course-based research activities, they not only internalize abstract ethical principles but also develop professional competencies and greater sensitivity to social justice. This paper outlines research on the effectiveness of experiential course-based ethics assignments, discusses the benefits and caveats for student learning, and shares how UVic's course-based ethics review framework can support instructors in designing such assignments using evidence-based strategies to cultivate students' ethical reasoning and social responsibility.

Research Evidence on Experiential Ethics Learning in Course-Based Settings

Research consistently shows that experiential learning methods enhance students' ethical understanding and application, particularly when aligned with social justice principles central to TCPS 2. The following studies exemplify how embedding ethics into course assignments promotes not only knowledge but also ethical aptitude and reflective practice.

For instance, Farghally et al. (2025) documented how computer science students across levels benefited from ethics case studies and assignments tailored to their disciplinary context. Students reported increased awareness of ethical dilemmas specific to computing, such as privacy concerns and algorithmic bias, reflecting the TCPS 2 principles of Respect for Persons and Justice. This work highlights the value of repeated exposure and scaffolded complexity in building ethical reasoning skills.

Weyrich and Harvill (2013) supported this pedagogical orientation by demonstrating how structured coursework and mentorship can effectively foster ethical awareness in graduate education. They suggested that graduate students who engage in ethics instruction that emphasizes reflection, discussion, and case-based analysis can develop deeper ethical reasoning and a richer appreciation for the societal implications of their research. The authors further advocated for the incorporation of classical ethical theories as part of course work to improve students' understanding and decision-making in complex research situations.

Moreover, Lee et al. (2024) explored how embedding social justice frameworks within ethics pedagogy enhances students' commitment to equitable research practices. Their comprehensive scoping review highlighted case-based learning, simulation-based learning, intergroup dialogue, and community engagement as key methods linked to deeper ethical awareness, aligned with TCPS 2's Justice principle. Similarly, Teixeira-Poit et al. (2011) presented a framework for engaging students in ethics through hands-on research tasks such as protocol development, institutional review board (IRB) simulations, and reflective debriefings. Students reported increased comfort with ethical reasoning, a stronger grasp of procedural ethics, and greater adeptness at identifying ethical issues in their projects. The authors linked these outcomes to active engagement with TCPS 2 principles, especially Concern for Welfare, by having students reflect on potential harms and benefits.

In a similar context to the two preceding studies, Tammeleht et al. (2019) explored how students working together on real-world ethical dilemmas build deeper understanding and competence in the field. They discussed the use of collaborative case-based learning, focusing on how students develop ethical competencies through group work and the effectiveness of various pedagogical competencies. The authors found that collaborative analysis of complex cases enabled students to recognize diverse perspectives and appreciate the contextual nature of ethical decision making. This method proved especially effective in developing Respect for Persons and Justice, aligning well with the aim of course-based research assignments to nurture ethically responsible and socially conscious researchers.

From a science lab-based perspective, Buedo et al. (2024) argued for integrating ethical reflection directly into the laboratory workflows. This includes regular use of group meetings and structured assessments of ethical procedures. They detailed how lab-based assignments can include moments for students to assess the ethical implications of their methods, such as the environmental impact of materials used or the welfare of participants. From a humanities perspective, Boyd et al. (2013) explored how narrative writing within a course-based assignment supported novice researchers in developing ethical reflexivity. Rather than providing prescriptive ethical guidance, it underscores the value of reflective practice in developing ethical sensitivity. Students were encouraged to consider their responsibilities to research participants, especially in sensitive or emotionally charged contexts. The authors contend that writing also helps students recognize ethical tensions that may affect participant welfare, including unintended consequences for participants and researchers alike. The authors suggested that narrative inquiry gave voice to diverse student experiences and ethical perspectives. To summarize, Boyd et al. noted that, as evidenced through their writing, students appeared to start moving beyond compliance to principled practice.

Caldwell-O'Keefe and Recia (2020) emphasize the transformative potential of integrating ethics and diversity-focused reflection into course-based experiential learning. They highlighted the role of community engagement in enhancing students' ethical reasoning and cultural competence. The authors argued that such approaches deepen students' critical engagement with systemic inequality and expand their ethical imagination. Their work supports a pedagogical shift toward justice-oriented research instruction, aligning with TCPS 2 core principles.

Finally, Moore and Griffin (2022) offered a design-based approach to embedding ethics throughout professional education curricula. Rather than treating ethics as a standalone topic, they argued for its integration across learning activities within and across courses. Their approach closely mirrors the three TCPS 2 principles by encouraging students to prioritize autonomy and voice in problem-solving, equipping them with tools to anticipate and mitigate unintended consequences in real-world settings, and encouraging systemic thinking and the consideration of marginalized populations when addressing complex social and professional challenges. Their approach reinforces the spirit of TCPS 2 as a living framework for ethical action, not just a compliance document.

Collectively, these findings affirm the benefit of the UVic course-based ethics review framework as a tool to support instructors in designing research assignments for their courses. By combining experiential learning with justice-oriented reflection and structured ethical processes, instructors can promote students' ethical reasoning capacities and a sense of social responsibility.

The UVic Course-Based Ethics Review Framework

UVic's course-based ethics review framework focuses on ensuring that research activities conducted within a course setting, primarily for pedagogical purposes, are conducted ethically. The framework serves as a comprehensive guide for instructors who want their students to conduct research involving human participants as part of a course assignment.

The UVic course-based research ethics review framework includes two parts: (a) the required online course-based ethics application (https://www.uvic.ca/research-services/how-do-i/get-ethics-approval/how-to-apply-human-ethics-approval/index.php#ipn-course-based-application) to be submitted by the instructor, and (b) guidelines for course-based research (https://www.uvic.ca/research-services/how-do-i/get-ethics-approval/how-to-apply-human-ethics-approval/course-based-research-guidelines/index.php). Together, these documents are intended to facilitate efficient navigation of the review process and provide guidance to instructors to ensure that the types of assignments they design comply with TCPS 2 requirements.

First, completion of the online course-based research ethics application form is required for instructors seeking approval for student research assignments that involve human participants but are conducted within the context of a course (not thesis or independent research). The information provided by the instructor in the application is intended to ensure that the instructor complies with TCPS 2 requirements. Briefly, the course-based research ethics application prepares students to recruit participants ethically; obtain informed consent; ensure anonymity and confidentiality, as applicable to the assignment; address risks and benefits; and destroy data after course completion. The following discussion expands each of these areas.

The first few sections of the course-based research ethics application capture key administrative details including basic information about the course instructor and any co-instructors, and the course itself (course number, name, start date, frequency etc.). In addition, if students will be engaging with any external organizations (e.g., schools or not-for-profits), instructors must confirm that prior arrangements and permissions are in place. The next section asks the instructor to summarize the content and scope of the research assignment(s), explain the pedagogical purpose (e.g., skill development, experiential learning), and describe how they will review and supervise student research activities for ethical integrity. This includes submission of a copy of the course syllabus and a copy of the research assignment the students will receive. At a minimum, instructors are expected to provide ethics instruction, review student instruments such as interview guides, and monitor recruitment and consent processes. Of note, an important condition of a course-based ethics approval stipulates that the instructor must ensure that all data collected by students are destroyed immediately following completion of course requirements. We will highlight an exception to this condition when data management is discussed below.

Next, instructors are asked to provide a description of the participant groups students may engage with, including inclusion/exclusion criteria (e.g., age, health conditions). Of note in this section, it is expected that course-based research undertaken by students qualifies as "minimal risk." Minimal risk, as defined

by the TCPS 2, refers to the "probability and magnitude of possible harms being no greater than those encountered in the participant's daily life" (p. 25). For example, peer interviews and anonymous surveys typically qualify as minimal risk. Research involving deception, sensitive topics, or vulnerable populations usually exceeds minimal risk and falls outside course-based ethics approvals.

In terms of recruitment procedures, instructors must describe the recruitment methods students will use (e.g., email, in-person), and how students will be trained. An appended sample recruitment script or template with talking points is typically required. In addition, the application requires the instructor to specify types of data collection allowed (e.g., interviews, surveys, focus groups) and to describe geographic details (e.g., on-campus, off-campus sites).

Next, documentation of the consent process includes a description of how consent will be obtained (e.g., signed, verbal, implied). An appended consent form template is required for this. Instructors must also describe how consent forms will be stored and destroyed at the end of the course and who will be responsible for their destruction. The application form also asks the instructor to clarify whether participants' identities will remain confidential in students' research output. As well, if the intent is to have participants acknowledged or credited by name in students' work, this must be explained in the application.

The final section focuses on the data management requirements. Instructors are asked to detail how students will store and protect their data during the course and dispose of it afterward (upon course completion), and how they will share their findings (e.g., reports, papers). As mentioned earlier, a condition of a course-based ethics approval requires that the instructor ensure that all data collected by students will be destroyed immediately following completion of course requirements. However, there are instances in which data may be shared outside the context of the course. This is most often the case when instructors partner with Indigenous communities that have the right to ownership of, use of, and access to their research data. If this is a possibility, the instructor is required to provide a rationale and clear plan in the data management section of the application for how this sharing or transferring of the research data will be carried out. Finally, two explicitly worded statements in the application emphasize that data collected from a course-based approval cannot be used by the course instructor for their own research purposes, and students cannot use data from course-based research for thesis/dissertation/project work. In such cases, submission of a standard research ethics application rather than a course-based research ethics application would be more appropriate.

The second part of the UVic framework, the guidelines for course-based research, is intended to offer assistance and clarification for instructors as they formulate their assignments and complete the application. It is not unusual for instructors to feel uncertain about how to operationalize their course-based assignments to ensure compliance with TCPS 2 requirements. These guidelines help to address this uncertainty. Specifically, the guidelines expand on instructions included in the application, often providing more in-depth explanations for requirements. In short, the guidelines aim to help instructors determine whether their course activities qualify for a course-based research ethics application, clarify when a standard research ethics application is required, guide instructors in

developing assignments and activities that comply with minimal risk criteria, explain the instructor's responsibilities and how to complete the application form effectively, and clarify ethical engagement in community-based and experiential learning settings. Much of the information included in these guidelines was originally formulated (and is regularly updated) in response to frequently asked questions from instructors.

The following discussion highlights the major content of the guidelines and examples of how they may be applied by instructors. First, instructors can consult a matrix of research activities that fall within course-based guidelines, exempt activities, and those activities that fall outside a course-based approval. This matrix not only defines which types of student projects require a standard research ethics application but also provides a decision tree and exemplars to help instructors assess whether a project meets the criteria for an approved course-based ethics assignment in three key areas: participants involved, characteristics of research activities, and topics and risk to participants and potential risks to students conducting research activities. For instance, a decision tree might prompt instructors to ask: Will students interact directly with competent adults? Will the data be used beyond the classroom? Do interview topics and/or questions present minimal risk? As the instructor, do I have the necessary expertise to guide student researchers on a particular topic? This helps instructors structure learning activities in ways that develop research skills and engage ethical reasoning while complying with course-based review requirements.

The following three areas are identified in the guidelines for further explanation. First, the situation of "impromptu research" is addressed. This occurs when an instructor has not planned for a course assignment that involves human participants, but their student proposes this research idea after the start of the course. In this instance, the guidelines ask the instructor to consider whether they have the time and expertise to provide the necessary training and supervision for the student. In most instances, where a student proposes such an idea midway through a term, logistically, there is just no time or capacity for an instructor to provide the extra support to the student who wishes to conduct impromptu research. There must also be sufficient time to submit a course-based application and receive approval to allow a student to conduct research. If an instructor decides to proceed, they must explain the situation in their course-based application and outline the proposed research activities, completing all sections in the application.

A second highlighted area distinguishes between course-based research and professional training activities, such as clinical practicums (e.g., counseling, nursing), and legal clinics or education field placements. In brief, these professional training activities do not require ethics approval if data are only used for training purposes and not analyzed for academic output.

The third area addresses some of the unique intricacies of community-engaged learning. As described in the guidelines, these are learning opportunities where course-based research activities, goals, and outcomes are planned collaboratively between a course instructor and a community organization. Although this context presents tremendous potential for hands-on learning, there is also the need for careful consideration by both the university instructor and representatives of the community

organization, especially where the needs and expectations could differ. The guidelines strongly recommend that the course instructor meet as early as possible with community organization representatives to ensure that both entities have a clear understanding of requirements. To help guide instructors, the guidelines identify characteristics of activities within the community-based learning context that require course-based ethics review, conditions where a standard application is required, and characteristics of those activities not requiring ethics review. In short, community-engaged coursework may require course-based ethics review if there is co-creation of a research project with the instructor, student, and community organization; if students use the project to fulfil a course requirement; and if students retain the gathered information for a period to complete course requirements. If an instructor plans to share identifiable data with an organization, a standard application must be submitted. This application allows for more details and better risk/benefit assessment for the organizations' use of the data. Alternatively, ethics review is generally not required if the data remain entirely with the organization. For example, when students participate in research activities led by the organization, where information collected is used solely by the organization and not by the student. The UVic research ethics office contact information is provided for instructors who need further guidance or have specific questions about whether a course-based research ethics review is required.

In summary, a key intent of a course-based ethics approval is to allow assignments that walk students through key ethical considerations within the limited confines of a course. This allows instructors from a wide range of academic disciplines to tailor learning experiences while complying with institutional and national guidelines. Through completion of the course-based application process, instructors clarify learning goals, identify ethical touchpoints, and adopt assignments that build students' competence. The course-based ethics review framework fosters introductory engagement with TCPS 2 principles and helps prepare students for future research that may require them to be responsible for more ethically complex research. More importantly, the framework provides a structure that helps instructors build ethical principles into assignment design.

Contributions to Student Learning: Benefits and Caveats

The course-based research ethics review framework supports deeper learning by creating opportunities for ethical reflection through structured, hands-on research activities. For instance, in an environmental science course, students might be assigned to conduct classroom observations of nature-based play. Before beginning, they complete a guided worksheet asking them to reflect on ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and the impact of their presence on the classroom environment. Following the observation, students participate in a debrief session where they discuss dilemmas they encountered and how TCPS 2 principles informed their decisions. This layered approach encourages students to grapple with real-world ethical complexities, reinforcing abstract principles through experiential learning and collective reflection. These assignments engage students in examining the implications of their methods and decisions, fostering a mindset of responsibility and care. Importantly, they also help students understand ethics as a living, evolving process—central to how knowledge is produced and used. Through such reflective assignments, students experience firsthand

how ethical practices and justice considerations are inseparable in responsible research, particularly as institutions increasingly prioritize responsible, inclusive, and community-engaged research practices.

Whereas the potential benefits of such course-based ethics assignments are numerous, design and implementation of such assignments should not be undertaken without considerable thought and caution. The following researchers provide valuable insights, emphasizing both potential benefits and caveats for consideration.

A notable contribution to understanding undergraduate research ethics comes from the work of Richman and Alexander (2006). The authors examined ethical dimensions of undergraduate research, including power imbalances between faculty and students. They explored some potential ethical dilemmas that arise when students engage in authentic research experiences. The authors argued that ethical issues often emerge not only in data collection but in mentoring relationships, authorship expectations, and institutional responsibilities. They advocate for clearer institutional guidelines, identifying course-based experiences as an example. They emphasized the importance of building ethical awareness early in the research process, particularly through guided reflection and faculty modeling of responsible research conduct. Integrating these insights into course-based assignments supports the emphasis on ethics as embedded, rather than adjunct, to academic inquiry. This approach reinforces Respect for Persons and Concern for Welfare by recognizing the complex power dynamics involved in student research mentorship.

Expanding the discussion, Winder et al. (2007) explored tensions between academic freedom, pedagogical goals, and institutional oversight. The authors reported on cases where students' enthusiasm for research clashed with ethical expectations or exposed gaps in institutional guidance. They advocated for stringent ethical standards, clearer frameworks, and more robust mentorship, aligning well with UVic's structured course-based ethics review framework. Their findings reinforce the importance of clear ethical guidelines and mentorship structures to help students balance academic enthusiasm with ethical responsibilities. Similarly, Adams (2012) discussed the challenges and issues related to research ethics education, particularly within the social sciences, highlighting the need for effective communication and compliance with the principles of responsible conduct of research. Documents such as the UVic course-based ethics review framework contribute to both communication and compliance.

Continuing the discussion, Foot (2006) contended that ethical instruction in undergraduate research is essential not only for ensuring participant safety but also for helping students understand their dual roles as learners and emerging researchers. Foot highlighted the risks of trivializing ethical concerns when research is treated purely as a classroom exercise and argued for integrated ethics curricula that promote critical reflection and responsibility. The article supports integrating ethics instruction in undergraduate research as essential not only for ensuring participant safety but also for furthering students' ethical maturity and research responsibility. Löfström (2012) further emphasized the need for early educational experiences for students. As a result of an examination of students' understanding of research ethics, the author identified conceptual gaps and varying degrees of ethical awareness. Results showed that many students lacked clarity about the core ethical obligations outlined in policies like TCPS 2, particularly

around informed consent and the protection of human participants. Some students equated ethics with rule-following rather than respecting participant autonomy. Results also indicated that issues like equitable participation, power imbalances, and potential harms and burdens of research were not well understood. The study highlights the need for more explicit ethics instruction in postsecondary settings. Its findings are particularly useful for educators aiming to increase student awareness and understanding of ethical frameworks underpinning research practice, especially in early-stage researchers.

Focusing on graduate student experiences with research ethics, Petillion et al. (2017) explored the ethical challenges faced by graduate students working in applied health contexts. Through qualitative interviews, they found that students often encountered uncertainty around consent procedures, community engagement, and navigating ethics board requirements. The study emphasized the importance of structured mentorship, the need for support during the ethics review process, and early ethical educational experiences.

It is intended that ethics-focused research activities develop critical thinking, enhance self-awareness, and connect students' academic work to real-world contexts. When paired with justice-oriented pedagogy, these experiences affirm students' capacity to contribute ethically to research cultures. These course-based assignments also cultivate students' identities as emerging researchers—highlighting their responsibilities not only to their research participants but also to their academic and social communities.

Value of Course-Based Ethics Review Framework: Collaboration of Multiple Stakeholders

By completing course-based research ethics applications, instructors create a comprehensive learning environment that embeds ethical and justice principles deeply into research practice in a gradual and structured manner. This helps to empower students to internalize ethical responsibility as an integral part of their research identity, preparing them for more advanced research endeavors. However, despite this honorable intent, and the well-documented benefits, integrating research ethics and social justice into undergraduate and graduate coursework presents challenges that instructors and institutions must address to maximize impact.

One major challenge is balancing the administrative requirements of ethics review with pedagogical flexibility. Instructors sometimes report that navigating institutional ethics policies can be time-consuming and needlessly onerous, especially when ethics boards require formal submissions that do not align well with short-term classroom projects. This tension highlights the need for clear communication between instructors and REBs and for frameworks like UVic's that clarify the intent of a course-based ethics approval. The following organizations and individual researchers offer persuasive support, above all emphasizing the need for institutional support.

The report *Recommendations for Effective Integration of Ethics and Responsible Conduct of Research (E/RCR) Education into Course-Based Undergraduate Research Experiences* (National Academies, 2021) underscores the importance of multi-stakeholder involvement—including instructors, ethics boards, and students—in cultivating ethical cultures. It emphasizes integrating justice and equity concerns early in research design, mirroring proactive scaffolding of ethics education within courses. Similarly, Diaz-Martinez et al. (2019) presented recommendations from an international meeting of scholars and educators in life sciences who discussed the integration of ethics into course-based undergraduate experiences. The report directly engages with all three TCPS 2 principles. Respect for Persons is promoted through pedagogical strategies that foreground consent, participant autonomy, and transparency. Concern for Welfare is addressed by embedding instruction on data management, confidentiality, and risk mitigation directly into course content. The report emphasizes the importance of equity in access to ethics education, ensuring that all students, regardless of background, receive robust preparation in ethical research. The recommendations also suggest practical teaching tools, faculty training, and curriculum design strategies that can support institutions implementing TCPS 2-compliant course-based research ethics.

Further to the need for shared responsibility, Bouter (2018) highlights the systemic nature of ethical research training. Bouter advocates for coordinated efforts among institutions, instructors, and policy makers to ensure students learn to navigate ethical challenges responsibly. This model of shared responsibility reinforces the need for institutional frameworks like UVic's that embed ethics instruction across curricula, fostering a culture of research integrity.

Finally, in a tangible contribution to communication and clarity of expectations, Bouchard et al. (2024) offer updated guidelines that include comprehensive benchmarks for ethical review of student research that is conducted within college and/or university courses. These guidelines align closely with TCPS 2 principles. They underscore the importance of Respect for Persons, particularly regarding informed consent, student autonomy, and voluntary participation. The authors also highlight institutional obligations to protect both students and participants. They also address the principle of Justice through their recommendations for consistent, equitable procedures across programs and institutions, ensuring all students are held to the same ethical standards regardless of academic discipline. Bouchard et al. strongly suggest that this resource fills a critical gap by clarifying how TCPS 2 principles can and should be applied in course-based contexts.

Embedding ethics early in the curriculum and revisiting it through scaffolded assignments can be a valuable stepping stone in student learning. In collaboration with academic program design and the course instructor, the UVic course-based ethics review framework endeavors to play a crucial part to ensure that students have sufficient knowledge to engage meaningfully with ethical concepts. Faculty development and training on ethics pedagogy also help build instructor confidence and consistency. To address this aim, we highlight the following strengths of the UVic course-based ethics review framework. The framework:

1) **Strengthens collaboration between research ethics boards (REBs) and instructors** to develop clear, flexible guidance that accommodates course-based research assignments.
2) **Encourages the integration of ethics instruction early and often** within academic programs, using diverse modalities such as interviews, surveys, and reflective writing.
3) **Invests in faculty development** to equip instructors with knowledge, tools, and confidence to design and facilitate ethics-rich assignments aligned with social justice and ethical awareness goals.
4) **Responds to diverse research needs** on ethics pedagogy by drawing from a wide range of academic disciplines across the university to enrich practice.

By adopting similar course-based ethics review frameworks, institutions can create a culture that values ethical inquiry as central to academic learning and social responsibility, thus preparing students to conduct research that respects human dignity and promotes justice.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the University of Victoria's course-based ethics review framework as a practical model for embedding social justice and ethical awareness within undergraduate and graduate course-based research assignments. By scaffolding ethical reflection through course-based experiential assignments and decision tools aligned with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, instructors can encourage students' critical understanding of respect, welfare, and justice in research contexts. Practical examples from a variety of academic disciplines demonstrate how experiential ethics learning develops professional competencies and civic responsibility.

Research evidence underscores the effectiveness of the course-based ethics review framework in providing the opportunity to enhance students' ethical reasoning and social justice sensitivity, while also highlighting challenges that require institutional collaboration, faculty development, and student-centered pedagogies. Ultimately, integrating ethics into course design is not merely compliance but a vital educational strategy that cultivates thoughtful, responsible researchers capable of navigating the complexities of contemporary scholarship and community engagement.

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Listening Through Storywork: Source Selection for Erasure Poetry in Decolonial Praxis

Kathleen A. Hare and Gitanjaly Chhabra

Abstract

This reflexive practitioner inquiry examines how we selected Indigenous-authored passages for an erasure poetry activity within an arts-based decolonial praxis. Guided by Jo-ann Archibald's Indigenous Storywork methodology, we approached the sources as living entities. We came to see source selection itself as a form of teaching—foregrounding emotional resonances, identity exploration, and responsibilities. Two key learnings emerged: first, the importance of honoring passages as existing decolonial pedagogy; and second, the necessity of situating our own narratives within pedagogical practices. This account demonstrates how settler educators might take up Indigenous Storywork to encourage ethical relationality in practice.

Introduction

This paper begins with responsibility. As settler educators working in Canadian higher education, we are accountable for promoting sincere engagement with Indigenous knowledges. This responsibility is part of broader commitments to decolonize and Indigenize education (Congress Advisory Committee on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, & Decolonization, 2021), and takes on added significance in classrooms like ours, where many newcomer international students are encountering Canada's colonial realities for the first time. Guiding pedagogical encounters with Indigenous knowledges requires careful attention to how stories/texts are approached, acknowledged, and carried forward. Battiste (2013) importantly reminds us that Indigenous knowledges have long been excluded, appropriated, or fragmented within settler education systems. To work otherwise demands a sustained practice of holistic, relational engagement (Donald et al., 2025).

We focus on a pedagogical experience that stems from this responsibility: an arts-based praxis that invites newcomer international students to consider their role in decolonization. We examine this praxis to reflect on how one pedagogical decision—selecting stories/texts for an erasure poetry activity—surfaced deeper learnings. We wonder:

1) What does it mean for settler educators to approach classroom stories/texts as a site of decolonial responsibility?
2) How do commitments to ethical relationality shape how knowledge is brought forward through Indigenous stories/texts?

To explore these wonderings, we braid together literature, narrative, and practice to carry out a reflexive practitioner inquiry (Dana et al., 2025). We begin by outlining our educator stances and describing the arts-based, decolonial praxis that frames this study. We then engage literature on story/text selection as source materials for erasure poetry, with attention to the extended responsibilities settler educators hold when working with Indigenous-authored stories/texts. We next explain how Archibald's (2008) articulation of Indigenous Storywork guides our selection process, including our initial difficulties in enacting the framework. In particular, we describe how we came to honor source passages as existing decolonial pedagogy and came to situate our own narratives within the praxis. These points structure the discussion that follows, wherein we consider implications for similar pedagogical work.

Through this reflexive inquiry, we present a situated account of how settler educators' decolonial responsibilities can take form through ethical relationality. Drawing from Donald (2016) and Madden (2014), such relations cultivate affirming connections between Indigenous-authored texts and stories, students, educators, and the knowledges generated together to create trust and mutual respect. We invite readers to further consider the conditions under which ethical relationality becomes possible in pedagogy, which can deepen holistic engagement with Indigenous knowledges in higher education.

Reflexive Practitioner Inquiry

As part of our reflexive practitioner inquiry (Dana et al., 2025), we take up our pedagogical practice here as the site of systematic study, generating knowledge through sustained and intentional reflection on what shapes our teaching and learning. Reflexive practitioner inquiry is grounded in the premise that educators are uniquely positioned to investigate their own practice in context, producing situated knowledge that is responsive to the complexities of educational settings (Dana et al., 2025).

A reflexive, applied methodological approach aligns with our overall focus on story/text selection as a pedagogical and decolonial act, where meaning emerges through situated decisions. It also requires an ongoing reflexive stance, wherein we examine how our positions as settler educators shape what we notice, how we interpret responsibility, and how we engage Indigenous knowledges in the classroom. Reflexive practitioner inquiry provides the methodological frame through which we document, interpret, and learn from our practice in this way, and is sustained throughout the sections that follow, including our educator stances, understanding of Indigenous Storywork, and analytic reflections on the story/text selection process.

Our Educator Stances

As reflexive practitioners (Dana et al. 2025), we begin by situating ourselves within the Lands, labor, knowledge, and institutional context of this inquiry (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2019). Our relations and histories inform how we take up Archibald's (2008) Indigenous Storywork and decolonial orientation that guides this work.

Kaye (Kathleen) is a white settler whose family arrived in Canada during early waves of colonial migration. Her schooling was shaped by the naturalized presence of whiteness, Anglo-settler values, and nationalism. As a domestic white faculty member, she benefits from privileges of respect and deference not extended to colleagues of color, while also working to unlearn colonization and white supremacy. She is often questioned about her choice to teach at a private institution primarily serving international students, as though her role there requires justification.

Gitanjaly is a Punjabi woman and recent settler in Canada. Her early education took place in an English-language boarding school run by German and Indian nuns in Northern India, shaped by missionary and colonial systems. As a faculty member with a background similar to many of her students, she navigates expectations to represent Punjabi culture and Sikhism, requests for special treatment, and the complex responsibility of countering racism by modeling academic achievement.

Our differences remain present in this work; we negotiate divergent approaches while building mutual understandings. We are committed to decolonizing higher education by stimulating dialogue and collaboration across cultures and backgrounds in our global classrooms (Wang et al., 2025), while continuing to learn how to be in affirming relations with Indigenous peoples and Lands in Canada. This project reflects our shared effort to approach decolonial teaching with care ethics (Shefer, 2020) and to remain in relation with the questions it raises.

Situating Story/Text Selection for Erasure Poetry

In light of our settler educator responsibilities, we created an arts-based praxis for newcomer international undergraduate students at University Canada West to learn about de/colonization and Indigenous knowledge(s) in Canada. Our institutional Indigenous Action Committee advised on the project. The first half of the two-hour session introduces key concepts such as Indigeneity, holism, and reconciliation, alongside student discussion and curated video materials. Key scholars include Dr. Brooke Madden, Dr. Pam Palmater, and Dr. Taiaiake Alfred. The second hour invites students to reflect on the question: What do you see as newcomers' role in decolonization and reconciliation in Canada? To help engagement with this complex question, students reflect using erasure poetry and discussion. The source/text selection process we reflexively focus on here is grounded in picking materials for use in the erasure poetry activity.

Erasure Poetry

Erasure poetry is a creative practice where an existing text is partially deleted so that the remaining words form a new poem. We understand erasure poetry through Nyman's (2018) framing of it as a practice of double/crossing that disperses meaning across multiple dimensions. In Nyman's framing, erasure is a practice that thickens meaning and makes visible/experiential processes of presence and absence. Schaefer (2024) similarly describes how erasure poems oscillate between presence and absence—retained words, erased marks, and newly created compositions set against the absence of the larger text. We think about this oscillation as a poetic way of attending to what remains, what is removed, and what

is created through processes of de/colonization, reconciliation, reconstruction, and Indigenization. For us, erasure in our decolonial praxis is an embodied and political practice of engaging meaning, power, presence, voice, and memory (Hare, 2021).

Stories/Texts/Sources

The term "text" is often used to describe fixed sources such as policy documents, archival materials, or literary excerpts, whose meanings are shaped through redaction to create erasure poetry (Nyman, 2018). Texts are typically treated as discrete and manipulable, and can be used in whole or in part. For the remainder of this paper, we use the term *source*—what we have referred to as stories/texts to this point—to reflect a broader understanding of these materials. By source, we mean the full works we selected (for example, books), and by source passages we mean the shorter passages drawn from those works used in the praxis. This distinction allows us to name both the integrity of the full work and the partial nature of the excerpts used, while attending to the storied and relational qualities these selections carry.

From a storytelling practice perspective (Galla & Goodwill, 2017), our selections carry teachings, relationships, and responsibilities. In this sense, the sources and source passages are both textual and storied. Like Madden (2019) observes, "stories make space for multiple, nuanced stories of under- and misrepresented peoples and experiences" (para. 10). The source passages orient how students might make meanings of their words and begin to think about ethical relationality.

Selecting Sources

We view source selection as a site of decolonial intervention. Panofsky et al. (2023) remind us that settler educators must stay attentive to both the potential and the pitfalls of engaging Indigenous knowledge systems. Stein et al. (2021) show that decolonization can reproduce colonial logics when Indigenous content is treated as thematic instead of relational. This guided us to see sources as invitations to engage with Indigenous authors, values, and worldviews. We follow Donald's (2016) teaching of ethical relationality, which calls for seeing how all peoples, places, and histories are connected while also respecting their differences. Our stance reflects calls in Canadian education to move beyond "empty metaphors" and toward practices grounded in relationships between humans and more-than-human worlds (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Dion, 2016).

Indigenous Storywork

Recognizing the stakes of this work, we sought guidance from Jo-ann Archibald's (2008) *Indigenous Storywork*. Indigenous Storywork understands stories/sources as engaging the "heart, mind, body, and spirit" (p. 12), offering us a holistic approach and framework to engaging with Indigenous sources in educational contexts. Indigenous Storywork is comprised of seven principles: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy (Archibald, 2008). Following Leddy and Miller (2023), Dlouhy-Nelson and Hanson (2023), and Davidson (2019), who model the use of Indigenous Storywork in settler-colonial institutional settings, we take these principles as teachings. Table 1 outlines the principles in our own words.

Table 1

Principles of Indigenous Storywork

Principle	**Explanation**
Respect	The principle of respect means engaging meaningfully with a story and presenting it in an appropriate context. We understand sources as connected to their origins, cultures, and histories as "living entities" (Archibald, 2008, p. 25).
Responsibility	The principle of responsibility includes ensuring accuracy and cultural appropriateness of the pedagogy. It means to honor the originality of story and its meanings to facilitate an understanding of Indigenous peoples' experiences (Scarcella, 2021).
Reverence	The principle of reverence emphasizes approaching stories with respect and with the intention of building deeper connections. Engagement can work well when approached with care, emphasizing respect and dialogue (Hickey & Riddle, 2024).
Reciprocity	The principle of reciprocity focuses on the multi-directional passing and sharing of knowledge with peoples and communities via the project. Drawing from Battiste (2010), we see it as focusing on giving back in ways that can encourage the uptake of Indigenous knowledges.
Holism	The principle of holism focuses on the interconnections of the ecosystem such as Land, memory, peoples, knowledge, and culture. Holism reminds us that decolonial issues affect all parts of ourselves (Battiste, 2013).
Interrelatedness	The principle of interrelatedness emphasizes placing oneself in the story and recognizing that stories are part of a larger culture connected to many others.
Synergy	The principle of synergy emphasizes creating deeper understandings of stories and recognizing that multiple perspectives can expand meaning, while remaining unique. It involves a holistic connection of mind, body, and healing. We see synergy growing naturally rather than by force.

Note: Adapted from Archibald, 2008.

Process and Praxis: Selecting Sources with Indigenous Storywork

With this understanding of Archibald's (2008) Indigenous Storywork, we now reflexively examine how these principles were engaged during our source selection process. This process included identifying the books (sources), reading the books together, and then selecting the final source passages. Along the way, we also worked through challenges and developed guiding questions to navigate pedagogical decisions.

In narrating this work, we interweave two reflections as negotiated, relational, and epistemologically meaningful (Clandinin, 2019), with lived experience taken up as a central site of inquiry. Kaye reflects on source book selection; together, we reflect on working as a team; and then Gitanjaly reflects on source passage selection. These reflections function as analytic moments within this inquiry, including how we encountered, interpreted, and worked through challenges as settler educators, guided by Indigenous Storywork. Like Kuly (2021) writes, "story-based pedagogy lives in the gap between self and other" (p. 235). These reflections share how we lived within that gap and may resonate with educators working through similar responsibilities in other contexts.

We would like to clarify that this reflexive inquiry does not draw on classroom artifacts or student reflections (i.e., participant data). While we hold an institutional ethics approval for the larger study (University Canada West REB – 202416), the present inquiry is based on our own reflections. These reflections were initially captured through our planning notes, online chat discussions, and memories, in alignment with Dana et al. (2025). Our analytic approach is iterative, returning to these materials to trace how meaning evolved over time. The events presented here have been reconstructed as narrative accounts (Clandinin, 2019).

The Source Books

For the sources, we decided to foreground the voices of Indigenous authors and to create openings for contesting colonial discourses (Masta & Grant-Ashbaugh, 2025) by working with memoir or related work. Other possibilities we considered included policy documents, the *Indian Act*, and political speeches. As protocol for deciding what specific materials to bring into the praxis, we followed the First People's Principles of Learning (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2007). Accordingly, we decided to use published documents to ensure that what we brought into the praxis has been intentionally shared by Indigenous authors for broader dissemination and learning, aligning our use with the purposes for which the works were originally made available. This decision became more significant as we considered the historical de-valuing of Indigenous knowledges. Battiste (2013) shows how settler-colonial education systems suppress Indigenous epistemologies through assimilationist narratives centered on Euro-Western texts. Attending to this context, we worked to pick passages from four source books written by young Indigenous people living in Canada, whose works bring forward knowledge and experiences in ways that are both personal and pedagogical. In Table 2, we give a brief overview of each source book.

Table 2

Source Books for Passage Selection

Title	Author	Genre/Story Form	Summary
Making Love with the Land	Joshua Whitehead Oji-Cree, a member of Peguis First Nation in Treaty 1 territory, Manitoba	Essay collection	Explores Indigeneity, queerness, mental health, and the connection between Land and body through personal and cultural reflections on healing and storytelling.
Bad Cree	Jessica Johns Nehiyaw (Cree), a member of Sucker Creek First Nation in Treaty 8 territory, northern Alberta	Novel (literary horror)	Blends horror and reality as a Cree woman navigates grief and memory through vivid dreams that connect her to her family's past, guided by the spiritual.
Half-Bads in White Regalia	Cody Caetano Anishinaabe and Portuguese, with Anishinaabe roots from Saugeen First Nation, Ontario	Memoir	A funny and poignant reflection on growing up as an Indigenous and Portuguese child in a complex family, exploring identity, survival, and the complexities of relations.
A Mind Spread Out on the Ground	Alicia Elliott Tuscarora, a member of the Six Nations of the Grand River, Ontario	Essay collection	Examines colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and mental health in Indigenous communities by weaving personal experiences with broader social and scholarly insights.

Note: Summaries adapted from the published works by Whitehead (2022), Johns (2023), Caetano (2022), and Elliott (2019).

Kaye's Story: Why These Books?

My storywork began with a question about the source books—asked by an Indigenous Advisory Committee member when consulting on the praxis development: "Why these stories or books?" I thanked her and admitted it was an oversight to not include this reasoning in the original praxis, and then committed to adding the content. I thought she was asking about the books' suitability for decolonial teaching and learning. So, I added longer author bios, fuller book summaries, and learner prompts to show how I connected the books to the praxis and why they were pedagogically justifiable.

We consulted again. And I was surprised when she asked the same question. I thought I had answered it. But this time, she asked differently. She asked: "Why these specific stories? Why did you think they were the right books for the workshop? Were they just any books?" In a synergistic moment, I realized she wasn't asking about the appropriateness of the books; she was asking about my/our relationships with them.

This time, I explained that these books came from years of personal reading, part of my own effort to learn about colonization and Indigenous voice in Canada. About five years ago, I started to think much more seriously about what colonization meant to me. My ancestors were part of the earliest waves of colonial settlement in Canada, and because of that, my family and I have benefited a great deal—through Land, wealth, and opportunities that continue to shape our lives today. It is not an easy thing to sit with, knowing that so much of what I have comes because others were displaced and harmed. To let that discomfort start to change the way I understood my own history, I decided to read stories written by Indigenous people who were close to my age, but whose lives unfolded in very different relationships to Canada's borders. I wanted to understand what it meant for them to grow up on these same Lands, during the same years I was alive. That is where the memoir-style books came from.

The books I chose for the project were ones that stayed with me long after I had finished them. I did not read them with this project in mind. But when the time came to select sources, I thought of them. As the person on the project who was more familiar with Canadian literature, I felt a sense of reciprocity and responsibility to bring forward what I had already been learning. Choosing these books as sources was a way of carrying my own reading into the shared work of teaching and learning with others.

Finally, the books were also the stories within which I saw the students we teach. At our institution, I often find myself as the only white person in a room of international students from the Global South. Teaching in those rooms, I feel the weight of my position in a new way, especially when those students are coming to terms with the hard reality of experiencing Canada as it really is, not as the glossy version promoted to them by a recruiter. I also listen to students dealing with being pulled in different directions, toward home and away from home, while trying to create a new home. I try to hold reverence for the connections I hear in students' liminality—stories of leaving their homes in search of safety or opportunity, while still longing for a reality where leaving their Lands would not have been necessary. And like in the passages from these sources below, I see moments, tensions, recognitions as students try to conform to colonialized academia in Canada with the hope they will one day stay here for a different future, although coming to realize it all might just be temporary.

Source Passage One

In my diaspora class we often talked about the experience of diaspora: remembering your past in your former home and constantly measuring it against your present in your current home, knowing you can never again re-enter the time and space you left, knowing you have lost access to that possible future forever, knowing your home will change without you, knowing you will change without your home—and knowing, in some instances, none of that was your choice. Jamison wasn't exactly right. There aren't only two ways to consider a place. It isn't just about those who choose to be there and those who don't. What about those who had never chosen not to be there? What about those who were forced out?

Alicia Elliott
A Mind Spread Out on the Ground

Fig. 1: Direct excerpt from Elliott, 2019, formatted to mirror the printed activity materials used during the workshop.

Source Passage Two

Without borders of genre or form, we reclaim the sovereignty of story, the orality of voice, for richer soils of decolonization—and can posit ourselves as ancestors in the making, while ancestrally speaking too. We are inheritors of story, even when these are found in the wound or the rupture, and our concepts of temporality posit us as speakers to that which we might consider the dead or forgotten. We are forever positioned in the rich membrane between material and immaterial worlds.

Joshua Whitehead
Making Love with the Land

Fig. 2: Direct excerpt from Whitehead, 2022, formatted to mirror the printed activity materials used during the workshop.

Reading Together and Encountering Challenges

With the source books selected, we entered the next phase of identifying source passages. Our idea was to build pedagogical relations through mutually understanding the stories in their wholeness. We wanted to consider together how passages might guide us—and our praxis participants—toward decolonial thinking, teaching, and learning. In this, we were guided by Kuly's (2021) reminder that "the strength of stories challenges me to think, to examine my emotional reactions . . . to question and reflect on my behaviours and future actions, and to appreciate a story's connection to my spiritual nature" (p. 235).

We began with a series of collaborative reading sessions in which we engaged each text as a whole. Our original intention was to co-select passages iteratively through discussion, sharing impressions, interpretations, and embodied responses. Yet after several sessions, many parts of the stories had been discussed, but only one excerpt had been identified. While we understood that getting lost in meaning is part of working with story, the process had stalled.

This stalling reminded us of how easily settler educators can fall back into familiar pedagogical habits, even when committed to engaging differently (Kerr & Adamov Ferguson, 2021). Assessing what was happening, we recognized that our focus had become overly fixed on locating a "good excerpt" rather than staying present with the stories. As settlers still learning to think holistically—beyond linear objectives or thematic categories—we had become disoriented. We had lost sight of the methodological and epistemological commitments of Indigenous Storywork.

Converging via Questions

To move differently, we returned to Archibald's framework and supporting literature to figure out how we might structure our engagement in a way that remained accountable to Indigenous Storywork, while also having more familiar direction for our process. Guided by Kovach's (2009) insight that "story is a relational process, and it is the relational that brings meaning to individual experience" (p. 94), we decided to develop some guiding questions to support and focus our continued reading. Through discussion, we came up with three questions that we felt flowed to and from the seven principles:

1) What does the story do?
2) What does it call us to consider, carry, or hold?
3) Who are we in relation to this story, and what responsibilities arise from that relation?

These questions helped clarify our orientation to the texts and provided a consistent structure for identifying source passages. This helped us span the epistemological gap we were encountering and allowed us to make our selections with greater clarity and care.

We paused the collaborative sessions and each applied the questions individually, in our own time, to the readings. We decided that we would each focus first on sections that spoke to us directly. This process helped create conditions for more situated engagements. When we later reunited as a duo to share the source passages we had selected, we found that they held strong relational resonances with each other.

While we had anticipated needing to revise or co-select again, the passages aligned in ways that required no further changes. We had selected 12 source passages that we believed would work well for the project holistically and individually.

The Source Passages

To help explain the source passage selection process, Gitanjaly shares a reflection from this time and how she drew on Indigenous Storywork alongside our three guiding questions above.

Gitanjaly's Story: Why These Passages?

Stories are ways to connect and cultivate collaborative understanding which create relatability, empathy, new perspectives, and compassion. I was introduced to these source books by my dear friend and colleague, Kaye. I had to select source passages, one or two from each text. Selecting source passages was not a process of a conscious effort of analyzing it from the standpoint of relevance, authority, date, accuracy, or reason for writing (Mandalios, 2013). It grew out of my interest to explore these texts for our praxis.

While reading these texts, I was naturally drawn to certain passages. At times, I felt like the stories were mine. At other times, they felt like the stories of all of us—those of us who have been colonized, decolonized, those who long to explore the world, to connect with our cultures, to find ourselves. The way I selected passages emerged organically. It aligned closely with Archibald's (2008) Indigenous Storywork, especially her principle of holism. I experienced the stories as part of a larger, interconnected whole.

In asking what the story does, my line of thinking engaged with the story's emotional context of how some experiences in life shape an individual's state of calming self. How a biological requirement of a body to sleep is hampered or altered due to our spectrum of extreme emotions. How similar all our experiences are: me as an immigrant myself, Indigenous peoples, and our international students; each one of us carrying our unique stories yet shared varied experiences. That resonated deeply with me, as I am very emotional. It reminded me how all of us are together—how we all carry stories, and, sometimes, how we all struggle to sleep in our stories.

In considering what the story calls me to carry, hold, and attend to, engaging with the story's relational context, it made me repeat the idea that nothing exists in isolation. There is an understanding that as humans we are all interconnected, irrespective of any borders that may humanly separate us; the Indigenous voices, my experiences, my colleague's/co-author's experiences, and our students' experiences are all connected in some way or another. We are holism. Our existence is an understanding of being in relational context with each other. As I reflected on who I was in relation to the story, I found myself wondering how my own disturbed sleep connects me to others who also lie awake, just staring up at the sky in a similar situation.

Source Passage Three

At first, I have trouble falling asleep. I toss and turn on the blow-up mattress, now somewhat deflated from a couple of days' use. I turn on a podcast on my phone, but the voices grate in my ears until I turn it off. Finally, I stop trying to force myself into sleep and just lie there. I look out at the stars from my mattress and think about Sabrina skipping across the sky.

Jessica Johns
Bad Cree: A Novel

Fig. 3: Direct excerpt from Johns, 2023, formatted to mirror the printed activity materials used during the workshop.

Engaging with these words, emotions, and experiences, I wanted to create a more action-oriented, ethical, and responsible synergy with the ecosystem. Therefore, we carried these passages to our workshops, where the students connected with the Indigenous voices while finding their own voices. These passages carried forward the Indigenous voices, knowledges, cultures, echoes across generations, and my vicarious experiences. When taken to the classroom these passages blended the Indigenous identities, my identity, and mirrored the consideration of Indigenous founding (Worrell, 2024).

Source Passage Four

Your story is the one thing in life that is truly yours. Story is what red-rovers us to one another, spirit to spirit. Everything has a little bit of story in it, even the changing weather and birdsong, even big team battles and trampoline sessions. Story is what happens when we fall in the thrall of the Play-Doh of it all and feverishly reach for life. Story is what transforms us through the lush valleys of becoming, rolling around in the gutters of raw, pure energy. The afterimage of good living. Story happens when you spear the future tense and embrace yourself for the robot invasions, increasing temperatures, and troll-filled dungeons that the Creator will task you with surmounting, on the roadside trails that open your skin, in the gardens you mend, around fires that spider your hot dogs, in your video game and movie marathons.

Cody Caetano
Half-Bads in White Regalia: A Memoir

Fig. 4: Direct excerpt from Caetano, 2022, formatted to mirror the printed activity materials used during the workshop.

Learning via Storyworks

Reflecting further on what this practitioner inquiry may offer other settler educators or allied scholars, two central learnings have emerged. We agree with Archibald's (2008) idea that the story and the process of storywork can become the teacher. Indeed, it is from this orientation that we developed our guiding questions. These questions emerged from the principles and served as a way for us, as settlers, to make sense of and work with them in ways meaningful to us.

What we had initially viewed as a preparatory step—the process of source selection—became a significant site of learning. It shaped how we understood our responsibilities in the project, how we approached ethical relationality in our pedagogy, and how we felt ready to invite students to create decolonial erasure poetry.

Learning 1

To detail our first learning, we return to the challenges detailed in the "Reading Together and Encountering Challenges" section. We had set out to read together, identify resonant moments for decolonial learnings, and co-select passages. The process was organized, intentional, and slow, but after several sessions, we had chosen only one passage. What we were doing did not feel right. As Coyle (2023) also describes, erasure poetry can replicate hierarchical reading practices when sources are shaped to meet external aims without attending to where the story comes from and what it carries.

Returning to Indigenous Storywork, we recognized that our process had begun to treat sources as material for shaping later teaching, rather than recognizing them as already "living" and "being" teaching and learning (Archibald, 2008). As Popp (2018) shows, texts teachers select—and how they frame them—shape students' epistemological access to the discipline. Still, we had assumed we needed to make that connection explicit when this was unnecessary. Said in the context of our inquiry, the erasure poems begin long before the first word is blacked out. Decolonial work already exists within Indigenous histories that birth contemporary stories. The ethical relationality of the praxis was not bounded by our decisions of what to include and how learners might make meanings. Each passages could be synergistically taken up as an opening for reflection and holistic connection.

With this recognition, the pressure eased. Our task shifted to finding passages that captured our attention and letting them teach. This was supported by returning to the questions we had developed, which helped us stay with what the stories were doing and how we were positioned in relation to them. We are not teaching decolonization and Indigenization through the praxis; we are decolonizing to enable Indigenization to happen.

This realization also deepened an earlier decision. We were engaged with sources that extended beyond the limits of "text" and into story. Although the literature distinguishes this, we had not dwelled on its significance. Through the process, we came to understand why it matters. Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) write that decolonial research requires rethinking "how we come to know, whose knowledges are recognized, and how we are implicated in their use" (p. 3). Indeed, Indigenous stories require a different

orientation. They are authored, situated, and often rooted in lived experience, Land, and memory. In using the term "source" as settler educators to name these stories, we are connotating something grounding and something teaching. A source Indigenous story need not be conceptualized as a product tailored for our uptake and use; it is an offering for many meanings to be made.

Learning 2

Our second learning developed alongside the first: our own stories matter. At the beginning, we thought staying in the background would show respect. We thought that minimizing our presence would demonstrate respect and protect the integrity of the Indigenous stories we were working with. We have seen many a settler (normally white) discuss their settler history, views, and identities at length in efforts to decolonize, in ways that overtake and fill learning spaces to the edge. But as Archibald (2008) states, "the story cannot be separated from the storyteller, the listener, or the context; all are part of the storywork" (p. 15). Our histories, perspectives, and meanings were already shaping how we approached the sources, which passage we found suitable, and how we talked about their relevance. Returning to the questions—particularly in asking who we are in relation to the story—made this shaping more visible to us. Bringing our narratives into the process via Indigenous Storywork principles allowed us to acknowledge our roles, take responsibility for their effects, and engage in reciprocity.

Naming our presence also helped us remain accountable to the ethical relationality guiding our praxis. As Kerr and Adamov Ferguson (2021) explain, engaging stories requires "being present to the way story reaches us, affects us" (p. 94). Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) further note that critical reflexivity must extend to "the web of relationships that enable and constrain research" (p. 4). Speaking from our own stories made those relationships visible and allowed us to work more transparently. This also then carried into how we engaged passages pedagogically, inviting learners to consider their own place within these relations.

Listening, in this sense, required more than hearing the words on the page. As Archibald (2008) explains, "listening to stories involves more than hearing words; it requires taking up responsibilities that flow from what the story teaches" (p. 23). We realized that sharing our own stories where they fit was not a distraction from respect, but part of what the stories were asking of us.

Taken together, these two learnings—about the stories as already living pedagogy and about storying our own presence in praxis—reshaped how we, as settler educators, understood source selection. As settler educators, we focused on creating a space where we could rethink what we know and envision what could be (Calderón, 2024). The stories and passages have pointed us toward ideas, feelings, and not-yet-materialized moments that are still calling us to stay longer, to return, or to begin again. We carry forward the understanding that not all meanings have yet arrived, and there may be conversations about more sleepless nights.

Conclusion

Indigenous Storywork is, as Archibald (2008) reminds us, "a decolonial methodology" that reclaims voice, honors relationships, and affirms the knowledge systems that colonialism has sought to erase (p. 371). In this project, what first appeared as a preparatory step became a site of teaching in itself. Guided holistically by Indigenous Storywork, through this reflexive practitioner inquiry, we came to understand the sources as already-living pedagogy, carrying teachings and responsibilities shaping how we engaged.

Our learnings align with Archibald's (2008) reminder that both the stories and the processing of those stories matter. This also echoes Donald's (2016) framing of ethical relationality, which calls us into pedagogical encounters grounded in trust, reciprocity, and respect. Taken together, these teachings shifted our role as settler educators. Our task was not to frame the stories into pedagogical use, but to remain present with them through story, accountable to what they asked of us, and open to the ways they shaped our relations with students and with each other. As Archibald (2008) writes, "the power of storywork to make meaning derives from a synergy between the story, the context in which the story is used, the way that the story is told, and how one listens to the story" (p. 84). We offer this account as one example of how storywork can guide teaching, reminding us the many ways Indigenizing curricula requires ongoing commitment.

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The "Teacher" in the Classroom: A Personal Self-Study With Photographs

Stephanie Ho

Abstract

This article illustrates a reflective experiment of analyzing the teacher self through personal photographs. While performing an observational study within my secondary English classroom, I embarked on my own exploration of my teacher identity and its relationship to my practice. I open the article by discussing my data collection procedures and discussion of artefacts from my recent past. I then discuss my sorting process with treating my data, as well as my methods of categorization and meaning-making with regards to my photograph collections. I conclude this article with curatorial statements, which highlight my personal engagement of self, expressed through these photographic moments.

Introduction

This self-study displays my engagement with photographs to discover messages about my teaching practice. During the 2019–20 school year, I engaged in an experimental journey within my secondary English Language Arts (ELA) class. As part of my doctoral study, I aimed to explore the impact of Surrealist-inspired pedagogical approaches in contemporary English classrooms. Concurrent to my period of observation and engagement within the classroom, I embarked on a personal study of the teacher self. This article details my self-study journey, where I examined a collection of personal pictures captured during my period of observation. I began with a hunch that my/the teacher self is not isolated from the confines of the classroom. Teaching and learning comprise experience, which involves a constant, "transactional" (Rosenblatt, 1994) interplay of exchanges. If, as I had wondered, a valuable relationship could be forged between the private and professional aspects of teaching, more could possibly be discovered in unlocking potential for both. I isolated an often-disregarded data set, which I had amassed with little to no regard to research. Picture-taking, and by extension, memory-making, has become automatized, instinctual, and sometimes ephemeral, by virtue of important shifts in photo-capturing technologies. This normalized practice of committing moments to (digital) memory using handheld devices has become woven into the lives of everyday citizens, including teachers. Therefore, these seemingly innocent pictures could in fact serve as valuable nuggets of identity—and, for my purposes, the teacher identity with and outside of the classroom. By shifting my gaze to the personal, intimate confines of the teacher self, I hoped to discover how even the most suppressed, subconscious desires or tendencies could work to shape the events of a classroom.

My Positionality in Self-Study

My act of self-study involved examination of my personal teaching practice. This act constitutes an autobiographical engagement, as I actively questioned myself, my teaching practice, and the complex web of contextual factors that affected its creation and continued evolution. In a sense, I envisioned my self-study to involve an exploration of self with and within others. The Surrealist methods of calling into question established norms, which are reflected through archetypal characters and thematic arcs in literature, therefore helped to inform my exploration. At the time of my research study, I experienced some frustration as an educator, sensing that I was not accessing students' full levels of potential in experiencing and engaging with textual themes. I wondered whether or not my role as an ELA teacher involved teaching students codes and cues to recognize in literature, which would serve as reference points throughout their academic and cultural pursuits, rather than opening doors to aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1994) experiences of engagement and meaning-making. My researcher self therefore aimed to support this teaching dilemma, by exploring teaching methods which expose and question our current methods of reading and understanding texts in a specific manner. Surrealism embraces experimentation, with the belief that multiple reality is a construct, and experience is personal and multifaceted. I therefore aimed, through my self-study, to discover how this method of openness could bolster our shared experiences with art (and life) within the classroom (and beyond).

Data Collection: Photographic Inquiry and Self-Study of Practice

Theoretical Framework for Photographic Inquiry

Mitchell and Weber (1999) presented different strategies for doing memory work in the process of engaging in self-study. One of these strategies included the examination of photographs, which in the case of the authors, consisted of school-themed pictures (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 74). This observation illuminates the degree to which capturing moments is a natural part of our lives, but also how we often do not contemplate how these moments can be placed together to form a continuing story. Teresa Strong-Wilson (2008) described the process of memory work in self-study to constitute an excavation of artefacts from our personal pasts (p. 22). The process of remembering the events of one's past also involves re-experiencing these memories anew, "such that remembering becomes an event" (Strong-Wilson, 2008, p. 78).

Data Collection: Photographic Inquiry and Self-Study of Practice

Collecting Photographs to Collect the World: Bringing Theory into Focus

Susan Sontag (2008) noted that "to collect photographs is to collect the world" (p. 1). To amass a collection of photos could therefore suggest one's "imaginary possession of [the] past" (Sontag, 2008, p. 6). By producing a photograph, an individual is transforming an experience into a tangible object. Sontag's collector, whom she compared to a tourist, reacts to the stimuli of the world by committing it to film. These

moments, now encapsulated in physical form, serve as evidence of past moments (Sontag, 2008, p. 6), but also evoke the collector's positioning within the world. Eric Freedman (2011) recalled Sontag's (2008) metaphor of the photographer as tourist, suggesting how an emphasis on "gaze" (Freedman, 2011, p. 2) could illuminate the specific sociopolitical context, as well as the personal motivations behind photographing an event. The author's focus on the photograph as an individual's engagement with (and creation of) experience invites a contemplation of self. Therefore, within my self-study, I assumed the position of the collector tourist, whose own personal collection is the object of scrutiny. I chose to use photographs captured on my personal iPhone, as this device has been an instrumental tool in the collection process. Without even realizing it, collection has become a part of my everyday routine, as my access to this documenting, certifying technology has allowed (or caused) me to become a tourist in my own life. I wonder whether or not the intimate relationship I have with my mobile phone has allowed for the "image" of creating experiences (passive collecting), while enabling me to delay the reflection required to render these experiences personal. I frequently find myself exercising Sontag's (2008) conceptualization of tourism photography: "stop, take a photograph, and move on" (p. 7).

Still Life of Moments: A Self-Study With iPhone

I divided my self-study process into two distinct phases: Preparing and Playing. The Preparing phase involved processing the wealth of data that contributed to my study, making it manageable to start my act of play. The Playing phase followed the initial preparation process where I developed an organized system to access and categorize my pictures. However, it is worth noting that I employed a certain level of play when initially viewing the data and categorizing it into sections. Similar to Bridget Campbell (2017), who was inspired by Anastasia Sameras (2011), my phases of collection and analysis were at times fluid, as the physical collection (and preparation) of the data required reflective thought and experimentation (play) (Campbell, 2017).

Data Collection and Analysis, Phase One: Preparing

The Preparing Phase Process

Phase 1: Preparing

1) Managing my 9000+ photo corpus
2) Creating folders using Photos application (according to the months of the study)
3) Creating albums using the triaged photos in folders (according to thematic sub-categories)

I began my experiment with over 9000 photos stored on the Photos application of my mobile phone. It appears that while my personal photo-taking habits have produced a number of souvenirs (Sontag, 2008), I have been somewhat of a packrat tourist (Freedman, 2011). I noticed that my souvenir collection displayed little rhyme or reason, and the sole organization markers were the date and location stamps from the phone application. I was reminded of more traditional practices of sifting through photographs; but rather than viewing neatly displayed albums, I was working with a cardboard box in which photos had been haphazardly tossed, with their contexts and sensibilities mixed to create a nebulous non-narrative. I decided that in order for me to begin any form of meaningful analysis, I would need to break down the wealth of data within my collection. Katie MacEntee (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019) also began with a large collection of over 200 photographs before selecting 20 units for her photo-elicitation interviews with preservice teachers. I also noticed that while the mobile phone's casual ease of use makes "capturing" extremely efficient (Freedman, 2011), "processing" on the same device is rather challenging. My phone accompanies me through all parts of my day, yet I experienced difficulties in manipulating the data using this compact "life" device. I equated this discomfort with attempting to re-organize photographs or documents that have already been placed within folders or albums. The messy level of play that I intended to do required the photos to be pulled out of their folders and sprawled out on the kitchen table; for my purposes, the kitchen table was the Photos application on my computer.

I decided to create albums within the Photos application, which I dated according to the respective months of my study. I acknowledge that, unlike some other self-study practitioners, my process did not involve leafing through paper photographs that may be stained, faded, or creased. All of my photographs were taken in high definition, and some of them, which is the case with Live photos, could actually move. However, I argue that transferring pictures from my mobile Camera Roll (Photos application) to the larger display of my computer's Photos application rendered them more "tangible." While I could still not touch these moments as I would a creased and stained photograph, viewing them outside of my day-to-day context of the mobile phone, side-by-side on the flat tabletop of the computer screen, invited me to notice different forms of wear-and-tear. This involved the ways in which the pictures were structured, the content that was included and excluded, and the emotions behind the static frames; in other words, I aimed to explore the challenges and overall "life" that these souvenirs weathered.

I also noticed that despite having access to my photograph collection at all times via my mobile phone, there were certain pictures that I knew particularly well. These photographs, such as those from my December 2019 family trip to New York, have been studied, examined, discussed, and shared many times over. This sharing would take place via our family WhatsApp group chat, where my parents and I would continue to relive our shared New York memories long after our return. These memories elicit positive feelings and reflect a "self" that I have taken comfort in revisiting, possibly when I need reminders that she exists. At the same time, there are other pictures that may have existed alongside my New York family photographs in my mobile Camera Roll, which I have possibly never revisited. These "passing" moments form the content that I scroll past on a regular basis to access the "important" memories. For my self-study, I aimed to stop and pay attention to these passing, fleeting moments. Everything contained in my Camera Roll constituted something that I felt needed to be committed to film. As Sontag (2008) referred to photo-capturing as a practice of note-taking, these notes, as insignificant as they may have

seemed, could have revealed something about myself. This self-study formed a move against my regular act of passive scrolling. By being able to swipe past dozens of pictures at once, I have caused these fleeting moments to flee faster and faster. I therefore aimed to stop the scrolling and the spinning, in order to bring these moments into focus. I attempted to approach these photographs with an open perspective, trying as hard as possible to move beyond my existing ideas of my personal self. I also noticed that my memory would at times deceive me when it came to the ordering of my memories. I found it interesting how the narrative I internalized of “what happened” sometimes stood in conflict with the reality of the date stamps and ordering of the Photos application.

Another notable element of my self-study process involved careful omissions. While I aimed, when performing the initial transfer (from one device to another) to process an authentic collection of moments, I did remove certain moments from my data set. I recognize that any omission from my collection could raise questions in terms of validity, as my set could presumably not represent “reality.” However, I made the categoric choice to remove photos that contained inappropriate or compromising content. This resulted only in the omission of around ten photos over the duration of the entire study. For my current purposes, as those items have not been treated as data, I still asked myself the question about what this act of omission could reveal. Was I feeling shame or remorse with regards to the content of the pictures? Regardless, this act revealed, to me, the tenuous and subjective nature of constructing an image of self. Even on a quest for discovering an “authentic” idea of self, it appears I still felt compelled to doctor my ways of seeing.

After having placed my photographs in the folders that were categorized by month, I created a separate set of folders, or as the Photos application aptly names them, “albums.” I titled these new folders according to my themes of exploration: Significant Life Events, Failures, Sources of Inspiration, and Questioning. I developed these themes while engaging in the “preparing” phase of my photographic experience. Threads would arise as I encountered and sorted pictures, thus prompting me to establish clear areas for analytical exploration. My manipulation and movement of the pictures within the Photos application on my computer formed my attempt at creating some structure within this large collection, which would make it easier to treat and eventually contemplate. I used bolded headings for the four folders designated toward my themes of exploration in order to easily differentiate the folders from the others, which were sorted by date. When selecting pictures for the respective categories (themes), I would view the photographs from a specific month before moving onto another. In addition to viewing the photographs one month at a time, I also filtered through the months by addressing one theme at a time. This is to say that when addressing the September 2019 collection, I would filter through the photographs with the singular lens of “Significant Life Events.” I would collect the photographs that applied to this category within the September 2019 folder, and drop them into the folder for this theme. I would then move on to a second observation of the September 2019 collection, with the observational lens of “Failures.” I would continue this system for all of the categories of exploration, before moving on to the next month. I would repeat this system twice for the entire collection. This means that the photograph collection for each month of the study would have been viewed eight times, through the lens of four guiding themes.

I noticed that my first round of viewing the pictures resembled the writing of first drafts (Mitchell & Weber, 1999). The process was instinctual and rather quick, as I did not stop to reflect too strongly on how a photograph corresponded to a specific theme, but rather, collected pictures that stood out to me (within the context of a given observational lens). For my second viewing, I was more scrutinizing, and moved through the pictures with a closer, slower eye. I had already been exposed to the collection once, allowing me to form a working understanding of its collective messages. These understandings shaped the ways in which I viewed the collection for a second time, and I argue that while the first viewing was based on instinct, the second viewing was based on logic. I also noticed that certain themed folders were far easier to fill, such as Significant Life Events. Others, such as Failures, or Questioning, were more abstract and I found myself needing to "read into" the pictures and their contexts a little more when addressing these themes. These challenges and moments of contemplation speak, once again, to the fluid nature of my self-study process, and how even in the Preparing phase, I was engaging in some thoughtful play. The categorization of pictures was a key component of my study, as placing a photo into a category meant it would be read as part of a specific collection. That collection would form a narrative based on the messages it revealed about my personal self. Jon Prosser and Dona Schwartz noted that "researcher-generated photographs are subjective visual records of an event [which] represent the photographer's individual viewpoint and what he or she considered of value to document" (2003, as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019). This observation suggests the careful decisions that lie behind the presentation of a photograph collection, as evidenced in the work of Mary Cullinan (2019), and how organization can form far more than a logistical task (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019).

Data Analysis, Phase Two: Exploring Personal Photographs (Playing)

My analysis of personal photographs constituted an act of photo elicitation (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019). MacEntee (2019, as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019), used photo elicitation methods when conducting interviews of preservice teachers involved in a series of participatory, arts-based workshops called YAKP (youth as knowledge producers). Just as my research data included a selection of photographs from a larger collection, MacEntee selected her sample from a bank of images taken during the YAKP workshop period. MacEntee (2019, as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019) "hoped the pictures would help jog [participants'] memories of events from several years earlier" (p. 39). She used these photographs as prompts for memory elicitation and discussion, as Benoit (2016) used images as triggers for personal memories. As well, MacEntee's use of recent photographs, taken during the time period of a particular event, mirrored my use of personal images taken concurrent with my classroom observations. MacEntee (2019, as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019) also noted that "looking at the photographs elicited a looking forward to consequences of participating in [the workshops] since the project had ended" (p. 38). Similarly, D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly (2000, as cited in Campbell, 2017) noted, "bringing . . . memories forward [involves] going backward, forward, inwards and outwards" (p. 33), as the researcher attempts to examine moments within their narrative contexts and complexes. This means that while my chosen images spoke to specific spaces in time, their implications and constructions elicited discussions on the stories that surrounded them.

I divided my photograph analysis process into phases, as I did with the photograph collection process. My phases for analysis were Isolating, Meaning Making, and Synthesis. The Isolating phase involved extracting thematic strands of inquiry from my collections, while the Meaning Making phase involved attempting to make meaning of these strands. The Synthesis phase involved summing up the understandings that were established in the previous phases, in an attempt to unite the collections and form cohesive messages on my personal self. Campbell (2017), in her doctoral thesis, frequently noted the questions she asked herself as she moved through the research process. These personal inquiries paved the way for further exploration and the formation of overarching research questions. Essentially, Campbell has made explicit the “hunches” and musings that guided her toward the tangible research goals she pursued in her study. As such, I shaped my photograph analysis phase around a series of personal questions, starting with a hunch and moving toward a research question, or goal, for my exploration of images. Before embarking on my exploration of photographs, I had the hunch that my Camera Roll was more personal than it appeared. I therefore asked myself the question, “how could my everyday photos say something about me?” This question prompted me to form photograph collections, upon which I performed a thematic analysis.

Isolating: What Do I See “Again and Again” in This Collection?

Similar to Benoit’s (2016) categorization process, I reviewed my four photograph collections and isolated thematic threads based on emotional responses, reflective understandings, and the people in my life. Unlike Benoit (2016), the content of my photographs did not follow an established structure.[1] Therefore, I also paid close attention to the content I chose to include, the circumstances in which it was included, and, likewise, what was omitted from my images. I feel this close photographic analysis (Mitchell & Weber, 1999), involving an analysis of content as well as my aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1994) engagement with it, has been conducive to a meaningful exploration of self. I adopted Benoit’s (2016) approach of holistic thematic analysis by isolating four recurrent themes in my collections: Food, Art and Beautiful Things; Prominent People; Festivity and Celebrations; and Triumphs. “Food, Art and Beautiful Things” was a theme I developed in response to my abundant images of food. Whether it be food produced by me, or something I ate outside of the home, I evidently displayed a fascination with food in all of my collections. From going to restaurants or watching television cooking shows, food has always formed content that is calming, comforting, and inherently associated with pleasure. This concept of abundance and luxury, somewhat bordering on obsession, permeates my teaching practice and passion for storytelling within the curriculum; in other words, to me, the curriculum is a narrative. “Prominent People” is a category that was inspired by Benoit’s (2016) theme of “Teachers and Supervisors.” While certain people were recurrent in my images, others came and left. I also charted the absence of certain figures and felt the presence of these “ghosts” (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 86) revealed some important aspects of my own personal self. I have come to realize that the characters of my life have impacted the manner in which I shape my stories within the classroom. These people and experiences have also affected the manner in which I build relationships and feel the need to protect my students. “Festivity and Celebration” was a theme that was intended to address my love for celebration. I have never been a person who enjoys crowds or large gatherings, and have always preferred intimate spaces and moments.

However, upon examining my photograph collections, my longstanding personal identification as an introvert became slightly complicated. I noticed that, as with food, celebration and festivity was an outlet I used to bond with others and create experiences. I bring abundant, somewhat frenetic energy to the classroom, and I have come to realize it could reflect my desire to transmit my love of learning to my students. Finally, the theme of "Triumphs" was born from my desire to celebrate my personal self. After having overcome a number of challenges in 2019, leading up to my period of observational study, I decided that establishing an event as a triumph need not always involve "official" recognition. While I recognize that my work within my professional life, including my doctoral studies, has involved a series of measurable milestones, the work within these spaces and my personal (and interpersonal) life experiences has reshaped my vision of an accomplishment. The qualities I have observed within myself are directly linked to my teaching philosophy and my desire to treat education as an emancipatory, celebratory experience. I aim to foster an environment where students also feel excited to enjoy small moments and possibly recognize their own potential as characters within their own stories.

Meaning Making: How Did These Images Come to Be, and What Do They Say?

Mitchell and Weber (1999) called into question particular ways of interacting with (and interrogating) photographs. The authors discussed the methods of Annette Kuhn (1995) in dealing with memory work, noting important steps in approaching photographs: considering the human subject, considering the picture's context, discussing the techniques and aesthetic circumstances of the photograph's production, and discussing the photograph's currency and viewership (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 99). The authors also illuminated processes of altering ways of seeing, through cropping and staging (p. 98). I used these considerations when approaching my own photographs, paying close attention to the presentation of the content, the codes and conventions that went into presenting the content, and the personal decisions behind including or omitting content. To synthesize, I developed a personal set of analysis questions inspired by Mitchell and Weber's memory work. My questions were as follows: What or who is the subject of the photograph? What is the context surrounding this moment? What are some artistic decisions included in the photograph (lighting, cropping, etc.)? Who were the viewers of this photograph? (Despite the fact that my photographs were intended for personal use, certain moments were captured with the intention of being shared. These particular photographs speak to, even more so than the immortalization of a moment, my own validation of having participated in it). I synthesized my responses to my collections through curatorial statements (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019), which aimed to express my discoveries of self.

Synthesis: What Do These Collections Tell Me About Me?

Paul O'Neill and Soren Andreasen (2007) connected the act of curating to Francois Truffaut's theory of the auteur, conceptualizing the "curator as a creator . . . rather than a facilitator or administrator of exhibitions" (p. 138). This perspective on curating provided inspiration for my treatment of photograph collections, as I aimed, from my compilation and interactions with the images, to create meaning and stories. For my curatorial statements, I aimed to produce a message, or set of messages, on my personal self. Within each statement, I discussed the context of the collection, recurrent themes, and the meaning rendered from the images. Patti Allison (as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019) created curatorial

statements for her project on social justice photo albums. Allison (as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al, 2019) noted that curatorial statements “help guide the way audiences perceive [an] exhibition [and offer] a chance to communicate directly to viewers” (p. 49). Interestingly, the sole viewer of my collection, up until the publication of my doctoral thesis, had been myself. However, I found Allison’s conceptualization of curatorial statements to be helpful in channeling a focus for my collections, and allowing me to step in and out of my position as the “self” subject of observation. My internal positioning allowed me to create personal messages, but treating the collections as exhibitions for analysis offered me a position from which to make “outsider” observations.

Curatorial Statements: Independent Photograph Collections

The following four passages form my self-study curatorial statements of photographs. These statements offer cohesion to the collections, while displaying my own reflective process in analyzing my memories.

Significant Life Events

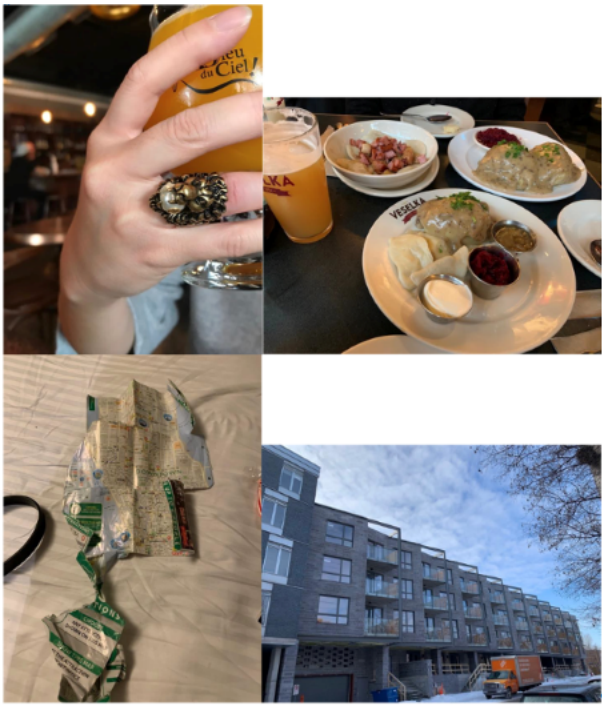


Fig. 1: Collage representing Significant Life Events collection

This collection reflects feelings of picking up and moving on, but also pausing to reflect upon my journey. Ranging from a series of close-up shots of beautiful meals and shiny jewelry that suggest meticulous focus and attention to placement, to some casual snaps of my parents and (a new) partner (often taken prior to enjoying delicious food), there is an air of enjoyment, celebration, and rewards in these pictures. This collection, which has notably been permeated by the ghost of my ex-husband, displays my constant effort to develop and discover my (new) personal self. From the images of my first home, to the weathered map

of Manhattan that guided my family vacation, these images show a constant commitment to overcoming challenges, developing new skills (I have always been directionally challenged, so using a paper map was a triumph), and celebrating the self I have (and continue to) become. The recurrent images of food, from a homemade pumpkin pie (my first, largely successful attempt), to an iconic Eastern European perogy dinner at Veselka's, to a sunny lunch (date) at the Ikea furniture store, display not only my slight obsessiveness with food, but the victories (big or small) that I accompany with my enjoyment of good food. Notably, this food also reflects my personal recognition that I embody a "self" that is worth celebrating. This celebration of special, everyday moments is a value I wish to transmit to my students. They are all entering transformative periods, and my hope is to use my conceptualization of triumphs to fuel their own.

Failures

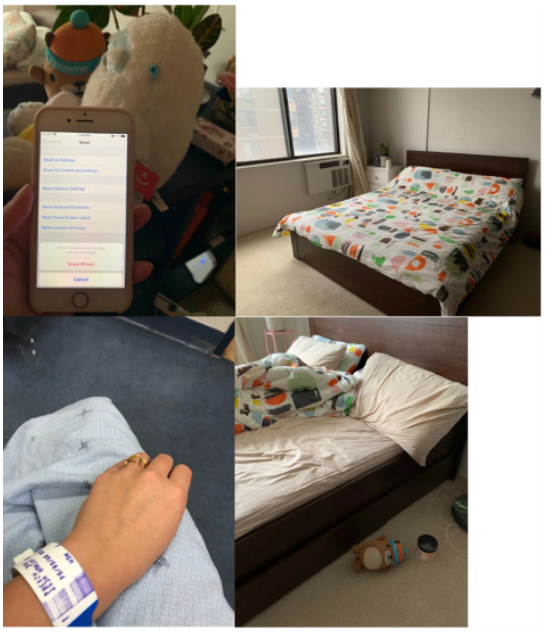


Fig. 2: Collage representing Failures collection

The image of the home screen of my old mobile phone, prompting me to "Erase iPhone," sums up the feelings of this collection. This is a collection that has once again been permeated by the ghost of my ex-husband, but rather than sparking victories in meeting and overcoming challenges, these images reflect the loneliness that has become a notable part of my personal self. The ghost's presence is everywhere in this collection, eerily forcing me to witness a life that once consisted of beautiful things and love—things now being sold on Facebook Marketplace by a newly single, lost self. I recall choosing the dark wood Ikea bed that stood in my former apartment, and how my ex-husband had travelled from our previous residence to spend the day constructing the frame. I also recall sitting on my couch, waiting for a total stranger to finish breaking apart the same frame that housed so many fond, warm memories. This collection has shown me my own experiences of coming to terms with erasing a life, and how seemingly quickly the "sacred" can turn to "omitted." The image of my hospital bracelet, along with remnants from a series of failed dates, reflect my constant fear of being alone, and my desire to once

again be happy. I also feel that these images reflect a desperate spiraling and an unwillingness to accept the fact my former life has been erased. Lastly, images of my (stuffed) animals, Doris and Muk, falling on the ground, suggest my desire to capture my own personal failures on film. Meanwhile, my carelessness in letting these creatures fall violently reflects a failure to control the chaos that had become my new norm. My desire to protect my students and build relationships reflects these past failures. Failure is something to which I have been well accustomed, but it has also helped me hold on to the positive bonds I have forged within the schoolplace.

Sources of Inspiration



Fig. 3: Collage representing Sources of Inspiration collection

This collection reflects a quest for art in life. Again, food assumes a central position in these images, but this collection pays specific attention to composition and the unexpected juxtaposition of food and beautiful things. However, in the image taken of my mother with a string of gnarly Brussel sprouts, the food is not particularly beautiful as it is eye-catching. This reminded me of the images I took as a child and teenager of misplaced fruits that I would find in my everyday travels. I also, as a child, asked my mother to pose with a rotting orange that had been infested with ants on a window sill, showing that my fascination with displaced produce has been an ongoing source of inspiration. In two photographs from this collection, I placed an orange on another food item. In one instance, it was a cruller donut; in another situation, it was a tub of coconut eggnog yogurt. Interestingly, at the time of writing this passage, I have taken to hiding oranges in plain sight. The unexpected nature of my compositions reflects my playful experimentation with the different elements I encounter on a daily basis, especially within the classroom. With my students, I aim to subvert commonplace narratives and help expose new ways of seeing and experiencing the (otherwise boring) world. This is especially evident in the images of my

(stuffed) animals, particularly the ones where Muk, the marmot, stares out of the window in a manner indicative of Friedrich's *Wanderer*. Evidently, for me, the innocent building blocks of my life hold great importance and inspiration, as they channel stories of their own. This collection also displays my interest in particular philosophies, notably the trend of vegan food, with which I have a fascination because of its own practice of subverting expectations (e.g., a milkshake that contains no milk), and also Anthony Bourdain, a lost figure whom I feel has helped me embrace my divergence and curiosity. Finally, this collection displays an interest in novel ways of seeing and approaching the world. An image reflecting the use of fresh snow to cool beers and champagne displays a resourceful way of viewing the world. I aim to channel this creativity and whimsy into my teaching, and hopefully inspire students to see their surroundings as the building blocks for play.

Questioning



Fig. 4: Collage representing Questioning collection

This collection reflects reservation, skepticism, and my unwillingness to trust the world at face value. While the recurrent theme of food surfaces in this collection, these images reflect subtle questions of the "normal" world around me. From a lone BLT sandwich on a desk, left behind by a student who quickly fell ill upon entering the class, to boxes of Little Debbie Christmas tree-shaped snack cakes, this collection displays my curiosity and fascination with the strangeness of everyday life. Vegan food has once again appeared in my images, in the form of veggie ground meat(less) products, a fast-food burger, and a Beyond Meat sandwich. Once again, the concept of something presenting itself as a regular, accepted part of everyday life, when in fact it is foreign, raises (Surrealist) questions of reality, but also feelings of betrayal and lies. I wondered to what extent the other elements of my life were imitations, and how it can become commonplace to sustain oneself in a life of inauthenticity. This concept was present in the images of Bar Boulud, a restaurant I had very much wanted to dislike. After Daniel Boulud took over the local high-end bistro Feenie's, which had been a much-loved special-occasion destination for my

family, I questioned the chef’s motivations. Seeing as he was a friend and mentor of the Feenie’s chef, I became especially repelled by Boulud’s seeming act of betrayal. However, when the Bar Boulud meal ended up becoming an occasion in and of itself, with a lobster potato salad serving as inspiration for my own culinary attempt, I realized how my skepticism has operated in creating rigid narratives. In turn, I aim to combat this tendency by inspiring students to be better. This collection reflects my tendency to continually ask questions, sometimes to the point of personal frustration. I use the classroom as a place for possibilities and discovery. I have always thought of myself as a proponent of justice, as I use the curriculum as a platform to promote openness and equality.

Conclusion

In this article, I describe my personal self-study, which highlights my engagement with photographs to discover messages about my personal teacher self. By mobilizing an unexpected data set, I aimed to discover more about who I am, and possibly how my practice came to be. From my successes and points of pride to my failures and sources of vulnerability, I hoped to create a picture of my “ways of being” (Berger, 2008). My exploration of elements which inspired me, as well as questions I asked of the world, illuminated my “ways of seeing” (Berger, 2008) during my specific period of study. Through this process, I aimed to gain a better understanding of the motivations underlying my decision-making within my teaching practice. Within my doctoral experiment, I gravitated toward Surrealism as a source of inspiration for the problems I perceived within my classroom. However, I wondered about the elements of my personal self, which caused me to see my practice in this way. Therefore, in order to understand the connections that I aimed to forge, and the experimentation within which I hoped to engage, I needed to discover why I felt compelled to pursue these directions. This work has also illuminated the valuable need for teachers to stop and reflect upon our practices, using the artifacts which inform the world(s) which we actively construct around us.

Notes

1. Benoit (2016) included photographs of former schools and personal residences, whereas my content involved all images included on my personal mobile device. I did categorize my photograph collection into four threads of inquiry in the processing phase of my data collection, but for the most part, commonalities in content were the subject of my analysis phase, rather than a necessary step in the data collection phase, as was the case with Benoit.

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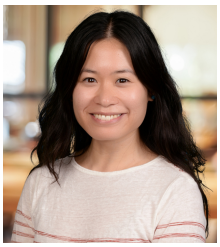
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Taking Medicine That Heals: Teachers Engaging in Reflective Inquiry Through Community Cultural Wealth

Aimée Myers

Abstract

This study explores how reflective inquiry can empower teachers from marginalized backgrounds, specifically women of color from immigrant families. Through the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) Reflective Inquiry, K–12 teachers merged their *testimonios* with theoretical concepts to identify their own funds of knowledge and capital. The CCW Reflective Inquiry was developed through culturally responsive-sustaining methods to meet the needs of the teachers enrolled in a graduate-level course. This study highlights the necessity of integrating culturally responsive-sustaining methods of inquiry into teacher education to support educators in connecting to course content, navigating oppressive environments, and continuing their work toward social justice.

Context

> I have realized that just reading the theories and research is like only reading the label on how to take a medicine; only after we engage in reflection do we swallow the pill and healing starts to take place. (Maya, bilingual teacher participant)

My students were struggling. It was not an academic struggle. It was a struggle inflicted upon them simply because of their identities. My students were predominantly women of color from immigrant backgrounds. More importantly, they were graduate students who taught emerging bilingual and immigrant K–12 children in public schools. Most of them have walked in the shoes of the children they teach. They know what it is like to learn a new language in a new country. They know what it is like to have to speak one language at school and return home to speak the language of their family. While this would seem like a perspective that would be valued in their workplaces, my students were being silenced and marginalized due to their backgrounds.

Early in the semester, there was a night in class that immediately caught my attention. I had seen how weary they were, but this particular night, I entered the classroom to the sounds of crying. I could see a large group of students huddling together. As I approached, they quickly apologized and dismantled their group. I explained they had nothing to apologize for and asked if they were okay. A few of them immediately started to vent about how they were being treated by their school administrators due to new policies that restricted diverse content in K–12 classrooms. After I asked for permission to discuss the issue with the whole class, they instantly began assembling their desks into a circle. While the desks were being reassembled, I looked over my lesson plans and lecture for that night, and I determined that their struggles were more important than the academic content I had prepared for them that evening.

We spent most of the class that night talking about the struggles they were facing. The new laws in our state and new policies in their school districts had made them feel helpless and like they had a target on their backs. No more diverse books on the shelves. No more curriculum centered around social injustice. They shared stories of fear that they would lose their jobs for creating inclusive spaces that met the needs of their K–12 emerging bilingual and newcomer immigrant students. It seemed as if the class content felt out of reach to my students. The class was centered around culturally responsive-sustaining practices (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Learning about theories related to this concept felt meaningless to them at this moment. It wasn't that they were rejecting the theoretical concepts or that they did not have the right mindset. Rather, they were so overwhelmed with the oppressive policies that their brains could not imagine how teaching in a culturally responsive-sustaining way was even possible at this point.

I went home that evening and reviewed my curriculum. Questions raced through my mind. How could I continue to teach as if nothing had happened? How could I meet them where they were at that moment? How could I continue to meet the learning objectives of the course and give them the academic content they needed, while still supporting their well-being and growth? I decided to dump a few assignments from the planned curriculum and replace them with reflective inquiry. My hope was to provide my students with some space—a space to process their struggles, identify their obstacles, and develop solutions.

Thanks to my students' authenticity with their struggles, I was able to develop the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) Reflective Inquiry. This assignment is conceptualized through three key components: a model of inquiry (Dewey, 1938), two-eyed seeing (Hatcher et al., 2009), and the community cultural wealth model (Yosso, 2005). After working through this reflective inquiry process with my students, I recognized the importance of studying their experience and better understanding how inquiry can be utilized to support social justice for our students and their students. What follows is an explanation of how I conceptualized the CCW Reflective Inquiry and my findings.

The purpose of this study is to explore culturally responsive-sustaining ways to engage reflective inquiry in teachers experiencing marginalization. The foundations of formal inquiry are often centered around Eurocentric and scientific approaches to learning. My goal was to develop a pedagogical tool and study how that tool can assist marginalized educators in connecting to course content in a meaningful way and applying those theoretical concepts. This study uses a critical perspective to explore teacher experiences and is situated in Chicana feminist epistemology (Bernal, 1998; Garcia, 2014). The research question that drives this study is: How do teachers from marginalized backgrounds respond to reflective inquiry that is founded in community cultural wealth?

Understanding Reflective Inquiry in Education

To understand reflective inquiry, we must first address each component individually. Reflection has become a buzzword in education, but it is a tool that has been applied within many academic fields for over 100 years to assist with meaning-making, processing knowledge, and growth (Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1983). Additionally, it is used as a tool to guide practitioners toward careful consideration of beliefs and actions (Dewey, 1933). Reflection has deep historical roots within philosophy and psychology, and it can even be traced all the way back to antiquity and the walls of the temple of Apollo at Delphi (Nicholson, 2002). It also has contemporary ties to teacher education and has been proven to be a powerful stimulus for the transformation of current practices, for assisting with coachability, and for generating new ideas (Marcos et al., 2011; Reichenberg, 2022; Tay et. al., 2023). In addition, critical reflection, which incorporates perspectives of culture, power, and privilege, has been identified as a key element among educators who are culturally responsive to their students (Howard, 2003; Regalado et al., 2025).

Inquiry falls within a similar space as reflection; however, while reflection focuses heavily on a pause or a serious consideration, inquiry is typically guided by an investigative question and encourages action (Chin & Duncan, 2021). Inquiry is used often in the sciences but has emerged as a tool to guide experiential, student-centered learning in other disciplines (Hammer et al., 2008; Iglesias & Tejada, 2024; Levy et al., 2013). Inquiry is often guided by a model or framework that leads learners through various phases. Over the past 25 years, specific inquiry models have been developed, especially in the field of education. Common inquiry models include the 5E model (Bybee, 2009), the big six information problem-solving process (Herring et al., 2000), and guided inquiry (Kuhlthau et al., 2015). Research has indicated that utilizing inquiry-based learning can increase student engagement and improves task performance (Faulconer, 2016; Hwang & Chen, 2017; Aidoo et al., 2024).

Combining the two concepts, reflective inquiry is complex and often determined by the professional field in which it is being utilized. Brown et al. (2021) broadly define reflective inquiry as

> a collaborative, dialogic process in which educators both consider and aim to address pressing educational issues or problems. Such a process involves the collective generation and testing of ideas linked to enhancing their own practice, with these ideas based on evidence in the form of literature and/or data and displaying internal attribution. (p. 9)

Currently, some studies show promise in using reflective inquiry as a tool to deepen professional learning, build stronger networks of learning among educators, and work through obstacles (Eshchar-Netz & Vedder-Weiss, 2021; Poortman et al., 2022; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016). Additionally, Vujaklija (2021) found that reflective inquiry can assist teachers in identifying their authority to stand on theoretically sound beliefs. While research on reflective inquiry indicates that it can help educators process new knowledge and apply it, there is limited research that advances our understanding of how reflective inquiry can support teachers from marginalized backgrounds, especially during these tumultuous socio-political times; thus, this study seeks to fill that gap.

Mode of Inquiry

In order to understand students' experiences with the CCW Reflective Inquiry, I will explain the conceptualization of the project and discuss how students engaged in the process. First, guiding my development of the CCW Reflective Inquiry was a conceptual framework consisting of three approaches: Dewey's model of inquiry, Marshall's two-eyed seeing, and Yosso's CCW model. Dewey's model of inquiry is supplemented by the other components because Dewey's pragmatism does not take into account issues of power and marginalization. Both two-eyed seeing and the CCW model are essential to provide a more holistic educative experience for students. Second, a description of the process is provided to understand how students engaged in decolonized aspects of learning through *testimonio*.

Conceptual Framework

The first component of the reflective inquiry conceptualization derives from John Dewey, who is the most widely taught educational philosopher and often referred to as the "father of progressive education" (Williams, 2017, p. 94). Dewey's model of inquiry has five key elements:

1) Recognizing a situation as problematic
2) Considering the difference it makes to define the problem one way rather than another
3) Developing a possible line of action as a response to the problem
4) Evaluating potential actions in terms of their likely consequences
5) Taking actions that are felt to be likely to address the problematic situation

Dewey himself believed that reflection is the highest form of critical thinking and inquiry (Dewey, 1938a; Dewey, 1938b). Contemporary research continues to support Dewey's ideas that reflection is one of the most powerful mechanisms for supporting learners in processing information and assisting them in moving toward application of that new knowledge (Dimova & Kamarska, 2015; Latasha, 2020).

The second foundational concept in our reflective inquiry is two-eyed seeing, which is birthed from Indigenous ways of knowing and connected to the ideas of Albert Marshall, an Elder of the Mi'kmaq Nation (Bartlett & Marshall, 2007; Hatcher et al., 2009). Education in the United States has always been heavily influenced by Eurocentric notions of knowledge, which often consist of reading works from published scholars who have gathered data from participants using the scientific method or stringent qualitative approaches. Scientific inquiry learning is not separate from this Eurocentric approach. If anything, it is often even more heavily ingrained in the perception that knowledge is only produced by scholars doing empirical research. To be engaged in inquiry, there is a belief that a learner must be diving into existing research. The Eurocentric approach silos scientific knowledge from natural, human, and spiritual ecosystems. Fortunately, two-eyed seeing recognizes the importance of personal lived experiences, holistic networks of knowledge, and ecological systems (Gardner-Vandy et al., 2025). Gregory Cajete, Indigenous educator and Tewa citizen from Santa Clara Pueblo, argues that "inherent in Indigenous education is the recognition that there is a knowing Center in all human beings that reflects

the knowing Center of the Earth and other living things" (2021, p. 104). Additionally, two-eyed seeing embraces self-reflection as a key component to the "transformative capacity of knowledge" (Forbes et al., 2020, p. 2). Thus, two-eyed seeing is essential to this conceptual framework because it merges together scientific knowledge with lived experiences.

The third foundational concept of our reflective inquiry is Tara Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005). Yosso is a scholar from University of California, Riverside (UC Riverside), who has founded her work in resistance to deficit views of learners and situated her research at the intersection of Chicana feminism, LatCrit theory, and education (Yosso, 2006). The CCW model is based upon Bourdieu's capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). However, the CCW model reconceptualizes capital by viewing it through a critical race theory lens (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). The purpose of CCW is to identify and acknowledge forms of cultural capital that are often dismissed for marginalized people. The goal of CCW is to create an asset lens through which educators can view their students. Within Yosso's CCW model (pp. 77–80) there are six forms of capital:

1) Aspirational: the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers
2) Linguistic: the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style
3) Familial: cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition
4) Social: networks of people and community resources
5) Navigational: skills of maneuvering through social institutions
6) Resistant: knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality

Each of these forms of capital comes from students' funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005), which is developed through their backgrounds and lived experiences.

While the terms "funds" and "capital" might seem to reflect transactional Eurocentric and capitalistic concepts, these terms, which were developed by scholars of color, reflect a strategic linguistic subversion of Eurocentric notions (Pengfei, 2025; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Spivak, 2005). They decolonize and subvert Eurocentric concepts by creating "social relationships of reciprocity and mutual trust with families (confianza) that facilitate the development and exchange of historically accumulated sets of resources, strategies, and ideas" (González, et al., 2011, p. 488). Each form of capital built into CCW can stand on its own or interact with other forms of capital. Additionally, these forms of capital are not static. They are dynamic elements shaped by the place and space our students are experiencing. CCW reminds educators of the value in our students' insights and the knowledge they bring to the classroom.

Process of CCW Reflective Inquiry

I began by assigning a freewriting activity that simply asked, "As a teacher, in what ways are you being silenced?" I chose freewriting over a formal essay because freewriting allows students' thoughts to flow freely onto the page without concerns regarding grammar and mechanics. In addition to the freewriting, students engaged in oral storytelling centered around their own *testimonios*, defined as "a tool for inscribing struggles and understandings, creating new knowledge, and affirming our epistemologies" (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 367). Since English was the secondary language for most of my students, freewriting and *testimonio* enabled them to engage in translanguaging practices (Creese & Blackledge, 2015). I wanted them to connect deeply with their experiences and insights rather than focus on strict academic language regulations.

After students had explored the ways they were being silenced in their classrooms, I began to scaffold their understanding of CCW. They were given a graphic organizer that broke down each of the six forms of capital. I asked them to write down ways they see their own K–12 students utilizing CCW. I started there because the teachers I have in class are reluctant to brag about themselves. However, if you ask them to brag about their students, they can talk all day long. Once they had developed a foundational understanding of CCW, we dove into some readings that deepened their theoretical understanding of the concept. After the readings were concluded and students understood CCW better, they were asked to identify one of the forms of capital that they felt the most confident in. Students took time in their small groups to share stories of their families and lived experiences that shaped their confidence in their chosen form of capital. We continued the process as they worked their way through each form of capital, from highest level of confidence to lowest level of confidence. Once we got down to the lower levels of confidence, I added an additional reflective prompt asking them to share the "why" behind their lack of confidence. This last step encouraged them to tap into their critical consciousness, or *conscientização* (Freire, 1973).

Once scaffolding had been put into place to support their understanding of the concept, students began to investigate more deeply. They were asked to go into their schools with a CCW field note guide. This guide had each of the six forms of capital and a graphic organizer where students could begin filling in their observations. They were guided by the essential question: How is your community cultural wealth serving you and your students at your school? They were also provided with a series of additional guiding questions for further support. Their objective was twofold: 1) document the ways in which they were already using their six forms of capital at their schools, and 2) document moments they felt marginalized and jot down ways they could use their different forms of capital to push back. After they had completed their CCW field note guide, we came back together as a learning community and shared experiences. Lastly, they were asked to write a report on their process and findings.

Methodology

In this study, I used qualitative discourse analysis to understand how teachers from marginalized backgrounds respond to culturally responsive-sustaining reflective inquiry. Discourse analysis was chosen as the method to study student responses due to its recognition of often dismissed or marginalized knowledge; its emphasis on understanding historical or cultural contexts, rooted in a social constructivist stance; and its exploration of how knowledge is linked to actions and practices (Fairclough, 1992; Gill, 2000). My goal was to understand students' situated meanings of language within their final written reports (Gee, 2014). Discourse analysis was beneficial in understanding how the students negotiated knowledge development, meaning-making, and their identities within their professional teaching contexts (Hunt, 2018).

Participants were students enrolled in a master's-level course focused on meeting the literacy needs of diverse language learners. Out of the 23 students enrolled in the course, 18 were currently K–12 teachers and four were serving outside of the classroom in leadership roles. Approximately 95% of participants were female, 87% self-identified as a person of color (predominantly Latinx), 83% grew up speaking a language other than English, 78% immigrated to the United States or were children of immigrants, and 16% were undocumented citizens. All names used for participants in this study are pseudonyms.

The data in this study comes directly from the CCW Reflective Inquiry. The purpose of focusing on just this specific assignment was to help educators better understand how students' own lived experiences can be utilized for inquiry-based learning. Written reports were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Student writing was initially analyzed to identify segments of text that were relevant to the research question. Through multiple iterations of this process, initial codes were developed. Codes were analyzed and synthesized to develop categories, which were used to formulate overarching themes.

Findings

The findings discussed below are directly related to the research question for this study: How do teachers from marginalized backgrounds respond to reflective inquiry that is founded in community cultural wealth? Through inductive thematic analysis, three main themes were identified: 1) Pushing back against social and cultural messages; 2) Looking into the past to change the future; and 3) Tapping into critical hope. Each theme is explored in detail in the following sections, supported by quotes from the students.

Pushing Back Against Social and Cultural Messages

Through the CCW Reflective Inquiry process, the students were able to identify the main cause of their struggle with our course content, which was social and cultural messaging. My students recognized that their connection with the class content was being disrupted by the messages they were receiving from outside of our classroom. The data revealed that these messages were twofold. One source of messages was coming from sociopolitical narratives heard in the news, comments made by colleagues, and administrative discussions. The second source of messaging was coming from their own families.

Since most of my students come from marginalized backgrounds, they have been exposed to negative socio-political commentary on who they are as humans and as educators. This caused them to live in fear and forced many of them to stay under the radar, especially those from immigrant backgrounds. This messaging has prompted many of them to teach in more traditional approaches so they can fit into the status quo. For example, Zahra expressed her desire to stay under the radar and not make too much noise: "As a visibly Muslim-American Black woman, I find myself teetering the line of authenticity and pushing through by watering myself down." Many students echoed Zahra's fears and mentioned that their ethnicity, religion, or language were common targets in sociopolitical messaging. For example, Azucena, who is a first-generation Mexican immigrant and had just started her second year of teaching, expressed her frustration with the messages she receives: "I am having to hide who I am to my students and silence myself. In the first seven weeks as a teacher, I thought I chose the wrong profession, and that feeling has nothing to do with the students." In addition, Manuel shared that he was afraid due to his sexuality. He shared an experience he had at his school recently: "I've been warned by my peers about current politics. I'm a proud gay man, and I've been told that I should not talk about my fiancé in front of my students or have pictures of us in the classroom."

Unfortunately, sociopolitical messaging often infiltrates families from marginalized backgrounds. Families, especially those from immigrant backgrounds, assimilate as a means of survival. Camila expressed that her mother had shared stories from her workplace, and those stories have influenced how she is moving in her teaching:

> I know the stereotypes that come with being a Latina teacher. I already face challenges because I am a different race than most of my colleagues. I do not want my colleagues to think less of me because English is not my first language. When I speak up, I have to defend my opinion unlike my white colleagues, but I am scared.

Many students shared that they have been taught to be grateful for the tiny things they have been given—which includes having a job. To make noise would mean to express ingratitude, which is at the least disrespectful and, at the worst, risky. For example, Ana was an undocumented student who came to the United States with her mother when she was in middle school. She shared, "My mother raised me to not question authority or elders. In our Latino community, it was disrespectful because elders have earned their respect. Additionally, she believed that a supervisor is not a boss but rather a father/mother figure." Staying silent was a survival technique that had served them well for decades. However, this forced assimilation develops messaging that says not to disrupt or make noise. The students in my course were struggling to fully engage with the culturally responsive-sustaining concepts being taught in our class due to the messaging they were receiving, and they were even more afraid to apply the concepts for fear of losing their jobs.

However, once students were able to engage with the CCW Reflective Inquiry process, they realized that the messaging was not serving them well or protecting them. They were still struggling despite staying under the radar. Manuel shared this conclusion:

> My hopes and dreams will continue to be just hopes and dreams if we continue to stay silent in the face of injustices. I challenge all teachers to speak up at faculty meetings, become advocates for their peers, advocate for themselves, and continue to question authority.

Students began to name and claim the negative messages and explore how these messages were damaging them, which in turn was damaging their own students. At the end of the inquiry process, Ana reflected:

> How has this changed me? It has changed me to help teach students to learn to advocate for themselves. My job is to make sure our students feel valued and seen. With instructional material being censored, I can imagine many possible situations where my students will miss an opportunity to learn the truth about history or people or themselves.

Students began to shed the negative messages and search for the positive messages that can fuel them in their work. Azucena recognized this when she shared, "I now feel empowered to continue my work. I can place value on the importance of speaking up and looking out for each other using the three main pillars I was taught: *familia*, *escuela*, *comunidad*. The perfect trifecta."

Looking Into the Past to Change the Future

Another element of the CCW Reflective Inquiry process was students' new awareness of their community cultural wealth and how they can utilize their different forms of capital to create inclusive and equitable learning experiences for their own students. Tapping into their past to make a difference in the future was predominantly seen in students' exploration of their linguistic backgrounds and their family history.

For example, this was the first time that most students had explored their linguistic background as an asset and not an issue to be fixed. They began to recognize that their linguistic background had served them well in their past. Now, in their present, they began to see themselves as a skilled bilingual professional. Lorena, a student who grew up speaking Spanish in the home, affirmed, "I have the ability to communicate in two languages, so I need to use this advantage to its full potential." Furthermore, they recognized how to use their linguistic capital to provide meaningful learning experiences for their own students. One example is from Aisha, who immigrated to Canada first and later to the United States. She explained:

> I want my students to know their linguistic capital is valued. I have created a multilingual word wall displaying the vocabulary words of our thematic units of study in Spanish, Arabic, and English. I know this takes more work than just using one language in my classroom, but I am seeing the differences in my students' engagement and comprehension.

Other examples from students included creating a Spanish-speaking homework assistance line for parents, developing a donation account for multilingual books for their classroom, and providing Spanish materials for monolingual teachers in their buildings.

Another pattern of past and present awareness came through exploring their family's history. When given the time and space to critically reflect on their family's experiences, they felt empowered. They recognized that they came from a lineage of strength and resilience. When reflecting on her journey to become a teacher and work on a master's degree, Juana proclaimed, "I have fought for my dreams like a lion." She went on to proudly share her family's immigration story from Mexico and stated, "I know it

in such a detailed manner that I can close my eyes and still see the river." She realized that she needs to continue to stay motivated in her learning so "their life-risking act would not be in vain." Remembering these moments encouraged them to develop curriculum for their own students that centered around recognizing one's worth. For example, several students decided to not just use published children's books; they wanted to use their own students' stories as a part of the curriculum. Azucena explained, "I have received so much familial capital information I can use now in my teaching and lessons. This is where the idea of the identity boxes came from." The identity boxes became a main part of her curriculum, where students would bring items from their cultural backgrounds and use those items as a springboard for exploring geography, writing, and even science.

A key component related to familial capital is the importance of mothers. Many of the students remembered nurturing moments from their mothers and *abuelitas* (grandmas). Engaging with those moments reminded them of why they wanted to become a teacher in the first place. Gloria, who was an undocumented child and was given DACA status as a teenager reflected on her literacy practices:

> My mom is an avid reader and someone who just loves to learn. She was also more than glad to take me to all the writing workshops I wanted to attend and made sure that I had what I needed to succeed. She was and still is my biggest supporter.

Gloria went on to elaborate on how she wants to be that person for the children in her classroom. Students also shared that they had forgotten to listen to their inner voice, which is guided by their family members and ancestors. There was advice and guidance offered from family that my students had dismissed as not having value in their professional lives. Maya, who was only in her third year of teaching, was struggling with whether or not to stay in the profession. However, she remembered some key guidance offered to her from her grandmother. She explained:

> It is my obligation not only to represent the product of a humble hard-working family but to use my knowledge of language learning and bilingualism to prepare others to reach their full potential. As my *abuelita* always told me, "*De todo se aprende la vida.*" You learn from everything in life.

Maya, like many others, recognized how that advice can assist them with overcoming oppressive practices taking place at their school and developing a safe space for their own students.

Tapping Into Critical Hope

The last main finding from the CCW Reflective Inquiry process is the shift from discouragement to critical hope. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade (2009) describes this as "teaching in ways that connect the moral outrage of young people to actions that relieve the undeserved suffering in their communities" (p. 181). This type of hope encourages us to acknowledge injustice while also standing in solidarity with youth to push back collectively in order to move forward. The focus of critical hope is to support action and resilience (Bozalek et al., 2013; Freire, 1994). At the beginning of this process, students were so overwhelmed by current negative experiences in their schools that they could not focus on the possibilities proposed in our course content.

Overwhelmingly, students clearly identified and confronted the injustices that were weighing them down. Repeatedly, particular obstacles were mentioned: lack of representation in the books children read, white-washing of history content, and lack of ethnically diverse administrators. The most prevalent injustice explored was book bans taking place across the United States. Azucena shared, "I'm fearful of the famous book ban. I pride myself in creating culturally relevant books in dual-language and ESL classrooms. I have fought for classroom libraries that are authentic Spanish books and not just a translation of English books." However, she goes on to discuss how she has developed action steps: "I have been to many board meetings where I have to cross lines of protesters against certain books being in the schools." Acknowledging the issues became the first step for students to eventually move toward solutions.

Toward the end of the CCW Reflective Inquiry, students began to develop goals and potential actions. These were clearly connected to the content in the course, along with the concepts of CCW. Maribel, who had immigrated with her family to the United States from Guatemala, wrote about her experiences as an undocumented immigrant child and how participating in an afterschool program called the Migrant Lab was her "saving grace" because it helped her learn English and understand her homework, while also giving her a sense of belonging and teaching her how to navigate the educational system in the United States. She shared her efforts to create an afterschool club for migrant youth:

> I felt as if I started a tiny revolution with my allies and teacher friends. I knew that as someone who is a part of multiple marginalized communities, my funds of knowledge included navigational capital as a part of my communities' cultural wealth.

Maritza, a student who immigrated to the United States from Venezuela with her husband, wrote about an administrator from her school. Maritza also aspired to be a leader in the school one day and had looked up to this administrator, but she had not been able to fully understand why until after compiling the CCW Reflective Inquiry. By reflecting on her field notes, she realized this administrator was using different forms of capital to help Latinx students in the school, and she desired to follow that lead. Maritza wrote, "I'm developing my navigational skills to teach my students to stand up for themselves and feel proud of their funds of knowledge. I am also preparing a staff development [program] for my colleagues to learn more about culturally relevant-sustaining practices." The concepts of funds of knowledge and culturally relevant-sustaining practices were both key concepts from the course that semester.

Discussion

According to Pedaste et al. (2015), who conducted a review of 32 inquiry-based learning studies, most inquiry cycles have five main phases in common: orientation, conceptualization, investigation, conclusion, and discussion. The graduate students in my course who participated in the CCW Reflective Inquiry worked their way through each of these phases.

Through this process, they were first able to recognize that hegemonic messaging pervades their sense of self and their professional work. The negative impact of dominant narratives on teachers from marginalized backgrounds has been well documented (Bettini et al., 2022; Brown, 2014; Castro, 2022).

However, what my students recognized and shared through their final reports was that their own families had been infiltrated by hegemonic discourses. This was surprising to many of them and disheartening. Nonetheless, identifying it and confronting it was the first step in orienting themselves in the struggle. Students were also able to identify other systemic obstacles they were facing which included book bans, lack of representation, and dismissal of multilingual and multicultural work being done in K–12 schools. LaBoskey (2009) argues that this process of "name it and claim it," which derives from Black American churches, is an essential piece of developing social justice in teacher education.

Once students were able to orient themselves to the obstacles they were facing and conceptualize questions and theoretical perspectives, they could begin to investigate how they had been impacted. Students recognized that their teacher training had encouraged them to view their own students through an asset lens rather than a deficit lens (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Valencia, 1997). However, due to the obstacles and messaging they were facing, the teachers were not viewing themselves through an asset-based lens.

Students moved into the investigation phase, where they took notes in the field and engaged in discussions with colleagues. Guided by Yosso's CCW model, students were able to connect their personal, lived experiences with their professional work. Similar to other teachers from marginalized backgrounds, they were able to utilize the six elements of capital to recognize their own funds of knowledge and recognize their value that had gone unnoticed by whitestream, Eurocentric perspectives (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018; Trigos-Carrillo, 2020). At the end of the process, most students were able to re-conceptualize their sense of self and their professional worth.

Western concepts of psychology have claimed that humans must release their emotions in order to begin processing with their logical brain (Oatley et al., 2011). However, more recently, decolonized ways of thinking have generated more holistic understanding that we can hold emotional knowledge and logical knowledge at the same time (Asma & Gabriel, 2019; Bhatia, 2020). While negative emotions can skew our view of reality, it is important that we don't dismiss our emotions completely. Mlodinow (2022) explains that rather than moving past our emotions to become more logical, we must just recognize them in a more nuanced way to achieve logical progress. Through their reflective inquiry, students were able to identify the injustice they were experiencing, move through the dark emotions, and shine a light on moments of progress and potential. The progress displayed in their final reports represented a critical hope fostered through a radical pedagogy combining "hope, critical reflection and collective struggle" (Giroux, 1985, p. xvii). In the end, the reflective inquiry process led students to connecting more with the curriculum and building actionable steps.

Conclusion and Implications

This article began with a quote from Maya, who uses a medicine analogy for her experience with the reflective inquiry. As teacher educators, we have an opportunity to create healing in educational spaces. This study highlights how healing can take place and the importance of developing culturally responsive-sustaining inquiry practices in teacher education classrooms, especially those that engage with students from underrepresented populations. Geneva Gay (2013) tells us that it is important to "teach to and through our students" (p. 49). The teachers who are entering the workforce and those returning for an advanced degree deserve the space to explore their professional self in a holistic way that does not dismiss their identities.

In the classroom, teacher educators should be willing to occasionally do some curricular off-roading. This can be unsettling in the beginning, but innovation often develops out of struggle. In addition, it is important that teacher educators recognize that some students have difficulty connecting to the curriculum due to destructive messaging that stands in the way of processing new knowledge and applying it. Therefore, it is important to identify culturally responsive-sustaining models and frameworks like CCW to assist students in developing an asset-based view of themselves.

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

Aleesha Noreen, Kashaf Noreen, and Mariam Al Ramadhan

Abstract

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

Where We Begin

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Importance of Collaborative Poetic Reflection

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

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

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

Our Poetry

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

Poem 1: Uncertainty–The Only Known

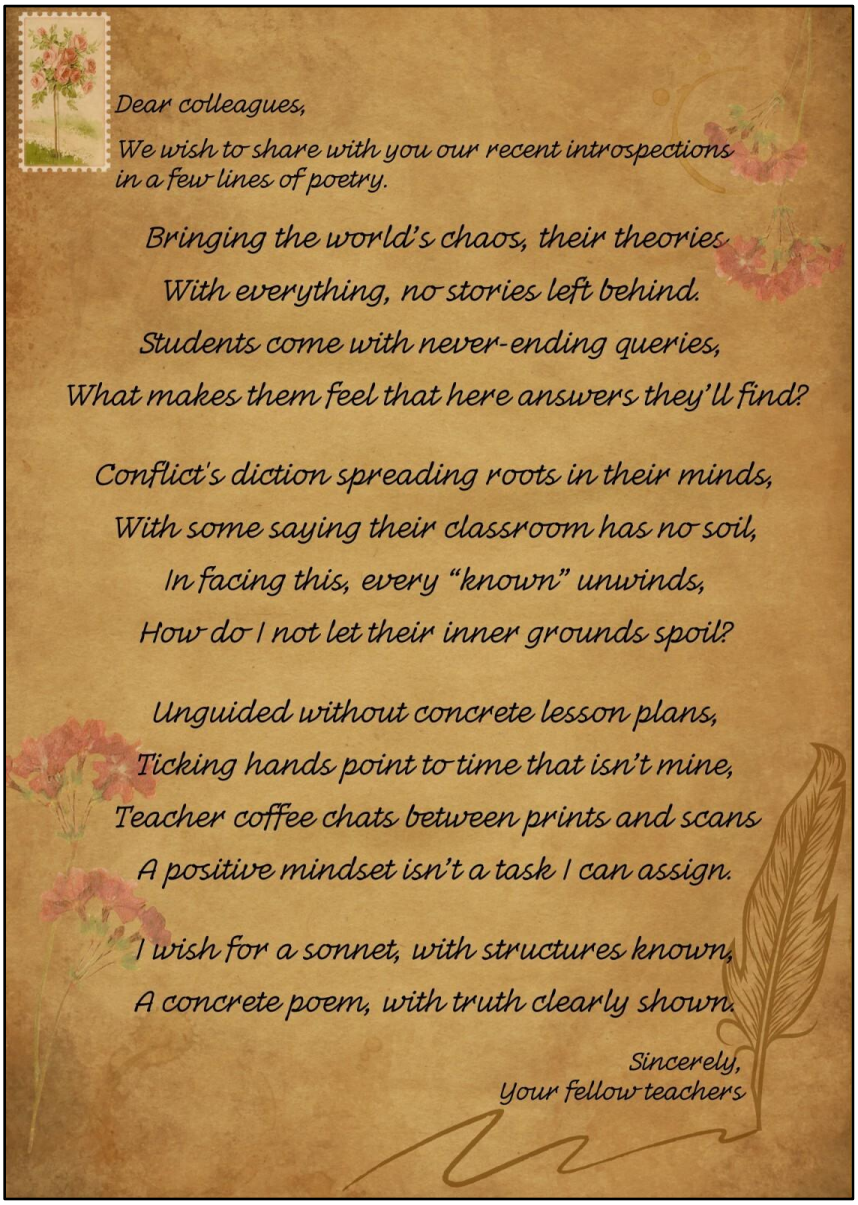


Fig. 1: Uncertainty –The Only Known

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

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

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

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

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

Poem 2: Education is Lifesaving

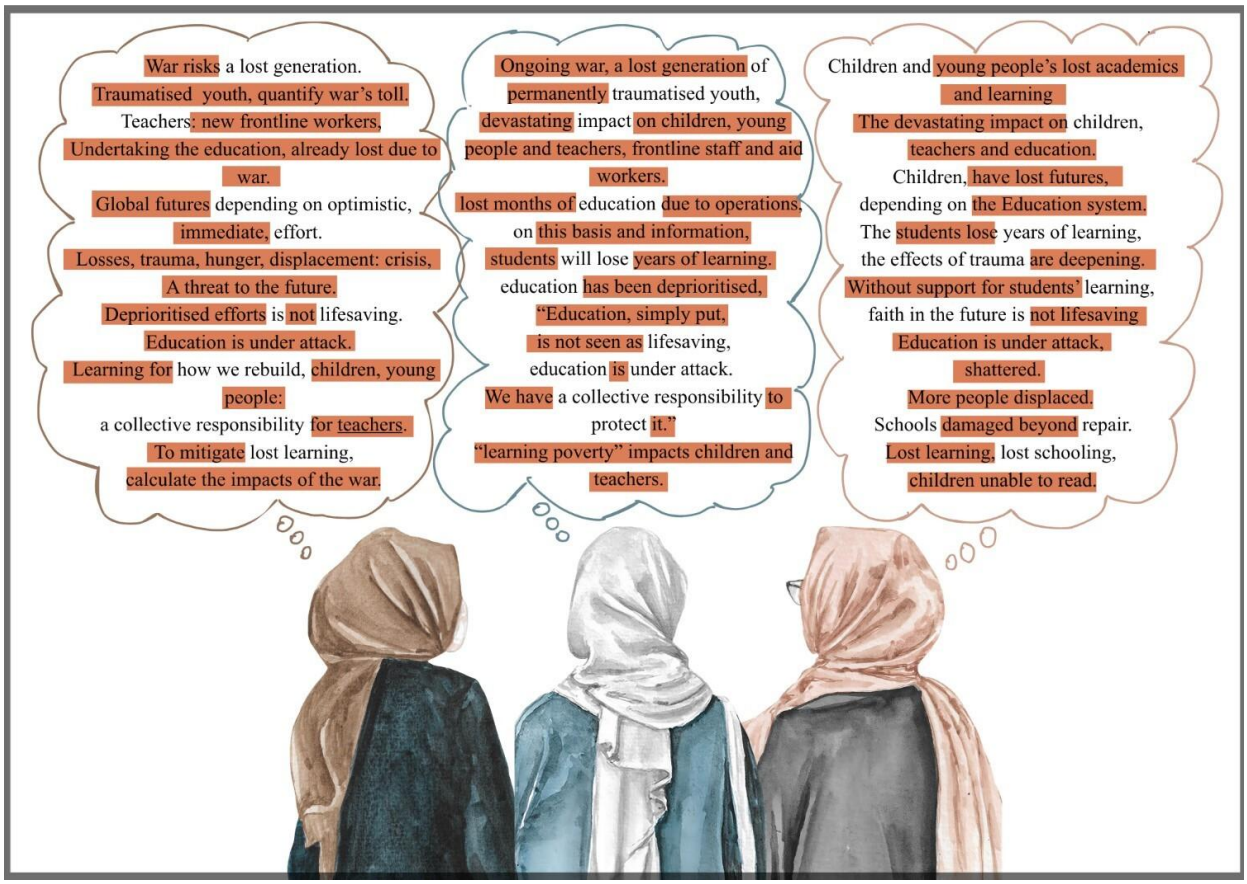


Fig. 2: Education Is Lifesaving

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

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

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

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

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

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

Poem 3: To Walk In Another's Shoes

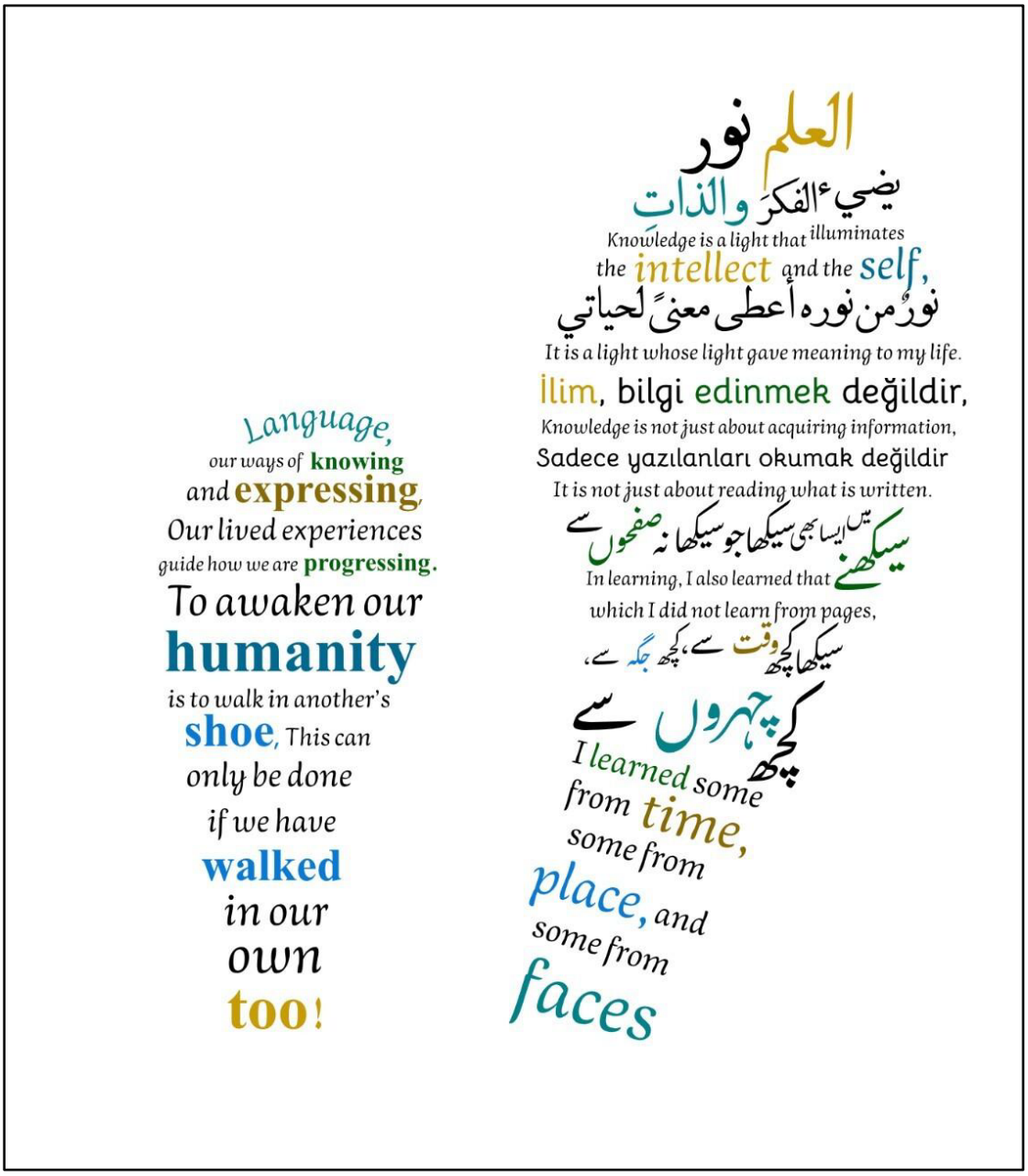


Fig. 3: To Walk In Another's Shoes

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

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

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

Dialogue as a Companion to Reflection

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

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

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

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

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

The Power of Our Stories

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

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

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

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

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Appendix A: Individual Found Poems

Mariam's Found Poem

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

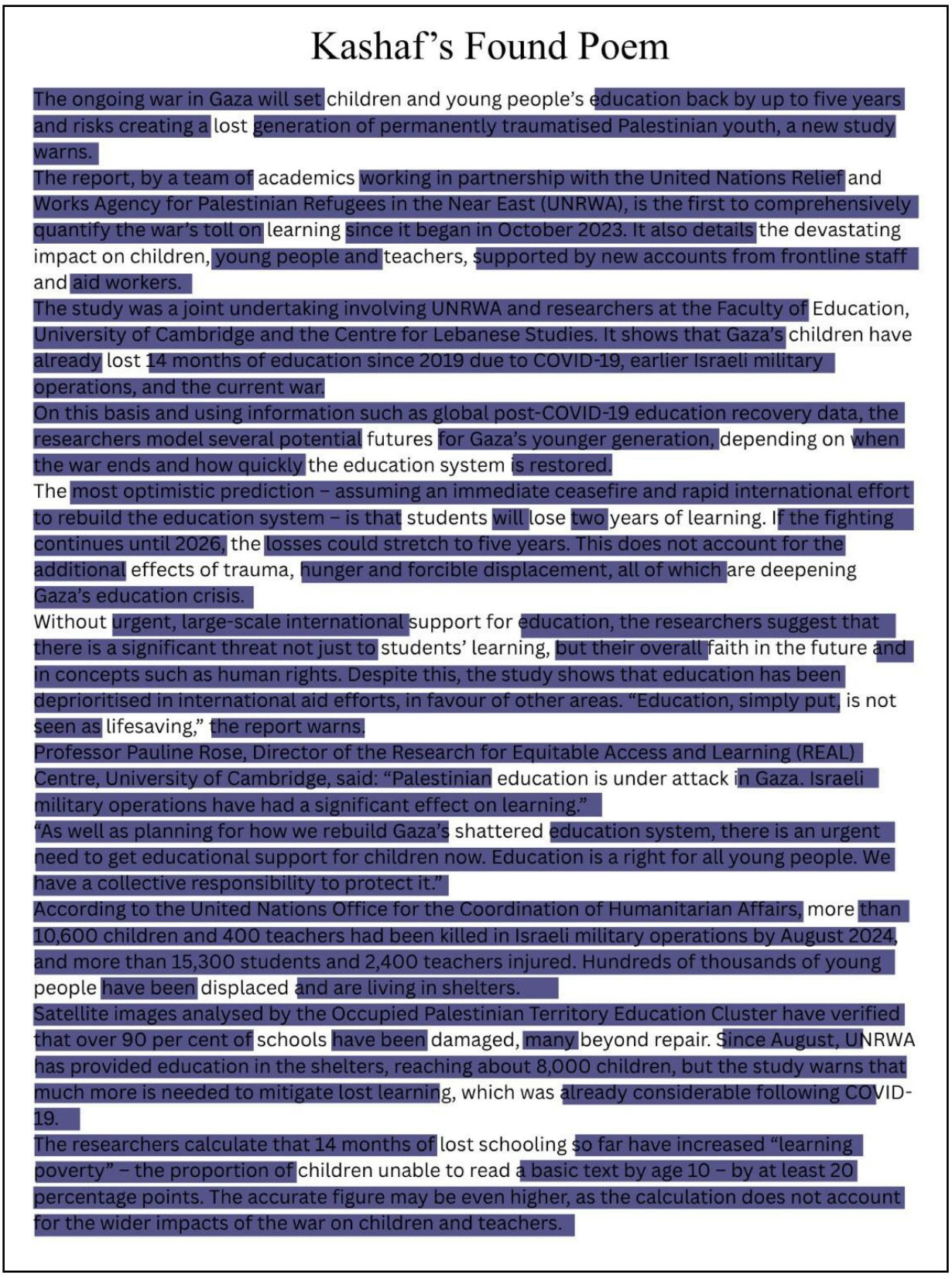
"As well as planning for how we rebuild Gaza's shattered education system, there is an urgent need to get educational support for children now. Education is a right for all young people. We have a collective responsibility to protect it."

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

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

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

Fig. A1: Mariam Al Ramadhan's found poem



Kashaf's Found Poem

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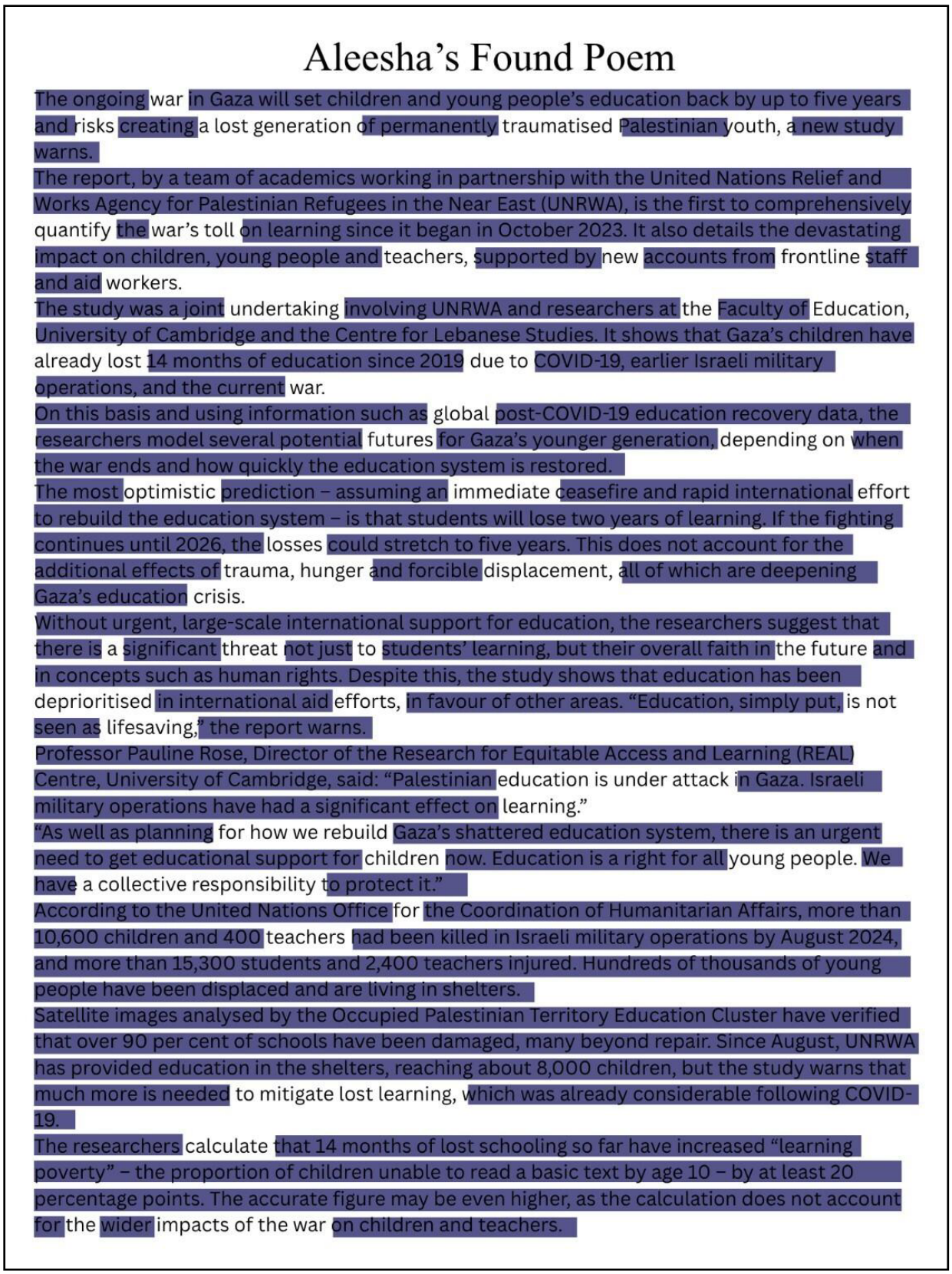
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Fig. A2: Kashaf Noreen's found poem



Aleesha's Found Poem

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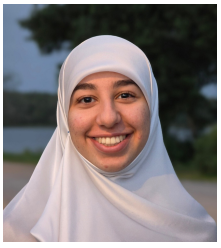
Fig. A3: Aleesha Noreen's found poem



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



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



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

Dance of the Stick: Relationships With Children in Early Childhood Settings

Linda O'Donoghue and Beverlie Dietze

Abstract

This study explores the relationships that emerged during outdoor play in an early childhood education setting. Over four months, collaborations deepened through playful encounters and co-constructed learning among children and educators, in nature. Natural materials shaped the play, and traditional hierarchy dissolved as children took the lead, inviting educators into their imaginative worlds. Through observation, documentation, and reflection, the action research illuminated the nuances of children's behaviors, motivations, and preferences. Weekly outdoor "dances" fostered curiosity, development, and discovery. The findings suggest that when educators release control, they rediscover joy and embrace a negotiated curriculum that centers play and honors each child's unique capabilities.

Introduction

My visit with the children began as usual—preparing the outdoor environment for play. The educators and I had collected several tree branches which we wove together into a structure with other sticks strewn freely around the play yard. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a college student on practicum and a child engaging with a stick [see Figure 1: The Dance]. The child followed the student around the play yard with the stick. The student walked backwards with a smile on her face. At first, the child's stick simply followed her, but then, she reached out to hold the stick. The student and the child laughed as he pushed the stick closer and with more force. The dance was one of turn taking, where the student pushed the stick back to the child and the child then pushed it back to her. Back and forth went the stick with laughter and delightful smiles between them. (Researcher account)



Fig. 1: The Dance

In early learning and childcare settings, building trusting relationships between children and educators creates a strong community of learning. Makovichuk et al. (2014) define an optimal early childhood community in which "people are in relationships that encourage growth, creativity, innovation, problem solving, and progress, as people come together and pool their individual perspectives, wisdom, strengths, and skills" (p. 51). This paper examines how trusting relationships with children were built and strengthened when the educators surrendered their lead in play episodes. Moreover, the paper posits that the outdoor environment creates conditions that make the transformation of relationships between children and educators possible. The unpredictable nature of experiential outdoor play invites a dissolution of hierarchy, allowing more equitable and collaborative interactions to emerge. Prins et al. (2022) agree that the educator holds a significant role in outdoor play: "The motivation and the capacity to be taught by the world is not totally innate. It needs to be nurtured and sustained by adults" (p. 4). In early learning and childcare settings, some educators may employ a pedagogy of a "top down" (Jobb, 2019) approach where children's voices are silenced. Murray (2019) describes the consequences of not listening to children:

> If we do not listen actively and attend to each child's voice, we convey to the child and others that we do not value the child's perspective, and ultimately, that we do not value the child. By choosing to act in this way, we teach children to be undemocratic: they learn that the individual's view is not important for the group. (p. 3)

In this study, the researcher illustrates how educators moved away from a top-down pedagogy by deeply listening to the children, following their play interests, and actively engaging alongside them. In the examples presented, children assumed leadership in their own playful learning, with educators supporting and extending investigations. The benefits for children become evident when the adults engage playfully, listen attentively to their ideas, and value their emerging theories (Dietze & Kashin, 2023). Through these reciprocal and joyful exchanges, relationships and trust are strengthened, fostering children's social and emotional growth (Blewitt et al., 2021). Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) argued that educators should abandon rote learning and other inappropriate teaching methods, allowing children to learn naturally through play (Clarke, 2023).

The concept of attunement is aligned with relationship building. Foran et al. (2021) draw on Heidegger's (2001) view that attunement requires a primary focus. In this context, it is the child. Heidegger's notion of attunement refers to adults intentionally maintaining a "relational attitude," choosing to focus on the child despite potential distractions, stresses, and responsibilities. When educators demonstrate responsiveness to the child and are "in tune" with a child's moods and behaviors (Swim, 2017), trusting relationships are more likely to emerge.

Through such attunement, the child becomes the composer of their play and learning. Play then becomes an entry point for educators into the child's world, if they are willing and able to listen. Rinaldi's seminal work (2001) reminds us that a pedagogy of listening enables multiple perspectives to be shared and mutual respect to be cultivated (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). While relationships between children and educators take time to develop, a key factor is educators' willingness to value and engage meaningfully in play with children (Clarke, 2023).

In this action research study, as the early childhood educators and the researcher played outdoors with the children, the children's natural confidence in leading the way emerged because they were given the opportunity to do so. The adults refrained from controlling or directing the playscape; instead, they created space for the children to lead and followed their cues through playful, reciprocal exchanges.

The concept of child-led pedagogy is theoretically supported in early childhood frameworks across Canada (OECD report, 2021). Educators are encouraged, but not mandated, to align their practice with the guiding principles outlined in their respective provincial frameworks (OECD report, 2021). Within the context of this study, educators engaged with and worked to implement the principles of the Alberta Curriculum Framework, *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* (Makovichuk et al., 2014) in their daily practice. The shift toward a child-led pedagogy requires time, reflection, and sustained effort. Jobb (2019) highlights the complexities of power dynamics in early childhood education, noting that although there has been a philosophical and pedagogical movement away from teacher-directed approaches toward child-centered orientations, "there remain questions as to where power is located and how shifting orientations may continue to reinscribe hierarchical notions of power" (p. 212). While shifting power to the children may seem idealistic, when educators truly view children as capable and competent, this ideal becomes attainable by creating conditions for authentic, trusting relationships to flourish (Government of British Columbia, 2019).

Each week, the educators and the researcher observed and documented how children expressed their knowledge and theories within the prepared outdoor environment. Makovichuk et al. (2014) emphasize that dispositions to learn are not taught to children; however, what educators do matters. When you respond to each child's dispositions to learn—extending and expanding their playing, seeking, participating, persisting, and caring, you value and acknowledge each child's learning potential (p. 118). When educators engage in critically improvised play experiences that respond to children's actions and interactions with the outdoor environment, opportunities arise to share and redistribute power. Gibson's 1979 theory of affordances, as discussed by Sandseter et al. (2020), describes outdoor environments as spaces that invite children to interpret materials, special arrangements, and natural elements in their own unique ways through play and movement. In this study, the children communicated their ideas through both action and interpretation of materials, and educators were faced with a choice to acknowledge and build upon those or to overlook them. The educators chose the former, responding with playfulness and offering their own ideas back to the children, thereby co-constructing meaning, and deepening relationships.

In early learning and childcare settings, power is typically held by adults, who make decisions regarding, but not limited to, schedules, curriculum, play materials, and the design of both indoor and outdoor environments. As a result, children often have limited agency, with few opportunities for their ideas to be heard or acted upon within the very spaces and places in which they are entangled (Jobb, 2019). Deconstructing adult-held power in early learning and childcare settings requires deliberate attention to play environments, particularly outdoor spaces, which can play a vital role in levelling hierarchical structures. Educators must cultivate an awareness of these power imbalances to effectively create environments where children can assert themselves. In a study by Smith (2018), the researcher

highlighted the significance of outdoor play environments for children's social and emotional development. Smith found that when environments were intentionally prepared with open-ended materials, children were empowered to make decisions, resulting in increased creativity, focus, emotional regulation, and social competence.

When educators pay careful attention to both what exists in the outdoor play environment and what might be added, children are more likely to engage in deeper learning (Dietze & Kim, 2021). Thoughtful and intentional planning can contribute to the deconstruction of power as it "seeks to transform the taken-for-granted (e.g. representations of childhood) into the problematic through the revealing of power, competing interests, and conceptual or theoretical privilege (e.g. underpinning the representations)" (Lam, 2008). Nolan & Lamb (2019) note that educators are expected to provide learning environments that allow children the freedom to explore, problem solve, and create, while simultaneously maintaining self-awareness of their own judgments and influence on each child's learning. The researchers frame this reflective approach as recognizing that "educators with a social justice outlook are acknowledged as believing in the capacity of all children to succeed" (p. 1). In Derrida's (1992) seminal work, the concept of justice is closely tied to the deconstruction of power relations, emphasizing the importance of examining and challenging established hierarchies. Further, Derrida indicates:

> That is what gives deconstruction its movement, that is, constantly to suspect, to criticize the given determinations of culture, of institutions, of legal systems, not in order to destroy them or simply to cancel them, but to be just with justice, to respect this relation to the other as justice. (p. 18)

For Derrida (1992), power relations are not eliminated; rather, roles can be reversed allowing the "Other" to be treated with respect and justice. Applied to early learning and childcare, this perspective calls for educators to critically rethink their traditional power over children.

Examining the early learning and childcare setting to uncover where power resides requires educators to reflect on whether they truly believe children deserve agency. When educators embrace a capability approach, where they recognize that children can make choices about their own play and learning (Nolan & Lamb, 2019), power can then be shared or deconstructed in a Derridean sense. In this study, educators enacted this approach by co-planning experiences with the children, providing diverse materials (natural and human-made), asking open-ended questions, engaging in play alongside the children, and relaxing the schedule to respond to children's cues.

Within this early learning and childcare community, the educator team adapted and shifted their approach each week in responses to the children. The dance of teaching and learning evolved and transformed as trust between educators and children deepened. Positions of power shifted as children took the lead in play experiences. Research supports that a distributed model of leadership is effective in early learning and childcare. Clarkin-Phillips (2011) notes that distributed leadership occurs when multiple educators share responsibilities and leadership, influencing children's "dispositions to inquire" (p. 3). In the setting examined in this study, leadership extended to the children, who demonstrated and guided the educators through their play and learning. The outdoor environment, rich with natural

and found materials, provided children with opportunities to express their ideas through their action and play, signaling a shift in power relations. Jobb (2019) describes the environment as distinct from a mere space, emphasizing it as "imbued with fluidity, embodied and enacted power relations, and to advance the idea of possibilities for reconceptualizing power relations in place" (p. 214). Through their play stories, the children revealed both their connection to the outdoor environment and their individual interests, further highlighting the emergent and negotiated nature of power in the setting.

To understand why the *dance of the stick* occurred, the researcher emphasizes how learning and collaboration were achieved. Building positive and respectful relationships with young children was a key factor, alongside maintaining a flexible schedule responsive to children's outdoor play. Clarke (2023) notes that when young children are given opportunities for unscripted, uninterrupted play, they are better able to make meaningful connections.

During these play experiences, children invited adults to join their joyful endeavors. The outdoor environment was intentionally prepared with both natural and human-made materials, offering multiple opportunities for collaboration to those willing to engage. Educators demonstrated curiosity in the children's play while valuing and emphasizing outdoor planning that was guided by children's interests. This reciprocal engagement accelerated the development of trust. Tonge et al. (2018) highlight that when early learning and childcare centers provide children with more time in outdoor environments, higher-quality interactions are reported. They note that

> recognizing the influence of the quality as well as the quantity of the time spent outdoors is critical. The need for deliberate planning of time, experiences, interactions and intentional teaching in outdoor environments is essential and has the potential to influence the quality of interactions in the environment and subsequently child experiences and outcomes. (p. 39)

Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of intentional, flexible, and responsive outdoor planning in fostering meaningful interactions, trust, and rich learning experiences for children.

The adults developed a *dance of relationship* with the children, while the more-than-human world offered numerous gifts of materials, weather, vegetation, animals, and insects. Regular access to natural spaces, both wild and managed, should be a foundational aspect of early learning and childcare. Contact with natural environments has been identified as a key pathway for fostering children's connection to nature, and engaging in physical and adventurous activities outdoors further strengthens this connection (Barrable, 2019). The *dance of the stick* exemplifies the relationship between child, educator, and a natural material. The stick itself was approached as a friendly and inviting material, rather than a threat or hazard, highlighting the collaborative interplay between children, educators, and the more-than-human world.

Methodology

Action research was employed as the methodology for investigating children's outdoor play due to its practical, participatory, and iterative nature. This approach provided a unique opportunity to actively engage with the participants, including children, educators, and families, allowing them to be empowered as active agents in shaping their own play experiences. By examining practice as it occurs and connecting theoretical understandings with lived experience, action research enabled a deeper exploration of the complex dynamics influencing outdoor play, including environmental design, social interactions, and educational practices (Aras & Merdin, 2020).

The methodology's flexibility also allowed for real-time adjustments and interventions, ensuring that findings were relevant and immediately applicable to the study context, thereby contributing to the enhancement of children's outdoor play experiences. Action research emphasized a qualitative, reflexive approach rather than relying solely on quantitative data or preconceived hypotheses. Through ongoing observation, documentation, reflective discussion, and inquiry, the nuances of children's play behaviors, motivations, and preferences were captured, while the participants' perspectives were authentically represented (Lachuk et al., 2020).

This approach fostered trust and a sense of ownership among participants, supporting collaborative problem-solving and the development of new strategies within the early childhood setting (Lufungulo et al., 2021). In contrast to traditional perspectives that often view outdoor play as a space primarily for expending energy, this study positioned outdoor interactions as rich learning experiences (Dietze & Kashin, 2019). The cycle of action research as outlined in Figure 2, comprised of action, observation, reflection, and planning, provided a structured framework to examine these interactions and adapt practices accordingly (Oosthuizen, 2002).

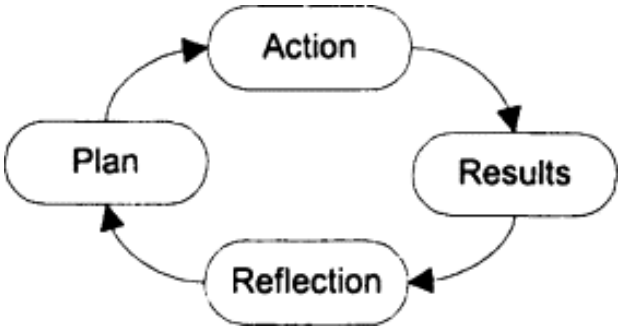


Fig. 2: A typical action-research cycle (Oosthuizen, 2002)

Clarke (2023) explains the expected outcome of action research is a change in one's approach to practice. When educators engage in sustained reflection and critically dwell upon their actions, transformation becomes possible.

The *dance of the stick* incident offered a moment of heightened awareness and a recognition of the power of relationships in action. As Mortari (2015) notes, "In the frame of the postmodern paradigm, reflective analysis of one's heuristic experience is assumed, whatever the subject matter of inquiry, as essential for the validity of the research" (p. 2). Through reflection, the educators came to appreciate that the relationships formed during this experience were the result of collaborative effort. The child led, and the adult willingly surrendered power. Mortari further emphasizes that "reflective practice is essential in research, since it aims at raising a thoughtful eye on oneself, which allows the subject to gain self-awareness" (Dahlberg et al., 2002, as cited in Mortari, 2015, p. 3). This reflective awareness reinforced the educators' understanding that authentic learning emerges when power is shared and children are positioned as capable leaders in their own play and inquiry.

The *dance of the stick* story provides an example of the many collaborations that emerged within this early learning and childcare setting. The educators intentionally reflected on power relations in early learning and childcare and chose to honor and embrace the children's play interests, which led to a joyful culture of play and learning. As Morley (2008) explains, "Critical reflection therefore brings into question how we know what we know and aims to transform our ways of knowing" (p. 268). In doing so, the educators deepened their understanding of how critical reflection can reframe pedagogy, moving it from a position of control to one of collaboration and reciprocity.

Over a four-month period, four different educators created documentation and play proposals that were offered to the children. The early childhood education student completing a practicum was included. The documentation was pedagogical in nature, incorporating photographs and video alongside written reflections and theoretical quotations to support meaning-making. Pedagogical documentation serves "to make the learning processes and life of children and adults in pre-schools and early childhood centers visible, as a basis of reflection and decisions for further actions" (Carlsen & Clark, 2022, p. 202). This documentation was shared with the children, families, and educators, offering the wider community insight into the play and learning taking place. This process encouraged ongoing reflection about the experiences, aligning with Mortari's (2015) view that "reflexivity, invoked in almost every qualitative research work, is conceived of as a practice that a researcher should carry out to make the politics of research transparent" (p. 1). In this way, reflexivity became both a research tool and a pedagogical practice, deepening the authenticity and transparency of the inquiry.

Children were provided with play materials based on their interests and, in turn, made decisions, asserted their ideas, and expressed creativity, innovation, and imagination. The outdoor environment, through its changing weather, seasonal conditions, and both found and natural materials, contributed significantly to the play experiences. The educators engaged in continuous team reflection to determine next steps for planning a playful, thought-provoking environment. However, to truly shift the power dynamic to the children, *reflection in the moment* was essential. As Dietze and Kashin (2023) note, "Professional dispositions become a way in which early learning students and teachers exhibit their professional practice. They have been called habits of mind. Critical thinking is one of many dispositions" (p. 480). Acting upon children's ideas as they emerge requires educators to embody these dispositions by professionals honoring children's play as a foundation for meaningful, reciprocal learning.



Fig. 3: Planks as skis

Discussion and Findings

The *dance of the stick* story provides a metaphorical example of how an equitable community was formed in this early learning and childcare setting. The stick represents an exchange of power and control, with no barriers to participation in play. Regardless of one's age, gender, background, race, or language, acceptance and belonging were experienced by all members of the community. The *dance of the stick* illustrates the back-and-forth rhythm of shared leadership, where both children and educators are empowered through the act of mutual disempowerment. In this sense, the power of leading play experiences is shared and never fully possessed by one or the other. By surrendering control, educators rediscover the joy of learning alongside children whose diverse capabilities are honored and respected.

A negotiated curriculum replaced what Sampson and McLean (2021) describe as a "rule-based culture," creating space for educators to center their attention on play. The adults' attunement and responsiveness to the children's interests were reflected in the materials offered in the outdoor environment, in how the natural setting (weather and season), influenced engagement, and in how educators both responded in the moment and planned future experiences.

The loose parts invited children to express their ideas and innovations freely. For example, in Figure 3, child M (4 years old) selected two narrow planks and, quite unexpectedly, demonstrated her knowledge of cross-country skiing. The educator responded by picking up a plank and joining her, snowboarding alongside. Through this shared moment, the educator honored the child's idea and demonstrated respect for her leadership in play.

Attunement is the educator's entry point into the child's world by engaging in an act of being truly present. As Foran et al. (2021) note, being attuned and reflecting pedagogically allows educators to recognize the child's unique sensibilities while also examining their own practice. In doing so, educators awaken to the ethical and relational responsibility of teaching, where learning becomes a shared and deeply human experience.



Fig. 4: Caped players

Awakening to children's theories and ideas requires educators to be thoughtful, courageous, and humble. Thoughtfulness is demonstrated when an educator honors a child's play and remains open to the possibilities it offers. For example, in Figure 4, a group of children explored notions of power and strength through super-hero and zombie dramatic play. The educators observed that the children's play centered on saving others, being fierce, strong, and courageous. To extend these ideas, the educators introduced capes and other fabrics to enrich the children's role playing. The caped players roared loudly, ran, and leapt across the play yard as rough-and-tumble play unfolded. If the educators had not attuned to the meaning behind these play ideas, the common reaction might have been to restrict such play due to safety concerns.

However, the courageous educator trusts in the value of children's play, even when it involves risk. Dietze and Kashin (2019) affirm that "risky play is now aligned with generating many positive outcomes for children. It is time for early learning students and teachers to reframe their perceptions that risk is something to be avoided" (p. 133). Through the characters they embody in caped play, children test their physical, social, and emotional limits. Pretend play allows them to explore empathy, courage, and care for others, while examining themes of power and strength within the safety of their imagination. As Rao and Gibson (2021) note, imaginative play provides an important avenue for young children to explore their emotions.

When children lead their playful learning with educators as collaborators and supporters, the power of structure is transformed: children gain freedom to make decisions within an environment of trust and support. As Jerome and Starkey (2022) point out:

> Once children have the right to express themselves and influence decisions that concern them, they may be said to have agency, that is, a sense that they may be able to engage with the structures around them and have some control over their own lives. (p. 440)

Within this study, children's agency was visible through their confident decisions, collaborative play, and ability to influence the direction of learning outdoors.

Within this early learning and childcare setting, the relationships between children and educators were grounded in love, care, and mutual respect. Cultivating such a climate requires dedication and passion, qualities that go beyond theory and which must be lived and visibly enacted. Siraj et al. (2019) emphasize that for professional development to be effective, both the evidence base and the method of delivery are critical. When educators work in isolation and are only exposed to practices within their own settings, opportunities for professional growth are limited. While workshops and conferences often provide inspiration, their impact tends to be short-lived. Sustainable change, by contrast, occurs when educators engage in ongoing reflection, coaching, and collaborative support that nurture both their practice and professional identity.

To design and implement professional development that leads to transformational change, it is essential to recognize that meaningful shifts in practice require ongoing support, multidimensional approaches to training, and dedicated time for reflection. Educators also need opportunities to apply, evaluate, and refine new skills within a conceptually aligned community of practice. As Siraj et al. (2019) emphasize, educators must be given space to engage in and assess their interactions within, between, and beyond the training context.



Fig. 5: Collaboration

In this study, the researcher collaborated with children and educators over a four-month period. While such intensive engagement is uncommon in professional development, this study demonstrates the value of this type of immersive learning. Modeling how educators surrender control and share power while building relationships requires time and cannot be achieved through a single workshop or conference

(see Figure 5: Collaboration). Although the exact pathway followed in this study cannot be replicated, fostering long-term relationships requires time between children and educators and is achievable. Allowing children to share leadership within a non-hierarchical structure is essential for high-quality early learning and childcare practice (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011). A child's right to make choices should not be exceptional; rather, it must be the normative.

Educators entering the profession must be aware of their own power over children and be willing to act as co-learners and co-facilitators of play and learning (Makovichuk et al., 2014). In Canada, the field of early learning and childcare requires a new model of professional development that prioritizes long-term coaching and mentorship, similar to the approach highlighted in this study. Extended engagement allows educators to embrace the concept of "being with" (Clark, 2023). Clark (2023) explains that this concept is linked to finding the rhythm of the children but also attention to "the 'rhythm' of colleagues, materials, and ideas" (p. 39). Over the four-month period, relationships between educators and children developed a shared rhythm, grounded in trust and collaboration.

Recommendations

The researcher continued visiting the children until spring 2023, while the student moved to a different early childhood setting. The *dance of the stick* persisted, surfacing in outdoor adventures during each visit. The child who danced with the practicum student later shared the dance with others, the sticks moving in harmony, accompanied by trust, laughter, and joy.

Relationships within the community deepened as educators planned outdoor experiences guided by children's play and encounters with nature. Documentation of these experiences provide opportunities for reflection and ongoing inquiry. The power over play is held by the children, while the educators marvel at their creativity. Wonderings continue as educators collaborate on play proposals, learning from children as their theories unfold. The Reggio Emilia term *mettersi in gioco* or "putting oneself into play" (Giamminuti et al., 2024), captures this ethos of educators engaging in playful inquiry, questioning themselves and their practice, while co-learning alongside children.

The natural world offers endless possibilities for both children and educators, with the season and weather acting as informants. Educators remain ready to respond meaningfully in the moment and through subsequent proposals. Such responsiveness encourages "attentive waiting" (Clark, 2023), a form of listening that allows slow knowledge to develop. "Working in a playful, unscripted way with materials may enable listening to happen 'differently' and for slow knowledge to develop" (Clark, 2023, p. 71). This approach encourages educators to remain present, attentive, and responsive, encouraging children's ideas and play to guide meaningful learning experiences.

Play is valued for what it represents to the child. While adults may misinterpret aspects of play, children are forgiving. The journey of outdoor pedagogy is an "adventure of growing" (Giamminuti et al., 2024), in which educators actively engage with children, sharing experiences, celebrating their creativity, and honoring their agency.

Notes

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Honoring Story, Land, and Community: Rethinking Indigenous Literacy Education

Brittany Ouellette and Trudy Cardinal

Abstract

In a Western schooling context, literacy education is often narrowly framed through reading and writing, privileging text-based practices grounded in Eurocentric assumptions about knowledge, learning, and achievement. For many Indigenous children, such framings do not acknowledge the relational, embodied, and land-connected ways literacy is lived and learned within family, community, and culture. In this literature review, we engage scholarship on Indigenous literacy education to examine how storytelling, land, kinship, community, and creative expression open broader understandings of literacy. Rather than approaching these as separate themes or as culturally responsive additions to Western literacy instruction, we consider them as interdependent literacies that reshape how meaning-making, teaching, and learning can be understood. We argue that rethinking literacy in these ways invites educators, particularly non-Indigenous educators, to move beyond deficit and classroom-bound frameworks toward more relational, culturally grounded, and collaborative literacy practices with Indigenous students, families, and community.

Introduction

> Consider that for more than a century, Indigenous students have been part of a forced assimilation plan—their heritage and knowledge rejected, suppressed, and ignored by the education system. (Battiste, 2019, p. 23)

Indigenous students' learning and levels of achievement in Western education institutions are an ongoing dialogue in academic literature. Many scholars have brought forward their concerns regarding the achievement gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students, which frames the latter within a deficit position (Battiste, 2019; Brice, 2020; Deer & Heringer, 2023; Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Hare, 2012, 2021; Skeete & Conrad, 2025). Across this work, scholars continue to point to the literacy achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and to the damaging ways deficit discourses are reproduced when Indigenous learners are measured against Western norms of literacy alone. Yet the problem is not simply that Indigenous students have been insufficiently included in existing literacy frameworks. More deeply, literacy instruction grounded within Western ideologies and knowledge systems often fails to acknowledge, or co-create space with, other ways of knowing, being, and doing. As described by Indigenous scholar Dr. Willie Ermine (1995), Western ideologies are grounded in "fragmentation," which he cautions is harmful for Indigenous students in education (p. 110). Ermine draws our attention to the disconnectedness of Indigenous students' cultures and traditions within Western-dominated curriculum and pedagogy; hence, Indigenous students' cultures and traditions are

not part of their literacy learning experiences within schools. Indigenous scholar Dr. Sharla Mskokii Peltier (2024) brings forward how there is a "huge emphasis on written language as knowledge in our schools. So, traditional Indigenous ways of coming to know are based on experience and storytelling, and these have been largely untapped and unacknowledged in the classroom" (10:34). As a result, it is imperative that non-Indigenous educators engage in critical work to deepen their understanding of how these structures in education impact students' literacy learning.

In Alberta's education system, literacy education is defined as "the ability, confidence and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct and communicate meaning in all aspects of daily living" (Alberta Education, 2025). Alberta Education (2025) further asserts that "when children enter the public school system, literacy education takes place within the Language Arts classroom" and is a "shared responsibility among all educators" (Alberta Education, 2025). This is important for educators to understand for two reasons. First, literacy is positioned as central to all learning experiences, meaning that every content area contributes to students' literacy development. Second, locating literacy primarily within the English Language Arts classroom risks narrowing where literacy learning takes place (Alberta Education, 2025). While literacy is taught in classrooms, framing it only within these spaces closes the door on many of the landscapes where literacy learning unfolds.

For Indigenous students, literacy learning is not restricted to a classroom; rather, it is a holistic and embodied way of learning that is woven through multiple relationships and places (Hare, 2021; Peltier, 2024). As Brubacher and Filipek (2025) remind us, Indigenous children "need to engage in learning that is land-based, narrative, experiential, and intergenerational" (p. 89). This understanding invites educators to rethink both what literacy is and where it happens, moving beyond the classroom walls to engage in authentic partnerships with students, families, and community. Literacy learning is an important part of students' daily lives, in their relationships and on multiple landscapes, as learning does not end when they leave the classroom.

The purpose of this literature review is to support educators in rethinking these assumptions by engaging with Indigenous scholarship on literacy as relational, embodied, and interconnected with story, land, family, and community. Rather than treating these as separate themes, this review approaches them as interdependent literacies that can guide more culturally grounded and collaborative approaches to literacy education. Through this lens, educators are invited to re-imagine literacy learning in ways that honor Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. This paper is intended to serve as a learning resource for educators to re-imagine their approach to literacy education both in the classroom and across landscapes.[1]

Literature Review

Western Literacy Education and Indigenous Learners

A consistent thread across the literature is the literacy achievement gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. Wright (2022), in "Western Literacy and First Nations Education," argues that the public education system presents significant challenges for Indigenous learners, particularly in literacy. They note that "many First Nations people in Canada struggle in the acquisition of the skills associated with Western literacy, that is, with the skills necessary to communicate through reading, writing, and numeracy in either English or French" (Wright, 2022, p. 2). Wright makes clear to the readers that the experiences of Indigenous students in their literacy education contribute to the uneven literacy achievement gap between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students. Similarly, in their work on literacy, Hare (2012) argues, "Indigenous children do not experience the same success in [western] literacy as their non-Indigenous counterparts" (p. 389). As a result, Indigenous students are unable to obtain the literacy skills and knowledge they need to function in today's society. Hare (2012) notes that 60% of Indigenous peoples over the age of 16 "failed to meet the basic standard Level 3, a level considered necessary for participation in everyday work and life" (p. 390). This achievement gap is ongoing. In the monograph *Honoring Our Students*, Brice (2020) echoes these concerns, stating that "the statistics around the literacy learning of Indigenous people paints a grim picture for the academic achievement of Indigenous children and youth" (p. 11, referencing the Canadian Council on Learning [2007, 2008] and the Canadian Educational Statistics Council [2009]).

Across these studies, scholars point to the deep colonial roots of these disparities. Wright (2022) emphasizes that "the causes of low literacy levels are deep rooted and complex, and have their origins in Canada's colonial past" (p. 2). The ongoing presence of colonial structuring in today's school systems continues to subject Indigenous learners to a Western curriculum that privileges Eurocentric knowledge systems. Peltier (2017) highlights this tension, noting that "when a binary opposition of Western literacy versus Indigenous orality is perceived, Aboriginal cultures are defined as oral traditions and the discourse follows that they are non-literate societies" (p. 6). This framing not only misrepresents Indigenous knowledge systems but also reinforces deficit narratives that position Indigenous learners as lacking.

The literature further emphasizes how these tensions manifest in classrooms. Hare (2012) notes that when Indigenous students' home and community literacies differ from the "literacy expectations and practices of formal school, children do not do well" (p. 390). Anderson et al. (2016) similarly argue that literacy education is often shaped by "middle-class, Western, and/or Eurocentric values and ideologies" (p. 4), creating a mismatch between school-based literacy practices and the relational, culturally grounded literacies Indigenous children experience in home and community. McKnight (2023) extends this critique, asserting that the "'English' curriculum in particular is a colonial project" (p. 259), reinforcing the dominance of Western knowledge systems in education.

Collectively, the literature evidence reveals a concerning achievement gap in literacy outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. More importantly, it shows that this gap is not a reflection of Indigenous learners' abilities or cultural practices, but of the pedagogical structures that fail to support Indigenous learners. Western literacy education continues to position Indigenous families' cultures and traditions as lesser than, thereby silencing the "life experiences, histories that shape how [Indigenous] children and families make sense of their world" (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 6). This article calls for a re-imagining of literacy education, one that honors and recognizes Indigenous literacies in authentic, relational ways to support all learners.

Non-Indigenous Educators and Literacy Education

In turning toward non-Indigenous educators, a common theme in the literature is the need for a deeper understanding of Indigenous students as literacy learners. Schools continue to be dominated by "settler-colonial agendas" as a result of a limited understanding of residential schools and the impacts still being experienced in Indigenous communities today (Bang et al., 2018, p. 8). As Bang et al. (2018) note, "non-Indigenous educators and administrators often lack an understanding of the history of schooling with respect to Indigenous communities or the ways in which schools continue to be shaped by and reflect settler-colonial agendas," resulting in the unpreparedness of educators to engage with Indigenous learners in "culturally responsive ways" (p. 8).

These systemic conditions shape everyday classroom practice. Gannaway (2022) argues that non-Indigenous educators who are positioned within the dominant culture in society may unknowingly reproduce those norms in their teaching, positioning one knowledge system above another, creating conditions "from which deficit discourses and disrespect for students' cultures can take root" (p. 226). Hare (2012) similarly observes that educators often lack familiarity with Indigenous cultures and literacy traditions, contributing to a lack of meaningful cultural learning opportunities because "educators struggle to move beyond dominant literacy paradigms, particularly in this age of high-stakes testing and outcomes-based accountability measures" (p. 391). Battiste (2019) extends this critique, emphasizing that culturally relevant learning requires educators to "become more aware of the systemic challenges for overcoming Eurocentrism, racism, and intolerance" (p. 28).

Research evidence shows several ways literacy education often fails to be meaningful for Indigenous students, not only because of missing "content and perspectives," but because dominant school literacies are grounded in epistemologies that differ fundamentally from Indigenous cultures and traditions (Leddy & Miller, 2023, p. 29). When lesson plans exclude Indigenous story, land, and kinship relations, they do more than omit culture; they disrupt the relational framework through which many Indigenous learners come to understand the world. Indigenous students describe literacy instruction as "irrelevant" and "disconnected" from their daily experiences, cultures, and traditions because school-based literacy is often treated as an individual, text-centered skill rather than a practice embedded in relationships, land, and community (Wright, 2022, p. 2). Educators' desire for ready-made lesson plans "that makes it all safe and easy to do" reflects the continued reliance on standardized approaches that cannot account for literacy as a living, place-based rhythm (Leddy & Miller, 2023, p. 29). When these deeper connections

are overlooked, literacy becomes detached from the very relationships they grow from, and which hold the potential to reshape how educators understand meaning-making alongside Indigenous literacy learners, their families, and community.

Educators must take initiative to engage in critical thinking that supports the unlearning and relearning of their understanding of literacy education. As bell hooks (2010) reminds us, "thinking is action . . . the heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works . . . it is an interactive process" (pp. 7–9). This work cannot be done in isolation and requires authentic collaboration and partnership with Indigenous students, their families, and the community. The following section, "A More Hopeful Story In Literature," turns to the literature not as a set of steps but as an invitation for educators to pause, notice, and re-imagine literacy learning and their own work alongside all learners. These examples from the literature open space for wondering about how we come to know literacy and new possibilities alongside Indigenous literacy learners. This section encourages educators to reflect on the assumptions that shape their practice and to re-image literacy learning that is grounded in relationality, respect, and partnership.

A More Hopeful Story in Literature

While the literature presents the tensions regarding the literacy learning experiences of Indigenous students, this section illuminates the possibilities of creating more culturally relevant literacy experiences. Figure 1, "Literacy Learning," gathers threads from the literature in a shared image, not to prescribe but to open space for educators to re-think what becomes possible when literacy learning is co-created with Indigenous learners, families, and community members (Bang et al., 2018; Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Hare, 2012; Peltier, 2017). This graphic gestures toward stories; land literacies; Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing; and creative expressions. It is not meant to serve as a "one size fits all" or "how to" approach, as the authors acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous peoples, their cultures, and traditions on the land. This conversation with the literature is intended to offer the reader possibilities to reflect on and inform their pedagogical literacy practices while coming alongside students and families in ways that honor Indigenous knowledges.

Figure 1 illuminates storytelling, land literacies, and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing as interconnected with family and community. This connects with the literature, which makes clear that these are not separate themes but interdependent literacies. Story emerges from the land—its histories, rhythm, and teachings—and is carried forward through the relationships children hold with family and community. As Styres (2018) reminds us, the land is storied and relational, offering teachings that are read, interpreted, and retold through oral traditions. These stories live because families and communities embody them, shaping how children come to know themselves and their place in this world (Hare, 2012; Peltier, 2024). When understood together, storytelling, land, and family form a relational literacy rhythm in which meaning-making is rooted in place, carried through kinship, and enacted through story. This framing moves beyond treating these practices as illustrative, separate examples and instead positions them as an interconnected lens for re-imagining literacy education.



Fig. 1: Literacy Learning
(Adapted from Barnes & Cardinal, 2023; Banister & Begoray, 2013; Brice, 2020; Hare, 2012, 2021; Anderson et al., 2016; Peltier, 2024, 2017; Sianturi & Hurit, 2024; and Styres, 2018)

Storytelling

Storytelling in Indigenous cultures and traditions is sacred and "possess[es] the power of meaning making" and "shape[s] how [Indigenous peoples] engage with and make sense of our lives. The stories we are told, and those we tell, both frame and reflect our understandings of ourselves, of the world around, and our place within it" (Hampton & DeMartini, 2017, p. 247). What we can glean from Hampton and DeMartini's insights is a need to re-imagine storytelling as literacy grounded in relationality. Stories do not come into existence in isolation; rather, they emerge from embodied experiences on the land and are carried forward through family and community relationships.

Turning toward education, storytelling is a learning partnership between students and educators. As Peltier (2024) describes, "together we engage in a critical process of learning and unlearning." Similarly, Weenie (2024) affirms that "stories are an opportunity to share important events that are meaningful to children . . . . children can be given an opportunity to share their stories, which can be changed into teaching moments" (p. 47). These insights echo Hare's (2012) observation that "Indigenous children draw on their rich cultures, traditions and ancestral languages to provide them with meaning-making experiences that shape how they make sense of their world and contribute to their socialization in early literacy practices" (p. 394). Families carry stories drawn from the land, teaching children to read and learn from the land as a living text. Storytelling, then, becomes an intergenerational literacy practice—co-created, shared, and remembered through relationships with people and place. When understood in

this way, oral storytelling is not simply an instructional strategy but a way of knowing that binds land, kinship, and literacy together. Storytelling can create and sustain rich literacy learning environments for all students. The following section invites readers to consider the ways storytelling can be woven into the daily learning rhythms for students and educators alike.

Story Circle (Peltier, 2024)

In their virtual presentation *Bundle Knowledge Workshop*, Peltier (2024) describes story circles as "traditional Indigenous ways of coming to know . . . based on experience and storytelling." The story circle "process involves listening, sharing, inner dialogue and reflection, deep meaning-making, remembering" (Peltier, 2024, 10:24) and can be engaged with learners from Kindergarten to Grade 12. Peltier (2024) also offers guidance for circle protocol, emphasizing the importance of creating a space that "brings belonging, a sense of safety, and a respectful community" (23:49).

To illustrate this rhythm, Peltier (2024) describes creating a class land acknowledgement within a story circle. Students are first invited to find a "green space" on the playground and "sit quietly for 10–20 minutes." They are encouraged to "observe, listen, feel, and reflect" and "then move around the area and select something that resonates with them," asking themselves, "is there something natural that is speaking to them, that is calling their attention?" Students may then "bring that back to the classroom," where "Grandfather rock is passed person to person as they share" (Peltier, 2024, 30:49).

Peltier (2024) explains that this land-based learning experience naturally transitions into the classroom through oral storytelling. Sitting together in a circle, each student has the opportunity to share the object and the meaning it holds for them. Moving clockwise, students bring "nature into this space and . . . talk about how they connected" with the item, demonstrating how story circles co-create relational, reflective, and land-rooted literacy practices (Peltier, 2024, 39:51).

Talking Circles (Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Weenie et al., 2024)

In their work alongside educators, Indigenous students, their families, and community, Goulet & Goulet (2014) identify talking circles and storytelling as central practices for "standing up to open spaces for student voices" (p. 143). They describe talking or sharing circles as meaningful learning experiences that support the oral literacy of all students and as a way of "reinforcing traditional Indigenous processes and communication patterns in the classroom" (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 151). Within these circles, students take up leadership roles, position themselves as speakers within the classroom community, and find opportunities to "bring their experiences and culture in the classroom" (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 151). Goulet and Goulet (2014) further note that talking circles are an "effective language arts strategy to develop listening and oral language skills, as well as writing skills," while also creating a community of learning in which students want to listen to one another (p. 151). In this sense, talking circles are not merely pedagogical techniques; they enact relational, participatory, and culturally grounded approaches to literacy that challenge dominant, text-centered approaches.

Building on this framework, Indigenous scholar Ida Swan (Weenie et al., 2024) offers additional insight into how talking circles can be implemented as a storytelling strategy in the classroom.[2] Swan explains that students sit in a circle, and there is an object "such as a talking stick" which is passed between students (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 48). A teacher may introduce questions or events where students can then "take turns discussing" with one question per round (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 48). Swan emphasizes that the circle creates space for choice and agency, where students are allowed to pass and must be respectful of others while staying on topic. Storytelling circles can be woven into instruction at the start of a lesson or unit or at the end to "finish off the unit in a good way" (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 48). Swan cautions that while the talking circle may offer teachers insight into students' thinking, "it is not used as an assessment strategy on the students. The talking circle is in keeping with oral tradition and the circle connotes connectedness" (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 47).

Together, these authors illustrate how talking circles are not simple instructional activities but relational frameworks grounded in Indigenous cultures and traditions. They position oral storytelling as a dynamic and relational literacy practice that can occur both within the classroom and across school landscapes. Talking circles create spaces where students' voices are honored, where confidence can grow, and where literacy emerges through connection rather than isolation. As we are reminded by Swan, "using Indigenous approaches that are derived from Indigenous worldviews or practices will result in good teaching" (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 49). In this way, the literature reveals storytelling as a relational approach to literacy that is grounded in relationships and respect as guided by Indigenous cultures and traditions.

These stories do not exist apart from place; they emerge from and return to the land, a living text that carries teachings across generations. Storytelling cannot be separated from the land and kinship relations that give it life; as the next section brings forward, land itself is a storied text through which stories are read, remembered, and carried.

Land Literacies

The literature emphasizes the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the land as one grounded in "deep connection to language and stories for Indigenous communities" (Mussi, 2023, p. 666). Drawing on Okanagan author Jeanette Armstrong, Mussi (2023) highlights that this connection emerges from the understanding that the "land holds all knowledge and constantly speaks" to Indigenous peoples who listen to its teachings and language (p. 666). In their work, Styres (2018) brings forward the ways literacy and land are interconnected; they write, "Land is an articulation of ancient knowledges grounded in the experiences of self-in-relationship to place" (p. 25). Further, they go on to affirm that what is written does not encompass what is found all around us in the "cosmos" (Styres, 2018, p. 25). The storied landscapes draw the reader's attention to how "the land is at once storied and relational, informing the social, spiritual, and systemic norms and practices of a particular culture-sharing group in relationship to their places" (Styres, 2018, p. 28). In connection with storytelling and literacy, the land contains the footprints of ancestors, which can be "read" and present within all living and non-living entities in the natural environment (Styres, 2018, p. 28). Styres offers a way of understanding land as a place where literacy unfolds. In Indigenous cultures and traditions,

land is storied, relational, and alive. Mussi (2023) and Styres (2018) extend this understanding, drawing attention to the land as a living site through which literacy learning takes shape. When families are on the land together, they learn to read the world through the stories it holds.

Land-Based Learning (Hare, 2012, 2016; Weenie et al., 2024)

In their research alongside Indigenous families and children, Hare (2012) affirms that land-based learning is inseparable from storytelling and culture, noting that "Indigenous knowledge is inherently tied to land, where meaning and identity are constructed through landscapes, territory and land formations" (p. 392). They note that Indigenous children "learn to inscribe meaning onto landscapes through stories and land-based experiences, shaping their understanding of the centrality of land to their identity and way of life" (Hare, 2012, p. 394). These insights are illustrated through rich examples of intergenerational storywork on the land. In Hare's work with families, one parent explained, "I make up stories, like when we're walking in the woods . . . [I] keep their main character Wild Woman [cultural character] but I just put a slight modern twist on it," demonstrating how cultural narratives are adapted and kept alive through everyday encounters with place (Hare, 2012, p. 402). Elders also visited children to share local stories and teach traditional practices, "such as preparing medicines, berries, and fish," grounding literacy in lived relationships with land and community (Hare, 2012, p. 402). During walks through the bush, caregivers pointed out cedar bark and explained "how it could be stripped and used to make baskets, hats and other artifacts of their culture" (Hare, 2012, p. 403). Seasonal teachings further connected children to place, as families spoke about gathering salmonberries in the spring and herring roe in the fall.

These insights illuminate how land-based learning is inseparable from storytelling, family, and community. The land becomes a literacy text that children learn to read through their experiences, cultural teachings, and intergenerational relationships, with literacy emerging as a relational, place-based way of knowing. Building on these examples also demonstrates how land-based learning enriches students' literacy learning by creating connections to their culture and traditions. Through oral storytelling, the land is rich with literacy where students, families, community members, and educators can read and speak aloud about what they see, feel, touch, hear, taste, and remember—stories carried across generations and held within place.

Ida Swan (Weenie et al., 2024) speaks to the importance of "ways to build stories in the classroom" and notes that land-based teachings "are an essential aspect of First Nations schools" because of the rich learning that grows from these experiences (p. 47). Turning toward the classroom, Swan goes on to inform us that "students can use their experiences to build their own stories and make their real-life experiences connected to the in-class activities" (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 48). This includes making a rabbit snare, snowshoes, and "in each case, the teacher can either access an Elder or Elder's helper to tell the stories as the student makes the item" (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 47).

Swan's words gesture toward the possibilities that open when classroom learning remains in relationship with the land. Her reflections invite educators to re-imagine classrooms as places where students' stories, movements, memories, and experiences continue to embody their relationship with the land; where their experiences are not translated into tasks, but held as living stories of the land that shape how learning unfolds.

Land and Student Storytelling (Peltier, 2024)

Peltier's (2024) work beautifully invites educators to honor students' stories and oral storytelling in connection with time spent on the land. In her *Bundle Knowledge Workshop*, Peltier (2024) describes how the "school yard became the earth teaching lodge," a place where students encounter teachings held in the land itself (4:30). Grandfather rocks, described as "the oldest part of the earth," become more than objects: they are knowledge carriers that connect students to ancestral presence and to the stories embedded in place (17:14). Through their work, Peltier shows us how land-based experiences are not separate from storytelling, but are the ground from which students' stories emerge, shaping how they understand themselves and the world around them.

A key thread in Peltier's (2024) work is the invitation for students to go to a "green space outside" (30:49), a practice she frames as "a pedagogy of land in an urban or rural schooling context" (31:05). When students spend time on the land, listening, observing, and attending to what calls their attention, they begin to read the world through a relational, sensory, and storied way of knowing. Peltier (2024) explains that "when the children storied about their experience out in the school yard, these words and concepts were expressed" in the story circle (31:41). In this way, land-based experiences do not come before literacy; they are literacy, shaping the meanings students bring into the classroom. The transition from land to classroom is not a shift from experience to learning, but a continuation of relational literacy practices. As Peltier (2024) notes in describing story circles, "we share so that our stories are layered, just as the footprints of our ancestors are layered in the earth under our feet" (34:41). Students embody their stories from the land that emerges from their encounters with place, and these stories become the foundation for oral storytelling in circles. Through this process, students engage in meaning-making that is grounded in relationships with land and community.

Peltier's (2024) teachings open our eyes to land and storytelling as interconnected literacies rather than separate. Land becomes a teacher, story becomes a relational practice, and students become holders of knowledge whose experience of the land shapes the stories they share. This framing moves beyond the "how to" model of literacy and instead offers a theoretical orientation in which literacy is understood as relational, embodied, and place-based. Her work provides opportunities for educators to engage in "unlearning" and "re-learn" (Peltier, 2024, 8:51) in ways that disrupt colonial embedded ideologies of Indigenous children's literacy learning. Just as land-based learning is intergenerational and relational, storytelling and kinship continue to shape how children read the land and understand their place within it.

Indigenous Students' Community and Cultural Traditions

The literature makes clear that family and community are inseparable from literacy learning; they embody Indigenous literacies, ways of knowing that are lived, practiced, and passed from one generation to the next (Bang et al., 2018; Hare, 2012; Anderson et al., 2016). As Boivin (2023) reminds us, "intergenerational storytelling has been around since the beginning of time" (p. 560). Hare (2012) further affirms, "Indigenous families want their children to become successful in the dominant literacy practices of schooling," yet they also emphasize that literacy "exist[s] for Indigenous learners outside of school" (p. 409). These out-of-school literacies are deeply relational and grounded in cultures, traditions, and land-based knowledge such as storytelling, gathering medicines, and walking the land with family. In these moments, children engage in literacy that is intergenerational, embodied, and place-based.

Building on these understandings, the literature also emphasizes the responsibility of educators to co-create spaces that honor the literacies that children bring from home and community into school landscapes (Anderson et al., 2016; Pelter, 2017). This requires educators to reflect on their own experiences and assumptions, and to co-create learning that honors Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing. For literacy learning, co-creating spaces and learning opportunities that include students' cultures and traditions leads to more meaningful and successful engagement with reading and writing skills in school. Importantly, this work highlights the vital role of families and community members in children's educational experiences and emphasizes the need to strengthen connections between home and school (Anderson et al., 2016). In this section, we draw forward key insights from the literature that open possibilities for educators to re-think and re-imagine how they come into relationship with families, students, and community in relational, culturally grounded ways.

Elder Storytelling and Partnership (Boivin, 2023; Hare, 2012; Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Peltier, 2017)

Elders have a central role in this relational literacy work. As Hare (2012) writes, "Elders are highly regarded in the community and have the responsibility for ensuring the preservation and transmission of knowledge" (p. 393). Peltier (2017) describes how a "transformative process of educator action and reflection emerges when educators and practitioners initiate contact with Elders, keepers-of-the-language, and knowledgeable people in the community and embody a listening and observing stance" (p. 14). When Elders lead culture-based and land-based learning, they "model traditional forms of teaching" (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 156) and this "is one way in which elders can engage with younger children" in intergenerational storytelling (Boivin, 2023, p. 559). These partnerships also help teachers become more "responsive" to students' strengths and abilities (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 156). Taken together, the literature highlights that working with Elders is not a separate approach, but a relational practice grounded in respect, reciprocity, and humility. Educators learn alongside their students, honoring oral transmission of knowledge and co-creating spaces where Indigenous ways of knowing guide and shape literacy learning.

Indigenous Family Roles (Bang et al., 2018; Kavanagh, 2008)

Bang et al. (2018) remind us that "families are the heart of Indigenous nations and communities" (p. 1) and "the primary contexts in which Indigenous children learn who they are, Indigenous ways of knowing, and what is expected of them as they become adults and eventually become good elders" (p. 2). Collaborating with families is therefore imperative to the learning achievement and success of students and requires expanding the narrow definition of "family" to include the multitude of relationships that make up children's support systems, not just "parents" (Bang et al., 2018, p. 13). As Bang et al. (2018) note, "multigenerational and community learnings are key aspects to Indigenous pedagogy and ways of knowing and being" (p. 14). These insights echo Kavanagh's (2008) reminder that "parents are their child's first teachers" (p. 9). For non-Indigenous educators, this means reflecting on which knowledge systems are centered in their instruction and recognizing that Indigenous children's learning unfolds across multiple landscapes, not only within classroom walls. When educators honor family knowledge and partner with communities, they co-create more relational and culturally grounded literacy experiences with Indigenous children and their families. These relational literacies, rooted in story, land, and community, also take shape through creative expressions that invite learners to engage with these teachings through embodied, imaginative practice.

Creative Expressions

In this section, we draw attention to discussions in the literature that highlight creative expressions that hold deep cultural significance for Indigenous learners, families, and community. Rather than positioning creative expressions as a set of classroom strategies, these discussions illuminate how tangible items, artifacts, and artistic practices carry story, memory, and relationship. They reveal how literacy can take shape through forms that remain connected to land, kinship, and lived experience, inviting educators to re-imagine literacy learning in relation with Indigenous students, families, and community.

Story Bundles (Barnes & Cardinal, 2023)

In their article, Barnes and Cardinal (2023) draw on Swanson's (2013) description of story bundles, guided by Anderson's work, to illustrate how stories live within people. As Swanson (2013) writes, "metaphorically, the story bundle represents the stories each person carries. The story bundles . . . throughout the text are pieces of my story, lived and told in relation with others and stories yet to be created" (p. 428). Story bundles, then, are not artifacts but living expressions of relational literacy.

Barnes (2023) extends this understanding through their reflection on role-playing games (RPGs): "my interaction with the narrative of the game and its responses to my in-world actions are relational; they are not two separate objects" (p. 432). They go on to describe how "the healing knowledge and stories I learned on the land with my grandmother reciprocally permeate my experience of the affective, RPG gamespace, describing how to use the ways story bundles can be represented" (p. 432). Through this lens, digital storytelling becomes a site where land-based teachings and contemporary literacies intertwine, demonstrating how story bundles can take form in both embodied and virtual worlds.

Cardinal (2023) similarly illustrates how creative practices such as beading and sewing carry a story. She writes, "I learned to bead and sew moccasins out of moose or elk hide, and my new creations became the lived and living story that came from within me and was told through me" (Barnes & Cardinal, 2023, p. 435). She goes on to describe how these practices allowed her to "reconnect to my hands, to the wisdom of the aunties who I had sat watching throughout my childhood" (Barnes & Cardinal,, 2023, p. 435). Through this reflection, Cardinal illuminates how creative expression is interconnected with kinship, memory, and land-based knowledge, illuminating it as a relational form of literacy rather than a purely artistic activity.

Taken together, Barnes and Cardinal (2023) invite us to understand story bundles as relational literacies that move across land, body, memory, and digital space. Whether expressed through beadwork, sewing, or role playing, they reveal how stories live within us. Their work invites educators to see creative expression as a way of knowing—one that honors intergenerational teachings and relationships. Through this lens, creative expressions become powerful sites of literacy learning, expanding school-based literacy practices and opening space for culturally grounded re-imagining of literacy learning.

Representations of Learning and Storytelling (Peltier, 2024; Whiskeyjack, 2021)

Peltier's (2024) work demonstrates how creative expression can serve as a powerful site of relational learning. She shares the work of a university student from one of her courses whose drawing emerged from *biophilia*, or "the love of nature," using color, plant forms, and key words and phrases. In another example, a student sculpted a "grandfather rock" to represent their learning from the course, a piece Peltier contextualizes within both Indigenous worldviews and Western schooling. Across these examples, Peltier emphasizes that each creative expression is a story of learning; of connection to culture, traditions, and the land; and a reflection of the student's autonomy in shaping how their knowledge is shared. Her work invites educators to re-think how students demonstrate their learning, recognizing creative expression as a form of oral and visual storytelling.

Visual storyteller and Indigenous artist Lana Whiskeyjack, ipkDoc,[3] from Saddle Lake Cree Nation, similarly illuminates how story lives within creative works. In discussing her painting series *We Are the Medicine*, she reflects that her "favorite part is just painting these matriarchs who are teaching me so much through just the act of creating" (Whiskeyjack, 2021, 5:08). Whiskeyjack (2021) explains that the series is rooted in her exploration of *nêhiyaw*, the Cree Thirteen Moon calendar, through which she explores "womanhood within the 13 moons' teachings," and portrays women as "courageous, incredible, and powerful matriarchs" (0:28, 1:22). She also describes working from "this three generations perspective . . . that whole belly button connections that I've always tried to honor through my work" (2:45). Whiskeyjack's reflections reveal how visual art becomes a site of intergenerational storywork, where teachings, memory, and identity are brought forward through creative expressions.

Together, Peltier (2024) and Whiskeyjack (2021) illuminate how visual and creative expressions are not supplementary activities but relational literatures grounded in story, land, and kinship. These forms of storytelling reveal how knowledge is carried in the body, in memory, and in creative practice, offering

students meaningful ways to represent their experiences and identities. When educators recognize creative expression as a legitimate and powerful literacy practice, they move beyond narrow, text-centered definitions of literacy to open space alongside Indigenous learners to tell stories in ways that honor their cultures and traditions. In this way, creative expression becomes not only a mode of representation but a pathway for re-imagining literacy education itself.

Moving Forward

In looking toward a more hopeful story of Indigenous students' literacy learning, the literature invites us to understand literacy learning not as a set of discrete practices, but as relational rhythms grounded in storytelling, land, and family. Literacy learning emerges from children's lived experiences on the land and is embodied in the relationships they hold with family, Elders, and community members. Land, in turn, is not separate from this learning, but a living text that holds histories and teachings, made visible through intergenerational stories and storytelling.

For educators, this relational understanding requires a shift away from seeking certainty or finding the "right answers" in literacy instruction. It leans more toward embracing co-learning with children, families, and community. As Leddy and Miller (2023) remind us, "perhaps the kindest thing you can do for yourself and your students, Dear Reader, is to acknowledge that this is something that you are learning about as well—you don't need to know it all! You can be a co-learner with your students" (p. 29). Their words emphasize the reciprocal nature of this work: learning is co-created through active listening, humility, and open engagement.

While the literature illuminates the historical and ongoing challenges Indigenous students face as literacy learners, as Tuck (2009) cautions, this is not to be framed as a deficit narrative of Indigenous peoples. This article offers an opportunity for readers to let the works drawn from the literature reverberate across the pages onto their own pedagogical practice with students, their families, and community in ways guided by Indigenous cultures and traditions.

Notes

1) Learning landscapes for this literature review include, but are not limited to, learning that takes place within school classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, home, community, land, and parks.
2) In their discussion of talking circles, Swan cites First Nations Pedagogy Online.
3) Lana Whiskeyjack received her iyiniw pimâtisiwin kiskeyihtamowin doctorate (ipkDoc) from the University nuhelot'ı̨ne thaiyots'ı̨ nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills.

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Brittany Ouellette is a non-Indigenous woman living on Treaty 6 Territory. She is a certified K–12 educator in Alberta and a mother of two. This literature review continues Brittany's ongoing journey of unlearning and relearning. Her research work focused on the experiences of Indigenous families and their children within and across school landscapes through a narrative inquiry framework. Her relationships with friends and community members from the Nations have opened her to new ways of thinking, most importantly, opening her heart to new relationships and to sustained self-awareness.



Trudy Cardinal, PhD, is a Cree/Métis woman, mother, aunty, grandmother and scholar. Her maternal family is Bigstone Cree Nation from Wabasca, Alberta. Her paternal lineage is of the Sinclair family in Slave Lake, Alberta. The Boreal forest has been her childhood playground and still calls her home. She is a professor at the University of Alberta whose research and scholarly work focus on Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing in literacy, assessment, and pedagogy. Her research is also deeply rooted in creating safe spaces for Indigenous children, youth, and families, in particular Indigenous young women, in efforts to support a wholistic understanding of well-being and identity.

Grounding Elementary Social Studies Teacher Education in Indigenous Knowledge

Sharla Mskokii Peltier and Janice Huber

Abstract

This article tracks a multiyear relationship between an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous preservice teacher educator working together on *Odenang* Inquiry pedagogy. The importance of truth-telling and relationship-building in a reconciliation context is discussed, followed by a discussion of Anishinaabe *Wiijiindowin* and story pedagogy as Indigenous relational self-study. We present some examples of *Odenang* Inquiry in social studies preservice teacher education that reflect three interconnected and layered processes. We conclude the article with some reflections on ways that the interconnections among these processes have contributed to the development of our *Odenang* Inquiry approach.

Coming Toward *Odenang* (Heart Place) Inquiry in Elementary Social Studies Teacher Education

The research reported in this article has an important positionality component and builds on a previous project involving the application of Indigenous knowledge. We are an Anishinaabe kwe from the Chippewas of Rama First Nation (Mnjikaning) and a member of the Loon Clan whose ancestors have been in a reciprocal relationship with Lands/Place[1] that through colonization have become known as Ontario, Canada (Sharla), and a person of mixed Scandinavian and European ancestry who was raised on lands known within colonial accounts as Crooked Creek, Alberta, Canada (Janice). We are a former speech-language specialist with years of experience alongside Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in First Nation and public schools (Sharla) and a former elementary teacher who came alongside children and families in rural, international, and urban schools, and has been a faculty member in various teacher education programs in diverse places in Canada (Janice). We are both mothers.[2] Our relationship began in 2017 when Sharla accepted a position in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. Our coming to implement *Odenang* (heart place) Inquiry in an elementary social studies course was nurtured through our participation in a four-year project led by Anishinaabe Elder Stanley Peltier and Sharla.[3] Since then, our reflections together of our project experiences have deepened our relationship of coming alongside each other as instructors of preservice teachers.

As two of the 21 student, staff, and faculty co-researchers, we participated in a monthly Teaching Lodge guided by Elder Peltier and Sharla's teachings. Early in the project, Elder Peltier began to teach *Odenang* as he invited us to remove our shoes and walk barefoot on the grass. There was much laughter and sharing about how many of us had not let our bare feet touch the earth for a long time. As we stood in a large circle beside the trees near the Teaching Lodge, Elder Peltier taught us about their medicines, and reminded us of our need to walk in this whole-body way so we remember *Aki* (all of creation at the level

of the earth or Land) and our connection with the Lands/Places where we were raised and/or currently live. In the Teaching Lodge later that evening, he shared more of his knowledge of *Odenang*:

> O doing with your heart
>
> d actualization
>
> ode heart
>
> nan territorial area of where you live; usually closer to where your Nation lives; we walk where our ancestors are
>
> (Peltier et al., 2022, pp. 5–6)

In a subsequent Teaching Lodge, Elder Peltier encouraged us to remember the web of life, which includes the remains of our ancestors who nourish Lands/Place and us, and the feelings and knowledge we reconnect with when we walk on the Lands/Places of our ancestors.

One purpose of this earlier research project was to support the design of new courses or to redesign existing courses with attention to culturally respectful engagement with Indigenous foundational knowledge. The re-visioning of our teaching of the social studies methods course has been an ongoing process fueled by our desire to engage students and ourselves in *Odenang* Inquiry. This Indigenous pedagogy can nurture the individual and collective growth of critical thinking in response to colonial, taken-for-granted beliefs, values, discourses, and practices in social studies and citizenship education. By engaging in *Odenang* Inquiry, we want to support student teachers to understand children as situated beings, as knowledge holders and makers, and that children's families, communities, and Lands/Places are key in relational learning and in Indigenous Knowledges. Through use of this approach to inquiry in the course, we envisioned a process of growth in the ability of our students to value Indigenous Knowledge. We invited Elders, family, and community members to lead culture- and Land-based learning and stories, which nurture habits of slowing down, and we visited with Lands, Waters, and Beings, including local Indigenous significant sites.

This article further elaborates on *Odenang* Inquiry by discussing its importance for truth-telling and relationship-building in a reconciliation context before moving to a discussion of Anishinaabe *Wiijiindowin* and story pedagogy as Indigenous relational self-study. We go on to present some examples of *Odenang* Inquiry in social studies preservice teacher education in a way that involves three interconnected and layered processes. We conclude the article with some reflections on ways that the interconnections among these processes have contributed to the development of our *Odenang* Inquiry approach.

Odenang Inquiry for Truth-Telling and Relationship-Building as Reconciliation

As an Indigenous scholar and a non-Indigenous scholar, and as mothers, we have each long been involved in the field of education. Our experiencing *Odenang* Inquiry in the project grew our desires to ensure we maintained attention to truth-telling and relationship-building as key constituents of reconciliation. As noted by Frank Deer (2019),

> the general aim of reconciliation that has emerged from the activities of the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] is the development of a new relationship amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. Such a new relationship must acknowledge harms of the past and their impact into present. (p. 1)

Crucial are Indigenous peoples' understandings of Lands/Places, education, and the Treaties. As affirmed in a seminal report by the National Indian Brotherhood (1972),

> In Indian tradition each adult is personally responsible for each child, to see that [each child] learns all [the child] needs to know in order to live a good life. [We] want our children to learn that happiness and satisfaction come from . . . pride in one's self, understanding one's fellowmen, and, living in harmony with nature. (p. 1)

Centering a child's growth in pride "encourages us to recognize and use our talents, as well as to master the skills needed to make a living" (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 1). Centering a child's growth in understanding other human beings, "enable[s] us to meet other Canadians on an equal footing, respecting cultural differences while pooling resources for the common good" (p. 1). Centering a child's growth in living in harmony with Lands/Places and more-than-human-beings ensures "preservation of the balance between man and his environment which is necessary for the future of our planet, as well as for fostering the climate in which Indian Wisdom has always flourished" (pp. 1–2). These goals are realized for each child when education "provide[s] the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honoured place in Indian tradition and culture" (p. 2). These include "self-reliance, respect for personal freedom, generosity, respect for nature, and wisdom" (p. 2).

As Mary Young (2005) highlights, given the ways Indigenous people have always understood education, their perspectives during Treaty-making were such that they "wanted an education but did not want to be 'Christianized,' 'civilized,' or 'assimilated'" (p. 33). Even so, the colonial government intentionally and forcibly "separated children from their parents, sending them to residential schools [meant] not to educate . . . but to break their link to their culture and identity" (TRC, 2015a, p. 2). "Insulating" the children "from the influences of their own people" took place by "[subjecting the children] to a program designed to lead them to forget who they were and to adopt the ways and values of their teachers" (Young, 2005, p. 33). Slowly, more Canadians are learning these truths. Many preservice teacher educators see the importance of their own and present and future teachers' inquiries as part of truth-telling that can interrupt the colonial legacy of Indigenous education (Battiste, 2013; Cardinal & Fenichel, 2017; Chambers, 2006; Deer, 2022a; Dion, 2009; Donald, 2016; Peltier, 2017; Steinhauer, 2023; Tupper, 2014; Weenie, 2008).

Troubling Multiculturalism and Colonial Understandings of "Citizenship"

Our work as preservice teacher educators in the Social Studies course responds to calls for education to stop assimilating Indigenous peoples and to honor an Indigenous perspective of citizenship in Canada, where Indigenous Peoples are "Citizens Plus." Over time we have learned that many non-Indigenous people, including non-Indigenous teachers and teacher educators, do not yet know of Harold Cardinal's leadership on behalf of the Indian Association of Alberta. Harold's work elevated an Indigenous perspective of citizenship in Canada as outlined in the 1970 *Citizens Plus/The Red Paper* (Indian Chiefs of Alberta, 2011), grounding historical Treaty relationships with First Nations as self-determining and in control of all aspects of their lives as Indigenous peoples first, and Canadians second.

In her book about multicultural education, Rhatna Gosh (2002) discusses Indigenous peoples' assertion that they are "citizens plus" with their rights superseding all subsequent rights granted to other groups. Rhatna states that "any real and long-term change will require education [policies and curricula] to be more reflective of and responsive to Aboriginal interests" (Gosh, 2002, p. 32). However, as recently shown by Sara Karn, Kristina Llewellyn, and Penny Clark (2024), this reflectiveness and responsiveness is still not happening as "history curriculum across the provinces [continue to] generally ignore Indigenous ways of knowing and being" (p. 1101). As a result, we have seen how Indigenous peoples' understanding of themselves as "Citizens Plus" continues to be denied. This includes denial of experiences and values that give rise to broader understandings of education and membership in society that are grounded in the value of centering Land/Place relationships and responsibilities.

Indigenous education is not ideally situated within a multiculturalism agenda. As noted by Angela Ward and Rita Bouvier (2001), while "multicultural approaches to curriculum recognize cultural differences" (p. 7), in the absence of a lens of social justice, multicultural narratives continue to assimilate Indigenous peoples. Verna St. Denis (2011) shows that when multicultural narratives of being/becoming a good citizen are centered in social studies education, "Aboriginal peoples' claims to land and sovereignty in Canada" are silenced (pp. 306–307). Verna describes the differing concerns of Aboriginal peoples and racialized immigrants with the concept of multiculturalism:

> Racialized immigrants of color are concerned that multiculturalism does not address racism and anti-immigration sentiments but may even provoke them . . . . Aboriginal peoples are concerned with Indigenous sovereignty and asserting rights based on their original and continuing occupation of the land . . . . In other words, Aboriginal groups suggest that multiculturalism is a form of colonialism and works to distract from the recognition and redress of Indigenous rights. Racism also impacts upon Aboriginal groups, and multiculturalism can justify public expressions of anti-Aboriginal sentiments. (St. Denis, p. 308)

As Verna makes clear, in the absence of attention to Indigenous people's enduring occupation and relationship with these Lands, it is only when Indigenous people's sovereignty is recognized and realized that Canada will be actually moving toward respecting Indigenous peoples as Citizens Plus.

Frank Deer (2011) further describes how "citizenship is a problematic issue for all citizens in Canada because of its awkward association with the concept of identity" (p. 10). He highlights that for Indigenous people in Canada, "Canadian citizenship serves as a mechanism for control over crucial elements of

personal and collective self-concept," in part due to the lack of recognition of "the diversity of Canada's Aboriginal population," as well as "their struggle for recognition" (Deer, 2011, p. 11). While Indigenous peoples in Canada experience "this mechanism . . . at work in numerous social forums, including Canada's public schools," Frank asserts that because "social studies curricula across Western Canada address skills and outcomes that can be associated with specific citizenship values," citizenship has become "treated as an academic subject" (Deer, pp. 10–11). He argues that Aboriginal students are ill-served as a result:

> Aboriginal students are frequently exposed to subject matter that does little to facilitate the development of an identity that is informed by the traditional cultural mores of their peoples (Saunders & Hill, 2007). The Eurocentric educational programming that is delivered to many Aboriginal students in Canada may provide skills necessary for developing active citizens, but such programming is carried out with an omission of appropriate content that is relevant to the students in question and provides opportunities to challenge Canada's cultural status-quo in a way that solidifies Aboriginal identity (Critchly et al., 2007). Through language, community relationships, and traditional knowledge, Aboriginal students may be provided the opportunity to develop an identity of their own (Neganegijig & Breunig, 2007)—one that is informed by the experiences and legacies of their ancestors and communities. (Deer, 2011, p. 10)

Over time, as we have guided students in *Odenang* Inquiry, our recognition has deepened about how the spiritual ethos of Indigenous peoples emerged as significant in the TRC Calls to Action (TRC, 2015b) and education for reconciliation. As Frank notes, "in order to understand many aspects of the Indigenous experience, understanding the spiritual dimensions of those experiences and their associated ceremonies are necessary" (Deer 2022b, n. p.).

As we show in this paper, our re-visioning of coming alongside students in the Elementary Social Studies course led us to include exploration of spirituality and experience of ceremony through story circles, Elder and Land visits, and reflective arts practice, all of which shaped an unfolding process of "coming to know" deeply (Peltier, 2016, 2021). This process opens liminal space that alongside our ongoing nurturing of *Odenang* Inquiry draws attentiveness and further inquiry into values, such as interconnectedness and relationships. Exploration of these values opens potential for understanding citizenship and identity in ways that move far beyond the human-centric and economic focus that dominates in government-mandated social studies outcomes. As noted by Blair Stonechild (2020), "Indigenous peoples regard their sacred duty as one of respect for and living in harmony . . . with the rest of Creation. The action of placing humanity and its interests above all else was a critical mistake. It resulted in unresolved ideological conflict that has critical implications" for the destiny and interconnected rights of all beings (p. 241). As becomes visible through the upcoming sections that show our relational self-study, from the outset of our teaching of the Elementary Social Studies course we have invited student teachers to explore Indigenous conceptions of citizenship related to Treaty Education and Indigenous sovereignty and identity.

Anishinaabe *Wiijiindowin* and Story Pedagogy as Indigenous Relational Self-study

As the Teaching Lodge project was being conceptualized, Elder Peltier and Sharla shared their knowledge of how the Anishinaabe way of living *Wiijiindowin* (hearts joining together) opens an unfolding multidimensional process activated within a person as they attend to where they originate from, the values of working together, respecting personal experience, and appreciating the relationship between mind and heart. This process, which involves moving toward deeper awareness and understanding, is a powerful Indigenous pedagogy (Peltier et al., 2022).

By the time the project ended, our pedagogical research relationship had grown into a strong friendship, which had deepened through our experiences and interconnected storying within the multidimensional "*Anishinaabe* way of coming to know (theory and praxis)" of the project. Creating "space for Indigenous Circle storywork pedagogy . . . illustrates ways of knowing the interrelationships and interconnections with *Aki* and each other" (emphasis in original, Peltier, 2016, p. 120). As we continued to collaborate in teaching courses and in supporting the doctoral research of numerous graduate students, our trust in and vulnerability with one another continued to grow through our ongoing centering of *Wiijiindowin* and story pedagogy in our day-to-day lived relationship. As a result, it felt natural to continue drawing on, and to share and make meaning of our experiences through story as we inquired into our coming alongside students encouraging their *Odenang* inquiry in the Elementary Social Studies course.

This Anishinaabe self-study process has supported and continues to support our ongoing individual and relational re-searching. Kathy Absolon (2022) describes "re-searching" as a "process of how we come to know—a process of acquiring knowledge" through our continuous "searching for ways of knowing that wholistically include the spirit, heart, mind and body" (pp. xvi–xvii). This inquiry process has supported our ongoing designing of the three interconnected processes in the Elementary Social Studies course, which we invite students to engage in as the course unfolds, as well as our ongoing storying and restorying of our praxis with one another as we have come alongside successive groups of students.[4] Central is our dwelling in the midst of story with students, and our restorying, which Greg Sarris (1993) illustrates as a process that unfolds as we allow stories to work on us. As he describes, it is through our storying and restorying that we continue to (un/re)learn and grow as we talk back and forth with our stories, inwardly and with one another.

Odenang Inquiry: Interconnected Processes in Social Studies Teacher Education

Figure 1 shows that as the course unfolds, we invite students to engage in three interconnected and layered processes that support them to grow their knowledge of engaging in *Odenang* Inquiry when teaching elementary social studies. These three processes come into play in student inquiries into their "philosophy of citizenship education in social studies"; individual, small-group, and whole-class "reflective thinking with course texts" processes; and small-group collaborations to co-create an inquiry plan. In the upcoming sections we briefly describe each process and draw on students' work to show their engagements.[5]



Fig. 1: Nurturing *Odenang* Inquiry by growing knowledge through three learning processes

Philosophy of Citizenship Education in Social Studies

When we envisioned students' philosophical inquiry into citizenship education within the interconnected processes of the course, we searched for ways to support their growth in understanding how their inquiry into their experiences and lives—their identities—would bring forward "a knowledge of yourself [that enables] you to imagine who you will be as a teacher of social studies" (Philosophy of Citizenship Education in Social Studies assignment description, Fall 2019). Below we highlight work that was created by students in Sharla's Winter 2023 and Winter 2024 courses as they inquired into the nature of the philosophies of citizenship education they were carrying or living by, while they imagined coming alongside children and youth in social studies education. Both orally as each course began, and in the assignment description, Sharla illustrated to students how this process would invite them to draw on reflections from their personal experiences in social studies classrooms and their experiences outside of school, which they bring with them to teaching social studies with attention to citizenship and identity. Students engaged in reflection and a creative response in the form of a five-panel art belt. The work below illustrates the course readings, classroom activities, and discussions about citizenship orientations and resonance with Indigenous ways of being, teaching/learning traditions, and the kind of social studies teacher each student envisioned becoming.

The Art Belt assignment in Sharla's Winter 2023 and Winter 2024 classes illustrates teaching philosophy and vision for future classroom goals and learning environment. The Art Belt consists of five "philosophy panels," each with its own theme and prompt. Panel 1 ("Who I am and where I am from") has the following prompt: "What is my identity? I am considering complexities of power, privilege, identity, and difference and my social, historical, cultural-linguistic, political, and ethical contexts."

Panel 2 ("What honoring the rights of the child looks like and feels like in my social studies classroom today") has the following prompt: "Further to reflections on my lived experiences in Social Studies

classrooms as a child/youth, I am aware of resonance/dissonance. As a Social Studies teacher today, I can honor the rights of the child."

Panel 3 ("My personal experience stories and skills that I bring to the social studies outcomes of citizenship and identity") has the following prompt: "Further to reflections on my lived relationship with Land-Place and my awareness of Indigenous relational ways of being, I appreciate my experiences and skills outside of school that connect with Social Studies outcomes of Citizenship and Identity. A list of favorite personal and local experience and knowledge resources comes to mind and I see how these connect to the inquiry plan for Grade __ that I am developing with peers in my inquiry plan group."

Panel 4 ("My valued instructional resources for fostering respectful relationships and honoring intercultural understanding in my social studies classroom") has the following prompt: "I vision building a community of inquiry in my Social Studies classroom by drawing on valued instructional resources that support the learning experiences of all children and reflect diversity, equity and inclusion, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples' histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, experiences and contemporary contexts."

Panel 5 ("What resonates with me about equitable and ethically relational performance tasks and assessments") has the following prompt: "Children are learners and teachers. They are valued and engaged listeners, thinkers, and classroom community members with relationships inside and outside our school context. Children play many roles."

The examples shown in Figures 2a to 2e show all of the panels in Andrew's Art Belt from Sharla's 2023 class, which together illustrate his philosophy of teaching citizenship in social studies through his creative response to a series of prompts.

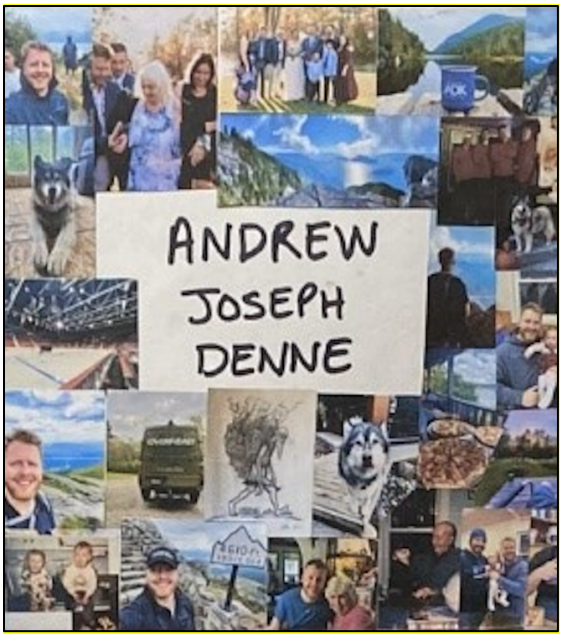


Fig. 2a: Panel 1, "Who I am and where I am from" (Andrew)



Fig. 2b: Panel 2, "What honoring the rights of the child looks like and feels like in my social studies classroom today" (Andrew)



Fig. 2c: Panel 3, "My personal experience stories and skills that I bring to the social studies outcomes of citizenship and identity" (Andrew)



Fig. 2d: Panel 4, "My valued instructional resources for fostering respectful relationships and honoring intercultural understanding in my social studies classroom" (Andrew)

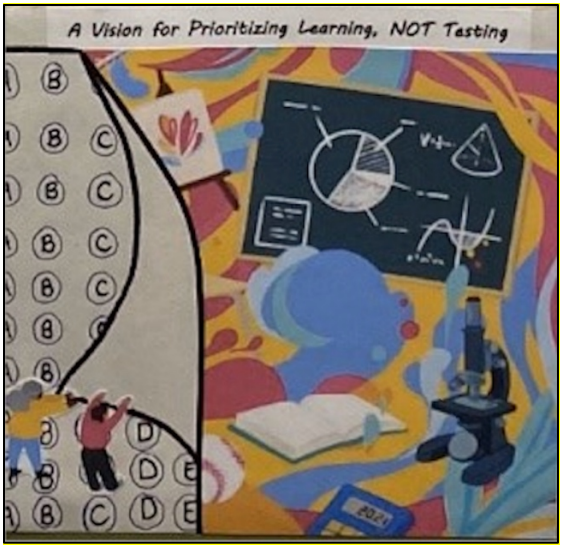


Fig. 2e: Panel 5, "What resonates with me about equitable and ethically relational performance tasks and assessments" (Andrew)

The Art Belt assignment was continued in Sharla's Winter 2024 course. The examples below shown in Figures 3 to 7 provide an idea of the student diversity. As these and the above art belt panels reflect, the prompts function as provocations for preservice teachers to reflexively examine experiences that inform their own educational perspectives, while their learning and evaluation experiences demonstrate a pedagogical approach to a philosophical understanding of teaching and learning.



Fig. 3: Panel 1, "Who I am and where I am from" (Kassidy)

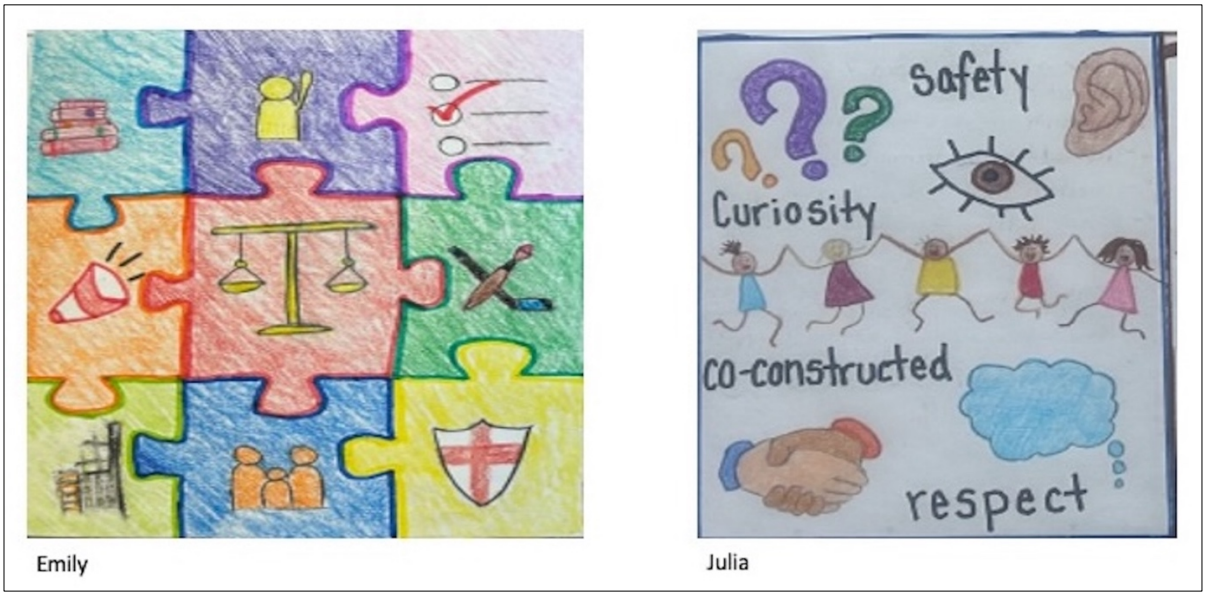


Fig. 4: Panel 2, "What honoring the rights of the child looks like and feels like in my social studies classroom today" (Emily and Julia)



Fig. 5: Panel 3, "My personal experience stories and skills that I bring to the social studies outcomes of citizenship and identity" (Jessica and Emily W)

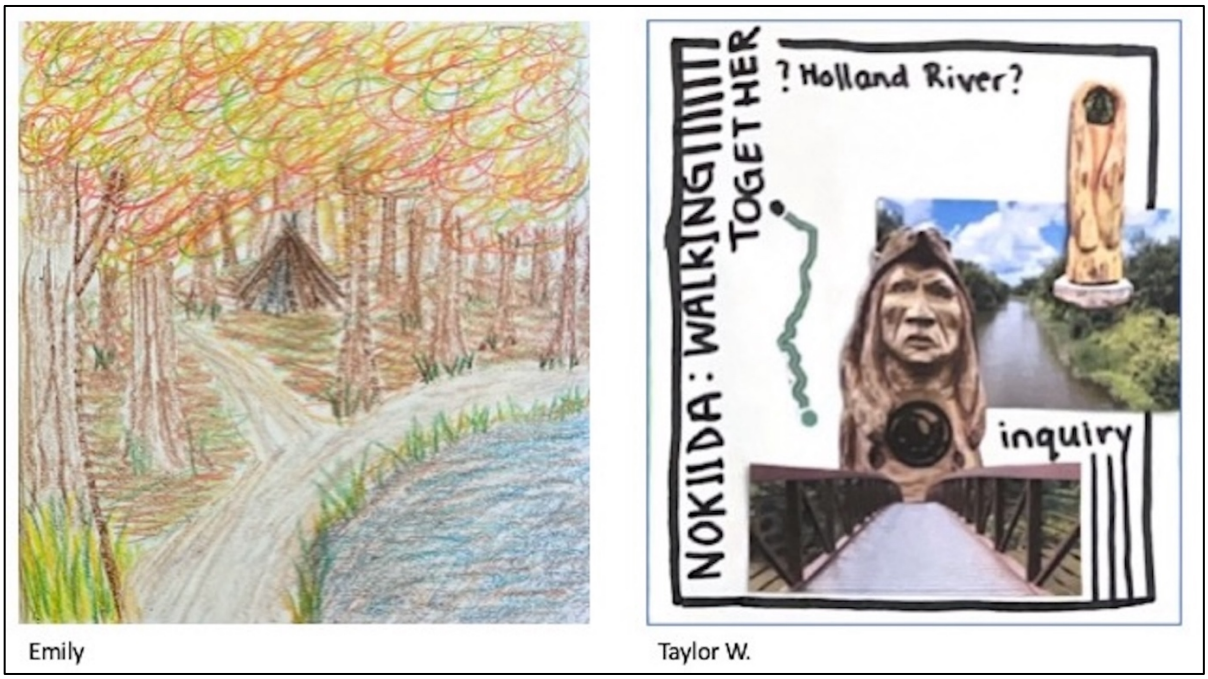


Fig. 6: Panel 4, "My valued instructional resources for fostering respectful relationships and honoring intercultural understanding in my social studies classroom" (Emily and Taylor)

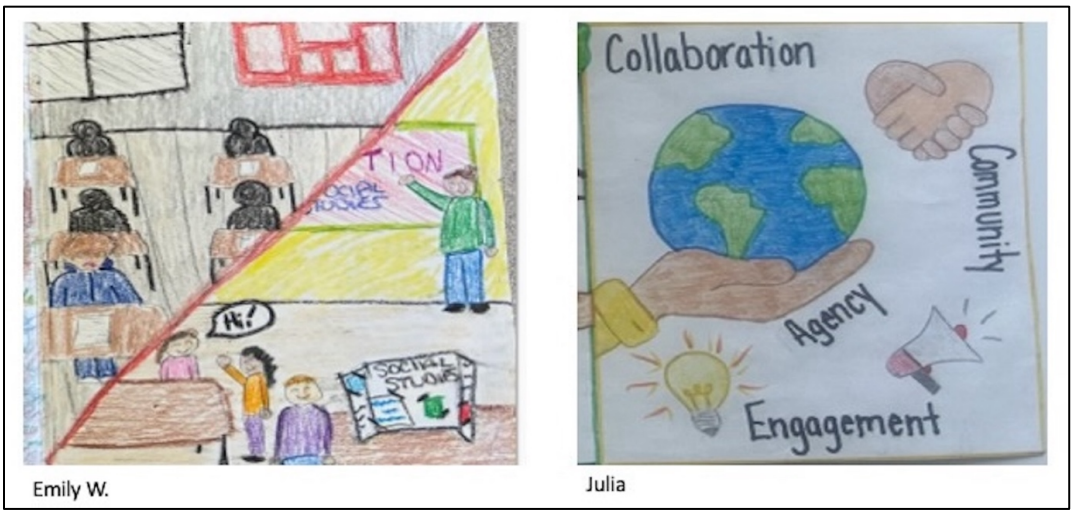


Fig. 7: Panel 5, "What resonates with me about equitable and ethically relational performance tasks and assessments" (Emily W. and Julia)

At the end of each course, students gathered to show their five-panel creative/artistic work and shared meaningful connections in a class story circle, with a circular cloth and candle in the center, to express their "philosophy of citizenship education in teaching social studies." At the beginning of each course, Sharla explained the circle protocol, which ensures a safe place of belonging. *Mishomis*/Grandfather Rock[6] was introduced to the circle and students were asked to introduce themselves by saying their name and then responding to the provocation to share an oral story about their philosophy of teaching social studies with attention to citizenship and identity. Due to limited classroom wall space, students placed their art belts around the center of the story circle in a beautiful sunburst formation, as shown in Figure 8 below.



Fig. 8: Story circle to orally express "philosophy of citizenship education in teaching social studies"

Each student was invited to show one or two panels on their art belt that were particularly relevant to their story. *Mishomis* was passed clockwise around the circle from person to person and represented our relational way of being a respectful, attentive community and signaled who currently had the floor to share. A gallery walk after the story circle enabled students to closely examine specific art panels that resonated strongly with them, and a discussion board provided a space to share about those connections with the art belt storyteller. As students experienced story circles, collaborative group work, self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and engagement in class discussions, they called forward memories of teaching and learning from across their lives, building educational perspectives through storying.

Engagement in art transports students to an in-between space where judgment-free and critical consideration of memories brings deep knowing. As is visible in their creative representations, their awareness was deepened by recalling experiences and assumptions that were previously hidden.

Reflective Thinking with Course Texts

Figure 9 shows the beginning of the "reflective thinking with course texts" process, which requires students to make individual and collective commitments to their learning. During the first class, students form groups of three or four students. Here, they visit to learn a bit about each other, and identify what each needs to ensure their group inquiry space and process is unintimidating (safe to be vulnerable, equitable, educative, and inclusive). Plans are also created for knowing how to navigate in the midst of tensions, which can arise when there is diversity in ways of knowing, being, doing, and relating.

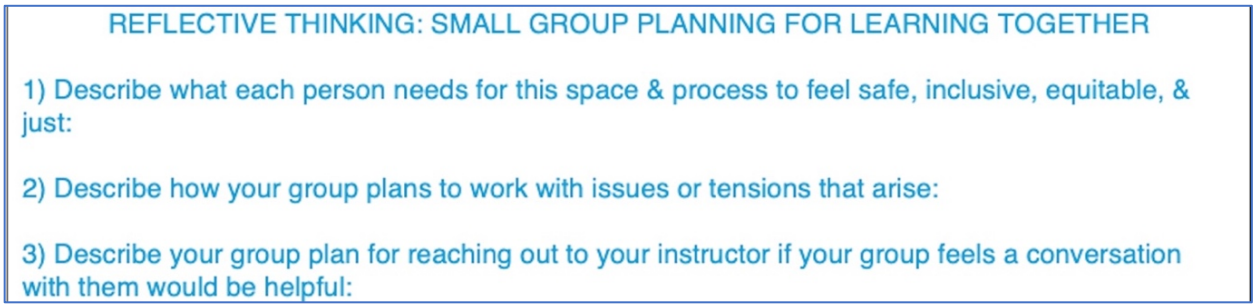


Fig. 9: Small-group planning steps for reflective thinking with course texts

This learning process supports students to explore a wide range of course texts, including textbook chapters, numerous additional readings and multiple videos and/or websites, as well as a large selection of diverse forms of classroom resources, such as (graphic) novels and picture books, the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989), the *Coming Home to Indigenous Place Names in Canada* map (Canadian American Centre, 2019), the *Nibi (Water) Song* (Mother Earth Water Walk, n.d.). Each week, three to five course texts are organized around themes, such as those depicted in Figure 10.

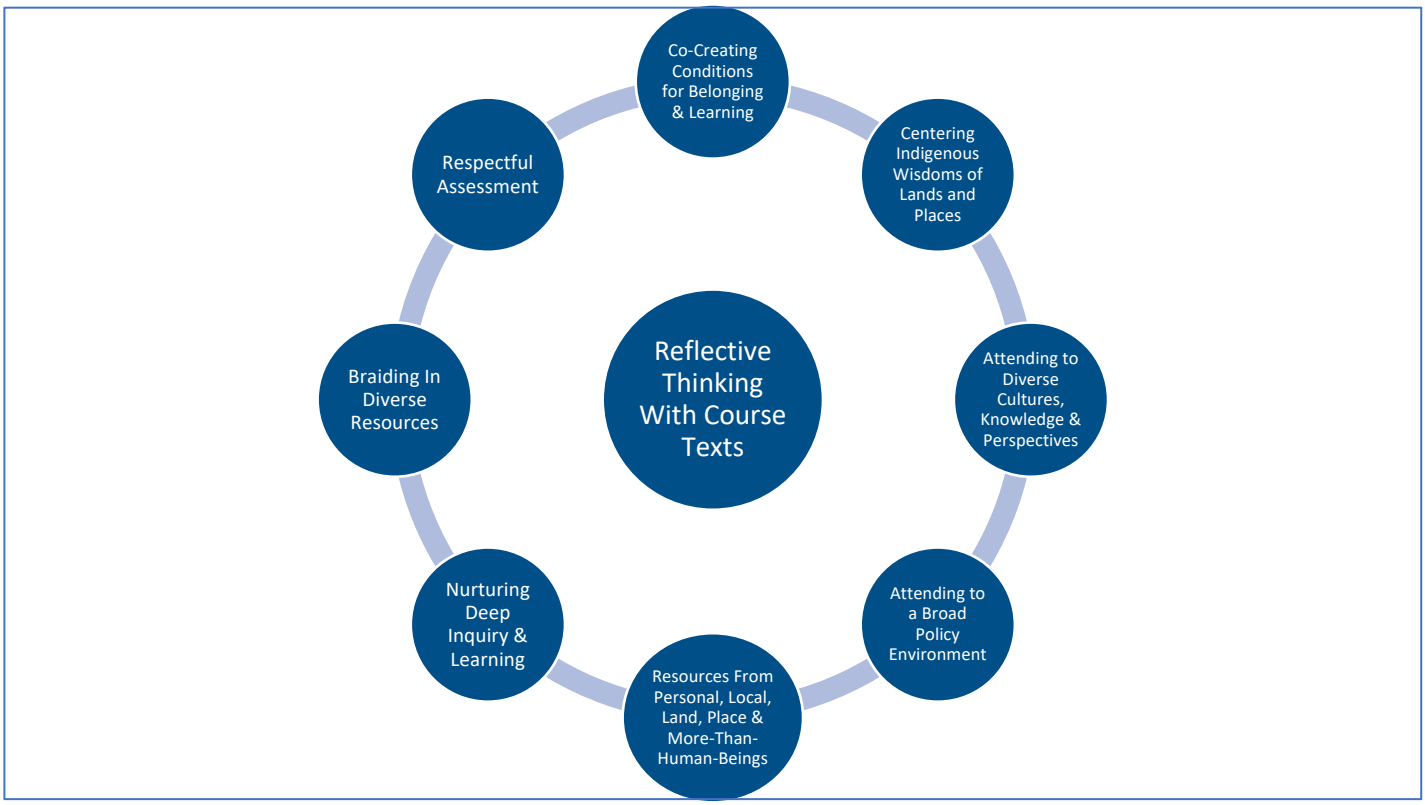


Fig. 10: Course themes that nurture students' creative, critical, and reflective thinking

Figure 11 shows the creative, critical, and reflective thinking of Carmen (a student whom Janice was alongside in Fall 2022) as she inquired into two readings connected with the theme of "Co-creating Conditions for Belonging and Learning." Carmen engaged in critical thinking in relation to two readings: first, a chapter from a textbook focused on strategies for centering children's diverse identities in social studies learning (James, 2021) and second, an article written by Métis Cree teacher and scholar Cindy Swanson (2013) who reflects on her growing understanding of children and families as holders and makers of knowledge. Carmen explored her knowledge of the importance of nurturing her and children's journeys from their heads to their hearts. As she centered her inquiry around this lifelong journey, her knowledge of barriers that many children experience in school came forward, as well as ways she imagines diminishing them; for example, in her interactions with them, centering values and priorities that deepen learning and knowledge, such as relationships, respect, validation, connection, stories, listening, curiosity, belonging, and experience.

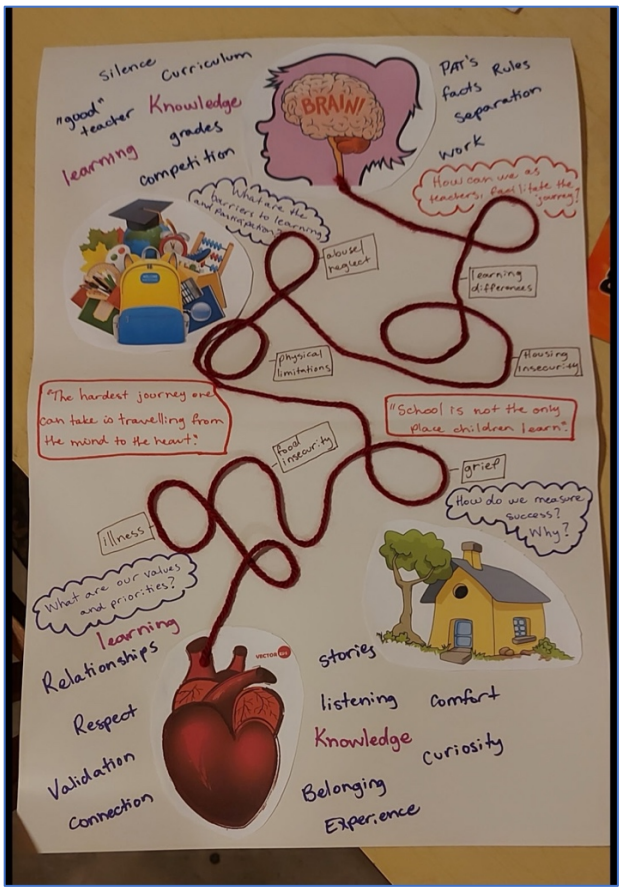


Fig. 11: Carmen's reflective art creative representation

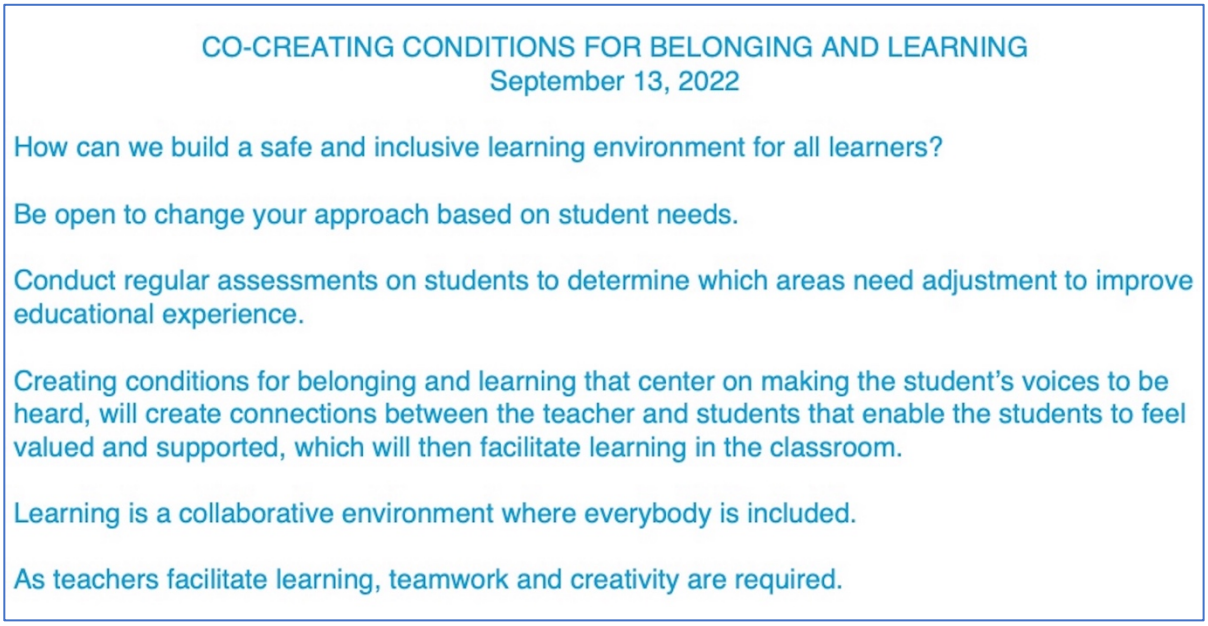
As students weekly reflect on one or two course texts, they experience the need to think with the differing perspectives that come forward in relation with each course theme, and across the term. Each student creates and uploads on a Google Doc shared with the members of their small group, either a creative representation or a journal entry that documents their learning. With respect to written reflections, two examples of journal entries written by students in Sharla's 2023 class are shown in Figure 12.

"A question this article has made me think of is: How can we encourage students to stay curious while still achieving the curriculum expectations?" (Maija M., Part of Journal Entry for Reflective Thinking, Winter 2023)

"My question about using children's books to examine examples of social inequity is, how can we ensure that we are choosing books that deal with such heavy issues and are still suitable for every child in the classroom? It is important to consider this because we do not know a child's entire background or history, or how they will react to such stories. Although we may have the best intentions in mind, I believe it is crucial that we read and interpret the story from different perspectives before choosing to use it as a resource. I would like to find out more about choosing appropriate yet meaningful resources to examine social justice issues. Overall, this reading has helped me to inform my future teaching by providing me with strategies to make all students feel included and create a positive learning environment" (Denize V., Part of Journal Entry for Reflective Thinking, Winter 2023)

Fig. 12: Some examples of journal entries

Both as Carmen shared her creative representation with her small-group peers and as Maija and Denize shared their journal entries with their small group peers, their goal was to teach their peers what they had learned from each of the resources they had read or interacted with. After each person in the small group teaches their peers, they then collaborate to create and post on a whole class Google Doc either a pedagogical insight or question or praxis statement. For example, as Carmen and her small-group peers thought with all of their creative representations in relation with the theme of "Co-creating Conditions for Belonging and Learning," they and each small group synthesized their learning by posting the following pedagogical question and numerous pedagogical insights onto a whole-group Google Doc (see Figure 13 for a sample), which then served as a bridge into a whole-class conversation circle where students continued to grow as they expressed their knowledge and understandings.


CO-CREATING CONDITIONS FOR BELONGING AND LEARNING
September 13, 2022

How can we build a safe and inclusive learning environment for all learners?

Be open to change your approach based on student needs.

Conduct regular assessments on students to determine which areas need adjustment to improve educational experience.

Creating conditions for belonging and learning that center on making the student's voices to be heard, will create connections between the teacher and students that enable the students to feel valued and supported, which will then facilitate learning in the classroom.

Learning is a collaborative environment where everybody is included.

As teachers facilitate learning, teamwork and creativity are required.

Fig. 13: Selected class posts for weekly theme, "Co-creating Conditions for Belonging and Learning"

In some offerings of the course, instead of posting pedagogical questions or insights, students were invited to post praxis statements that show their group synthesis as they draw on all group members' creative, critical, and reflective thinking to highlight the similar and differing insights in their small groups, in relation with challenging colonial discourses, voicing respectful questioning, contemplating beliefs, values, and/or socio-cultural experiences, and re-thinking and co-constructing new understandings. Figure 14 shows how Stacie, Caitlin, and Selin, three students who were alongside Sharla in the Winter 2023 term, reflected at the close of the course on the significance of their small-group creation of praxis statements in their learning and growth.

"I believe that these praxis statements will carry me into my home-schooling journey with my children. I appreciate this fresh perspective on social studies as it was very different [and boring] when I took it in elementary school. I learned a lot and continued to improve throughout the weeks" (Stacie M., Self-assessment, Winter, 2023)

"I strived to make connections between the weekly topics and practical use within the social studies classroom, drawing on specific examples for implementation" (Caitlin S., Self-assessment, Winter, 2023)

"When first writing the praxis statement it was challenging to me to contribute to the statement because it was the first time working with my group members and I did not know how to share my ideas. I shared my summary and what my reading was about but when it came time to write the statement, it was challenging for me to start as we all have our different writing styles. As the weeks went on it was easier for me to write my summary, talk about the article, and contribute to the group. We came up with the idea to have a document and to all contribute to it with a summary and to help write the statements" (Selin B., Self-assessment, Winter, 2023)

Fig. 14: Student reflections about learning how to collaboratively create praxis statements

Another aspect of this relational learning process is that twice during the term we invite students to talk in their small groups about how this process is shaping their individual and collective learning and growth. During the first of these check-ins, we ask the students to also set group goals for the remaining weeks of the process. Figure 15 shows the mid-October 2022 check-in for Carmen and members of her group.

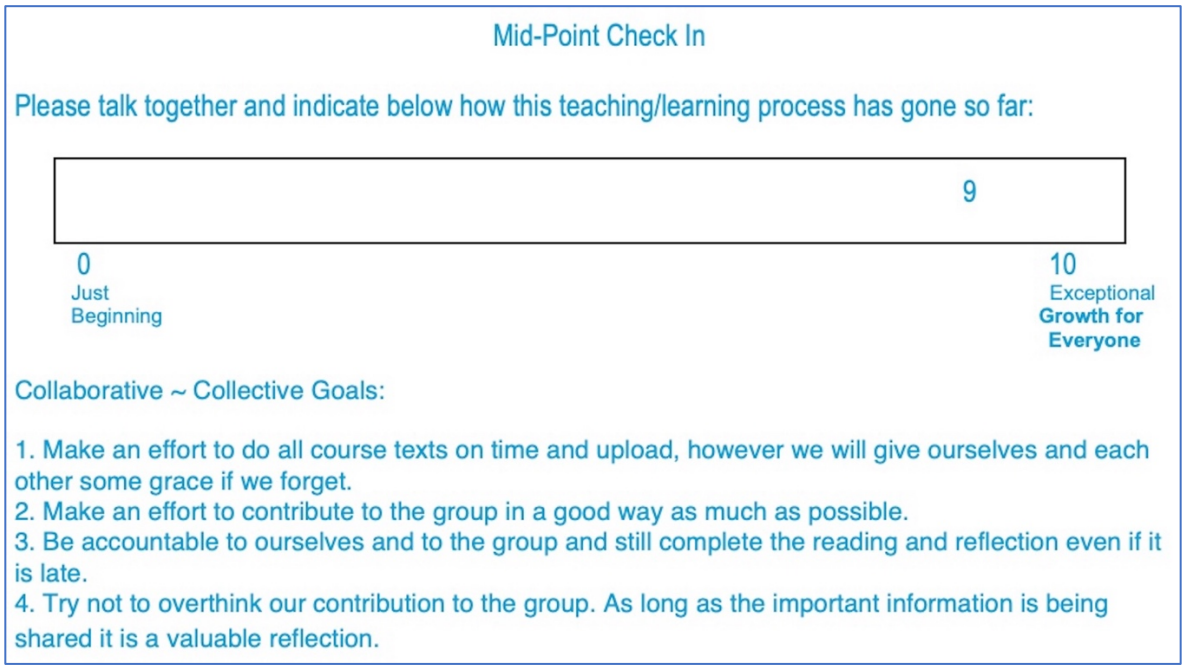


Fig. 15: Mid-term small-group check-in

Throughout this process, students collaboratively engaged within a small group of peers to create and clearly explain/teach and then co-create intriguing pedagogical and curriculum insights that invite their connections to praxis (a new awareness or learning applicable to teaching social studies) and their personal receptivity and responsiveness to new and diverse perspectives. Both the individual thinking, i.e., the creative representations or journal entries, and the collective thinking, i.e., the questions or pedagogical insights or praxis statements, are meant to show, and grow, each student's analysis and thinking with the author's or speaker's knowledge of the topic.

Partway through the course students often express gratitude for the peers whom they are learning alongside in their small group. As the group work begins, many students initially experience conflict due to their previous schooling experiences emphasizing individual thinking, representing their knowledge in written work, and competing with one another for academic standing. However, as students come to know each other, staying with the reflective thinking process supports them to experience a respectful community where each individual's contributions are welcomed, acknowledged, and become part of the overall learning and completion of course tasks. This collaborative process is not easy: it requires a desire to stretch and grow one's knowledge, as well as one's identity. Over multiple offerings of the course, we have noted how this growth serves as a springboard for how students come to see themselves and who they can be as they come alongside children in the future. One aspect that often emerges about who they want to be alongside children is their awareness that they can live out a similar relational process of deep thinking and synthesis with children. Over time, the student teachers grow in understanding that when children's capacities to synthesize are also nurtured, they too will see connections across concepts in a course, and across numerous courses or subjects, as well as much more broadly as they draw on their own identities, contexts, and relationships outside of school to create new layers of meaning. The students often express excitement as they recognize how this kind of synthesis grows agentic citizens who carry understandings of citizenship that attends to "all our relations," and who are further guided by questions such as, "How am I fulfilling my role in this relationship? What are my obligations in this relationship?" (Wilson, 2001, p. 171).

Inquiry Planning

In the later part of the term, when our classes shift toward making significant amount of in-class time for pairs and small groups to collaborate on their inquiry planning, the students have already carefully considered much: for example, who they are—their identities and where they are from and ways these aspects influence who they are becoming as teachers; connections between their *Odenang* and their identities; the kinds of learning environments and relationships they want to create with and among children (or if they are parents, that they also wish for their children); cultural protocols for inviting in, growing and/or sustaining relationships with, and learning from Elders, Knowledge and Language Keepers, and family and community members; ways of valuing and drawing on the diverse lives and identities of children to nurture interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and intercultural inquiry; and ways that the stories told today, yesterday, long ago, and into the future by local lands, places, beings, and

family and community members deepen inquiry into the government-mandated Kindergarten/Grade 1 to Grade 6 social studies outcomes.

As we transition into more fulsome inquiry planning, students often express that they do not yet feel they "know enough" to create a comprehensive inquiry plan. As a result, our work alongside them shifts from facilitating their philosophical inquiry and creative, critical, and reflective thinking and synthesis toward supporting them to apply what and how they have come to know through these two processes. As we make these shifts into the liminality, complexity, and messiness of this emergent forward, backward, inward, and outward thinking, which this kind of planning for inquiry with children entails, the weekly whole-class conversation circle makes space for sharing hopes, excitements, and possibilities, as well as fears and uncertainties. Figure 16 shares the visual representation created by Alanna and Claitinna, two students whom Janice was alongside in Fall 2022, to show the unfolding process through which they planned to support young children to inquire into where, how, and with whom they belong:

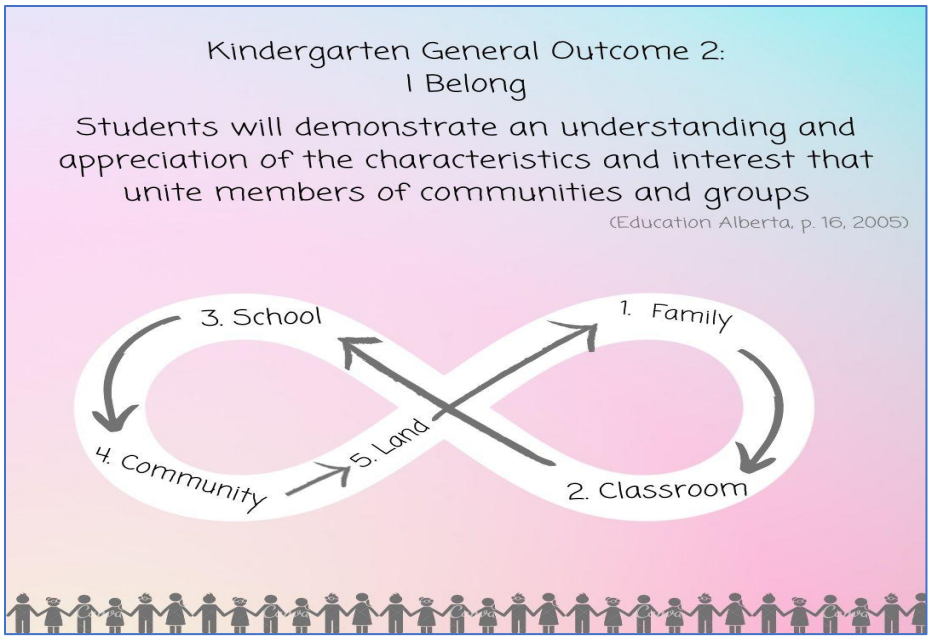


Fig. 16: Inquiry plan visual for the theme "Nurturing children's inquiry into their belonging"

Alanna and Claitinna are both deeply connected with a Métis settlement on lands that through colonization became known as northern Alberta. This Métis settlement is Alanna's ancestral home, and Claitinna, who is Blackfoot, has had strong connections with the settlement for many years. They are both mothers and each are strongly connected with the Lands/Places/beings, languages, values, knowledges, stories, and ways of their ancestors and present community. What Janice remembers about their numerous conversations as they began to plan in this emergent and non-linear way for the children's inquiry, is the significant hesitancy they initially expressed about starting with their embodied knowledge of belonging. As they and Janice made space in their conversations where they shared and thought with their hopes for and their experiences alongside their own children, Claitinna and Alanna slowly shifted away from the fear and intimidation they initially felt as a result of language, such as "students will,"

which at that time was dominant in the Alberta Social Studies Program of Studies (Alberta Education, 2005). Making this inner shift was crucial as they gradually re-valued what they had long before begun to come to know through their earliest and continuing experiences alongside their families and in the community, including with local lands, places, and beings.

As Claitinna and Alanna lived out this spiraling process of planning for inquiring into belonging with young children, some of their first work required that they share and think with one another about how each of their individual philosophies of teaching social studies and citizenship education were shaping how they were imagining inquiring into belonging with children in a Kindergarten classroom. They described this as follows:

> Our philosophy is rooted in Indigenous ways of seeing, relating, thinking and doing. We honour the guiding values instilled in us through the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program and progressively work towards decolonizing education as we know it to provide equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for inquiring young minds. (Alanna and Claitinna inquiry plan, Fall 2022)

This consequential personal inquiry, which began through their "philosophy of citizenship education in social studies" and their "reflective thinking with course texts" processes, slowly grew their awakeness to and understandings around the significance of *Odenang* in their identities. It also grew their knowledge of the place that *Odenang* Inquiry could have in the inquiries undertaken by children in relation with social studies values and attitudes, knowledge and understandings, and skills and processes. As they stayed with this circular and spiraling process over a number of weeks, they gradually saw that there could be at least five phases of meaningfully interconnected inquiry alongside the children (see Figure 17).

I BELONG		
Initial Phase	family	Centering their local Métis/Cree understandings of *wâhkôhtowin* (kinship & family) as the children explore the multiplicity of human & more-than-human families
Second Phase	classroom	Centering their local Métis/Cree understandings of *mâmahwohkamâtowin* (working cooperatively) and *mîyo wîcehtôwin* (getting along together) as the children explore how they fit within our classroom & discover interconnectedness with peers while learning to value and appreciate differences
Third Phase	school	Centering their local Métis/Cree understandings of *manâtisiwin ekwa* (respect) and *manâhcihitowin* (respect for others) as the children explore, acknowledge, and appreciate the contributions of those who add to our knowledge bundles and support our learning journeys
Fourth Phase	community	Centering their local Métis/Cree understandings of *kiskanowapâhkewin* (a keen sense of observation) as the children explore and observe ways community members foster a climate of cooperation and participate toward a collective whole
Final Phase	lands	Centering their local Métis/Cree understandings of *kisewâtisiwin* (compassion, loving and kindness) as the children explore and acknowledge our connection and responsibility to Land. Learners begin to accept their roles and responsibilities alongside Lands

Fig. 17: Phases of I BELONG inquiry with children

Another aspect that deeply grounded their inquiry planning was how story is woven within and across. This begins with stories in published picture books as a way to support the children's initial inquiries in phase one as they explore their own and one another's unique families, and animal families. Storying and thinking with their own and one another's stories begin in phase two and continues across the remaining three phases, which also draw in the stories of the children's families and diverse community members. Significant here is each child's growing sense of being a member of a learning community where it is safe to share their personal experience, knowledge, and ways of knowing and being, as well as their responsibilities to themselves and everyone else to learn from one another's stories. At the close of their inquiry planning, Alanna and Claitinna shared the following reflections about how this process, which as we earlier noted is significantly connected with the two earlier learning processes, supported their growth:

> The inquiry planning helped us connect to Indigenous teachings and practices, but it required us to first be grounded in what we already knew and understood. As mothers, we have knowledge and experiences that we can apply to teachings in the classroom. We know how our children learn best. In applying our previous knowledge and understanding and incorporating what we have learned through being mothers and our ATEP [Aboriginal Teacher Education] courses, we were able to foster a holistic approach. . . . Teaching from an Indigenous perspective [requires] the innate ability to connect the learning experiences to our land, our experiences and our people. . . . We created hands-on learning opportunities so that students can accurately conceptualize the sense of "belonging" in context. (Alanna and Claitinna, Personal Growth Reflection as part of their inquiry plan, Fall 2022)

Interconnections Among the Three Processes and Their Contributions to *Odenang* Inquiry

Figure 18 shows ways the three interconnected learning processes created a ground for and nurtured engagement in *Odenang* Inquiry. As becomes visible in Alanna and Claitinna's inquiry planning, as students experience *Odenang* Inquiry in the course, they gradually grow in feeling prepared to come alongside children, and their families and communities, to also engage in *Odenang* Inquiry. These inquiries, alongside the government-mandated social studies outcomes, open rich potential for nurturing truth-telling and relationship as reconciliation. This movement happens as students start to inquire into their "philosophy of citizenship education in social studies," which activates their attentiveness to their *Odenang* and supports them to draw on or rekindle ways of knowing and being, and relationships, that shape(d) their identities. The individual, small-group, and whole-class thinking that grounds the "reflective thinking with course texts" process shapes many opportunities for students to experience, as well as to contribute to, an inquiry community.

As students simultaneously engage in their philosophical inquiry and in the reflective thinking process, which requires that they attend to their identities and their visioning alongside the course objectives and the government-mandated outcomes for elementary social studies, they are gradually developing knowledge and ways of knowing and being that support their inquiry planning to be grounded in *Odenang* Inquiry. Central as they engage in all three processes is their gradual learning to trust that they, children, youth, families, communities, and more-than-human-beings all have knowledge to contribute, as well as diverse ways of knowing and being. Centering children's stories and identities situates children, and their families and communities (which includes Lands/Places), as holders and makers of knowledge and of ways of knowing and being that live deeply in their embodied knowledge. This praxis extends far beyond life in classrooms and schools to include everyday and ancestral, intergenerational, and interrelational knowledge and ways. These extensions are significant because they respect and draw on the wholeness of a life. In this way, as *Nehiyaw* scholar Patsy Steinhauer (2022) reminds us, they widen the ways of knowing and being in school: "For understanding to happen I needed to comprehend holistically. I not only had to learn something intellectually; I had to learn it emotionally as well" (p. 8).

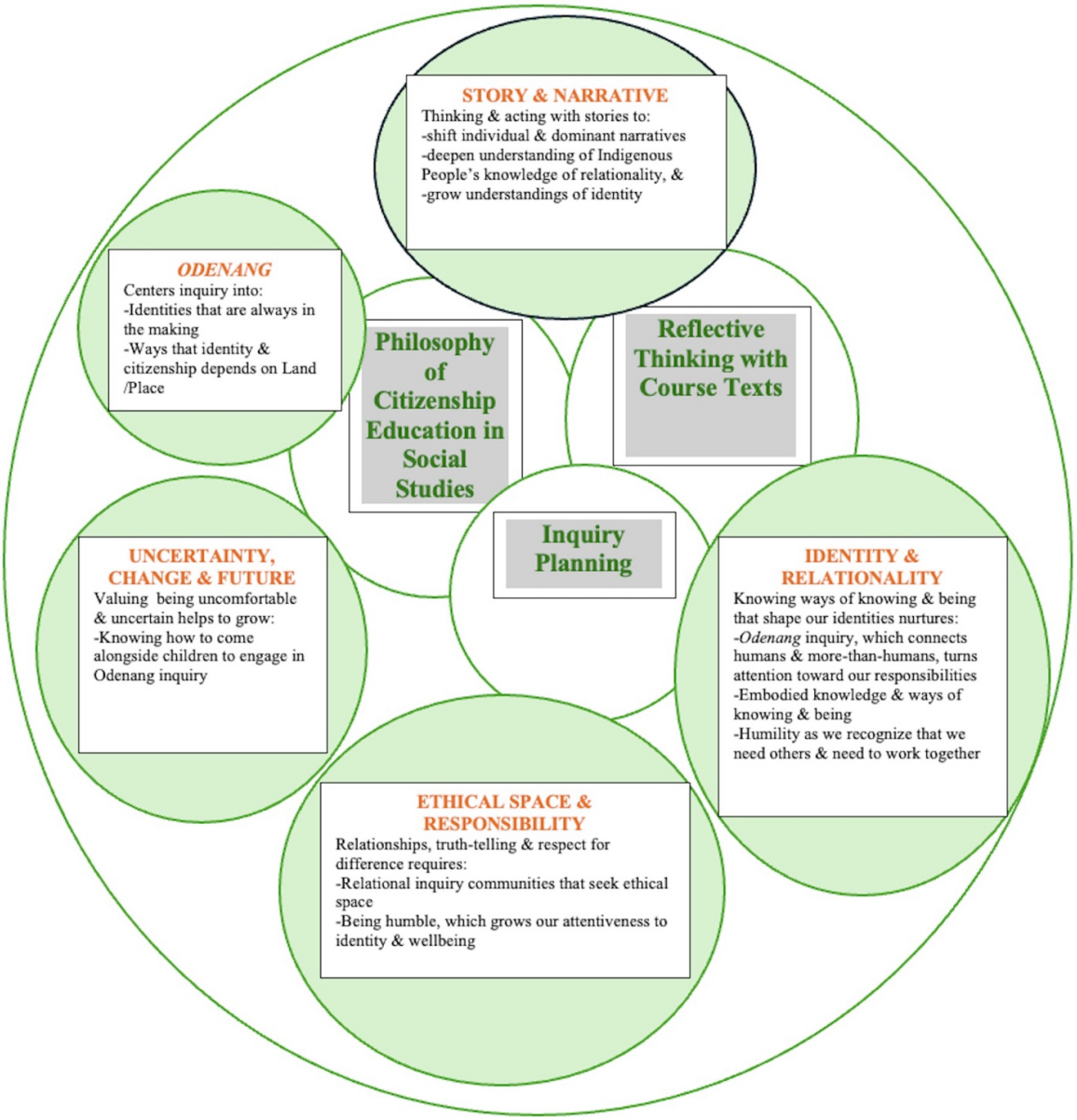


Fig. 18: Interconnections among the three processes and their contributions to *Odenang* Inquiry

Further, as she draws on her *Nehiyaw* understanding of citizenship, Patsy Steinhauer (2022) explains:

> Nahawahkohtohk can be understood as the idea of citizenship—the informed conscious act of living in harmonious coexistence and kinship. I emphasize understanding wahkohtowin as a foundation relational value—that is, our connection and kinship to all living things. Our understanding of these terms will deepen as we live out their truths. By continuing to acknowledge the interconnection and symbiosis that is the fabric of the living world, we will begin to recognize our place within the sophisticated system of wahkohtowin and mirror the kinship ways of living together. (p. 8)

While students often express feeling uncomfortable and uncertain as they simultaneously live out the philosophical inquiry process alongside the reflective thinking process, by the time we begin to move into the inquiry planning process, they often express gratitude for how these layered relational learning processes have not only grown their knowledge, skills, and understandings, but as importantly, their identities. They express feeling more awake to how working in a group brings awareness to what each person brings from their experience, group processing, and inner reflections. They also express greater wakefulness about how, across these experiences, they understand that we are seeking to support them to experience the emergence of an ethical space that is continuously shaped through their growing relationships and truth telling, and their differences. These qualities are foundational for our individual and collective understandings of, and growth in, a relational learning community that respects the interconnectedness among all of us as human beings; and among us and the many more-than-human beings with whom we are also in relation, and who are also wise teachers in our lives. Such knowledge also expands understandings of citizenship, as well as human beings' responsibilities to the many beings whose lives and ways significantly widen the narrow colonial ways that citizenship is understood in social studies programs of study.

Humility builds for both students and us as these three processes unfold and enfold. Knowledge of diverse human and more-than-human interrelationships and perspectives grows our humility as we, as teachers, acknowledge our need to work together so that the belonging and well-being of all can grow and guide us. As we live in ways holding up these values, we inwardly awaken to our responsibilities and accountabilities in the present, and in the future, to the young ones whom the new teachers will come alongside, to all of the beings still coming. These responsibilities to children open endless potential for co-creating with them opportunities through which they too will experience *Odenang* Inquiry and synthesis, through similar processes in which their diverse and healthy identity-making, and understandings and enactments of citizenship that center difference, kinship, and well-being, can flourish.

Acknowledgements

We are deeply grateful to all of the students who gave us permission to draw on their work in this paper. Many also read the next-to-final draft of the paper. We are also grateful to Dr. Trudy Cardinal and charis auger, friends and colleagues, who carefully read and gave us important response to our paper.

Notes

1. As taught by Anishinaabe Elder Stanley Peltier and Sharla, in their Anishinaabe worldview, Lands/Place includes Mother Earth (lands, air, winds, waters, and all more-than-human beings), as well as the physical places that have shaped Indigenous people's languages, ethical protocols, values, knowledges, relationships, and pedagogies since time immemorial.

2. Being alongside our children as they have navigated schooling contexts has provided important education to each of us. Our friendship has often included sharing and thinking with stories of our experiences as mothers.

3. This project, *Growing Faculty, Staff, and Student Foundational Knowledge of Indigenous Philosophies, Epistemologies, Ontologies, and Pedagogies*, was funded by Alberta Education.

4. When our inquiry began we were both teaching in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. Since 2022, Sharla has been a faculty member in teacher education at the Orillia Campus of Lakehead University.

5. All student work is shared with their permission; these students gave us permission to draw on their work in this paper.

6. Similar to what she did for her doctoral research, Sharla taught the preservice teachers to refer to Grandfather Rock as *Mishomis* (Grandfather), who was central to the story circle process, as holding him focused attention on respect and ensured an orderly flow within the circle. *Mishomis* was also a reminder to listen respectfully, remember, and share openly from the heart, in response to one another's sharings and personal life connections. In addition, the fire is central to the community. We are invited to take away what we can use for our personal and professional learning journey and we can leave behind any words and ideas shared that do not resonate positively with us. We give these to the fire, which has the power to transform negativity into positive energy for the universe.

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Sharla Peltier is privileged to walk alongside Janice exploring ways to bring ourselves and our students to deeply know relational ways of being, elevating *Odenang* in the classroom. Sharla is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University, Orillia, Ontario, who cherishes a supportive network in the challenging field of Indigenizing education.



Janice Huber is deeply grateful to have been able to continue to learn *Odenang* Inquiry alongside Sharla and numerous groups of students in the Elementary Social Studies course. She is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta who is privileged to have also been a faculty member at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia and at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan.

Critical Religious Literacy as Equity Literacy: Disrupting Silence in Teacher Education

Erin Reid

Abstract

Religious diversity remains a marginalized aspect of social justice-oriented teacher education, leaving many preservice teachers ill-equipped to navigate the complex religious landscapes of Canadian K–12 classrooms. Drawing on qualitative case study interviews with five Canadian teacher educators, this article examines how teacher educators perceive and navigate critical religious literacy as a form of social justice. Applying Gorski's equity literacy framework, we find that teacher educators experience silencing and self-censorship, are concerned about potential harms for preservice teachers, and consider dialogue as a point of disruption. These findings suggest that teacher educators who create intentional space for cultural safety and critical dialogue around religious diversity are better positioned to prepare preservice teachers for the religious complexity of contemporary Canadian classrooms. This kind of dialogic practice constitutes an underrecognized but essential dimension of equity-oriented teaching.

Background

In the current North American educational landscape of increasing political polarization, censorship, and threats to equity-deserving groups, Canadian teacher education programs have sought to provide preservice teachers with social justice and equity focused skills to navigate their diverse classrooms. This work presents findings from a small qualitative exploratory case study (Yin, 2014) with five teacher educators who work to prepare preservice teachers for the diverse classrooms in which they will spend their careers. This article explores the narratives of these teacher educators and develops key themes that are informed by Freirean and bell hooks' traditions of critical pedagogy, as well as Paul Gorski's (2014) equity literacy framework. In interview data, teacher educator participants describe feeling silenced in academic spaces due to their own faith identities, feeling frustrated by preservice teachers' lack of understanding about religion and belief systems, and struggling with inadequate programmatic support to address these gaps. At the same time, they identify critical dialogue as a promising pedagogical practice for cultivating cultural safety to instill a deeper awareness, empathy, and engagement among teacher candidates. This article also examines how teacher educators navigate their own silencing and how they enact pedagogies of dialogue and critical hope to disrupt these silences. Grounded in the belief that silence in educational contexts is never neutral (Freire, 1970), I argue that failure to address religious beliefs or identities in our K–12 classrooms is a kind of hidden curriculum that is a form of exclusion serving to undermine genuine equity goals and thus critical religious literacy should be an essential component of equity-oriented teacher preparation.

Contributing to scholarship in the fields of teacher education, equity-focused educational scholarship, and religious literacy, this article will begin with situating the study within the current educational/scholarly contexts. This is followed by a presentation of methodology, findings, and discussion, and then concludes with recommendations for teacher education programs. Ultimately, a central aim of this study is to respond to and disrupt the silence around religion in equity-oriented teacher education.

Literature Review

To better understand how teacher educators perceive religious literacy as a component of social justice education, this literature review examines teacher-educator identity, equity and social justice in teacher education, gaps in religious literacy, and teacher education in the Canadian context.

Religious Diversity in the Canadian Classroom

Changing Canadian Landscape

Shifting demographics of the Canadian landscape have meant sizeable changes in how our schools attend to the opportunities and challenges that such diversity entails. Increasingly, and particularly within our urban centers, racial, linguistic, and religious diversity is the norm as immigration rates have accelerated dramatically in recent decades (Statistics Canada, 2022). As scholarship continues to attest, the teaching profession remains dominated by white middle-class female teacher candidates, even in urban populations with high levels of racial and ethnic diversity, such as Toronto (Ryan et al., 2009; Abawi, 2018; Sulz et al., 2023; Statistics Canada, 2025). Additionally, for the small numbers of racially marginalized preservice teachers in teacher education programs in Canada, they too must contend with the even higher degrees of racialized disparity among teacher educators, where the percentages of racialized faculty have only minimally increased over the past decades compared to their white counterparts, resulting in a persistent lack of representation within teacher education programs themselves (Jafari et al., 2024). Given what scholars have been reporting for decades about the powerful positive impact of representation on educational outcomes for marginalized youth (Villegas, 2010; Sulz et al., 2023), this disparity between Canadian teacher candidates and the classrooms in which they will be teaching represents an ongoing challenge. When combined with other aspects of student diversity, such as religious identity, this challenge can be daunting.

While there has always been some degree of religious diversity in Canada, the shift from a country in which between 70% and 80% of the population reported being Christian in the 1970s to our current landscape of high levels of religious diversity is significant. This increased religious diversity is magnified by the simultaneous forces of declining religiosity among Christian Canadians, and the rising numbers of religious "nones," with up to 34% of the Canadian population identifying as "no religion" (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2022; Beaman, 2024). Moreover, the ongoing work of reconciliation taken up by our education systems has resulted in a complex educational landscape for teachers and teacher educators when it comes navigating how religious and spiritual issues arise in their classrooms.

Adding to this complexity is the fact that because K–12 education in Canada is provincially mandated, provinces differ widely on their approaches to religion as a topic in the classroom (Van Arragon, 2015). Within secular school districts, some have opted to include religion primarily within social studies curricula, such as in Alberta; however, there has been debate whether such inclusions go far enough in mitigating a Christian bias, exploring religious diversity, and incorporating Indigenous spiritualities and religion in a fulsome way (Patrick, 2023). In contrast, other jurisdictions, such as Quebec, have had mandatory courses that dealt directly with religion as a central curricular topic, such as in the now defunct Ethics and Religious Culture program, which has been a source of much contention among scholars in terms of its Christian bias, insufficient Indigenous content, and the lack of teacher training provided to those tasked with teaching the ambitious program (Chan, 2018; Hirsch 2018; Jafralie & Zaver, 2019). Related to this issue are provincial funding models for religious or faith-based education. Some provinces and territories, such as Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nunavut, provide no funding to faith-based schools, while others, such as British Columbia, Manitoba, and Quebec, provide some degree of partial funding. Three provinces and one territory have publicly funded Catholic education in the separate school system: Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and the Northwest Territories. This highly diverse educational terrain means that there is no single map to navigating religious diversity in Canadian classrooms.

Multiculturalism, Coloniality, and Reckoning With Reconciliation

Official Canadian policies such as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988 formally recognize religious pluralism and position religious diversity as a protected ground of cultural identity. Although Canada's multicultural policy has been and continues to be the source of scholarly and public debate (Modood & Ahmad, 2007), it remains a part of the fabric of Canadian identity (Kymlicka, 2021; Beaman, 2024). Additionally, Section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees freedom of religion, meaning that K–12 educators must consider both legal and pedagogical obligations in their classrooms when navigating issues related to religion and religious diversity. The Charter's protections around religious freedom place teacher educators in a difficult position, where they must navigate tensions between protected rights that may be in conflict (Rymarz, 2013; Zaver & DiMartini, 2016). Despite these protections, scholars have noted that Canadian public education tends towards a kind of secularism that may inadvertently marginalize religiously identified students (Guo, 2015; Keddie et al., 2019). The assumption of a secular neutrality in Canadian schools has implications and real risks; it may serve to marginalize students for whom religion or spirituality is a core identity marker. Unaddressed, it risks maintaining unacknowledged dominant structures of Christian privilege (Aronson et al. 2016; Joshi, 2020).

Any serious engagement with religious diversity in Canadian education must contend with Canada's colonial history through which Indigenous peoples, and their spiritual practices and worldviews, have been suppressed on a systemic level, such as through the residential school system (Bastien & Kremer, 2004). Because Indigenous spiritualities do not fit neatly into Western frameworks of "religion," they may unwittingly or purposefully be omitted in discussions surrounding religion in the public sphere in Canada

(Stonechild, 2020, p. 242). Certainly, in the era before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), that was often the case. However, in the post-TRC era many Canadian educational institutions have engaged in meaningful reconciliation work by developing students' and educators' foundational knowledge of Indigenous ways of knowing through curriculum development and pedagogical strategies that reflect the diversity within these communities and traditions. Within my own work as a professor of social justice education, I have seen firsthand the impact of these curricular and pedagogical shifts as the next generation of future teachers arrive in my classroom. Many of these students come to my classroom demonstrating a significant foundation of understanding of Indigenization and decolonization that was routinely lacking in previous generations. Moreover, as noted by Indigenous scholar Frank Deer, the widespread work of reconciliation going on in today's K–12 schools and in higher education contexts has necessitated a deep and ongoing engagement with spirituality. Using the Kanien'kehá term of *Onkwehón:we* for "original people," Deer (2024) writes, "When Onkwehón:we community members (such as community Elders) are invited to share about Onkwehón:we knowledge and experiences, spirituality frequently becomes an essential part of the narrative" (p. 596). Thus, transformative Indigenization cannot happen authentically in our education systems without an understanding of the ways in which Indigenous ways of knowing and being are infused with spirituality. In many ways, as noted by Deer, Stonechild, and others, this increased focus and engagement with spirituality in our K–12 schools as a part of reconciliation has created an opening for a paradigm shift in the ways we make space for different epistemologies and ontologies across our educational systems.

Equity and Social Justice Frameworks in Education

For decades, as North American K–12 classrooms have become increasingly diverse, educational scholars have continued to call for teacher education programs to be embedded with principles of equity, diversity, and social justice (Banks et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Gandolfi & Mills, 2023). To foster a safe and inclusive environment for all students in the K–12 classroom setting, educational scholars have emphasized the importance of preparing incoming K–12 teachers with the necessary tools to engage with social justice issues (Ankomah, 2020; Gandolfi & Mills, 2023). As agents of change, teachers must be well-educated and informed about how privilege and oppression are present in the education system. Engaging in social justice courses equips teachers with foundational knowledge to better understand concepts of diversity, equity and inclusivity. Most teachers are willing to improve their self-awareness regarding social justice pedagogy; however, institutional barriers often hinder the integration of such topics in the school system (Gandolfi & Mills, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on three complementary frameworks that together ground religious diversity literacy as an equity practice: Paulo Freire's notion of critical pedagogy and "life-affirming" dialogue, bell hooks' conception of education as the practice of freedom, and Paul Gorski's equity literacy framework.

Throughout his writings and his life's work as an educator, Paulo Freire insisted on the importance of dialogue to create transformation in the lives of the "oppressed" laborers he worked with as a literacy instructor. For Freire (1970), dialogue is seen as more than a means to communicate, but rather as an "act of creation" that when grounded in love and tolerance becomes the site of democratic, life-affirming education (p. 99). This kind of authentic democratic interaction can only take place if educators use what he calls a "problem-posing" education wherein subject-object distinction is dissolved through genuinely respectful dialogue between equals, as opposed to what he calls the "banking model" of education: an oppressive approach in which the teacher is the subject and students are placed in the object position. Freire's insistence on the centrality of critical dialogue built on a foundation of humility, love, hope, and critical thinking is as relevant for today's educators as ever. In the highly politicized and polarized environment in which educators currently work, supporting educators with the skills needed to facilitate critical dialogue in their own classes is as much an "existential necessity" for transformative education as ever (Freire, 1970, p. 88).

Educational and cultural scholar-activist bell hooks was deeply influenced by Paulo Freire, whom she met when he was invited as a guest speaker to the university where she was studying and teaching. While critical of Freire for his early works that ignored intersectional issues of sexism and racism, hooks nevertheless had a deep respect for his work and remained "a devoted student and comrade of Paulo's for life" (hooks, 1994, p. 14). Building on Freire's critique of systems of oppression in educational institutions, hooks insisted that education must be the practice of freedom, a practice that is grounded in hope, dialogue, and love. And in alignment with Freire, hooks emphasizes the central role of dialogue to enacting education that transforms. She notes how it is not only students who must be encouraged to share, but also educators, stating, "When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess . . . empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (hooks, 1994, p. 21).

Like Freire, hooks understood education as a system that is never neutral, but rather that reflects societal structures of power and oppression, and that can ultimately be used to replicate or challenge those structures. For hooks, critical hope is a necessary component of dismantling educational structures of oppression. By invoking this notion of critical hope, hooks (1994) focuses on the need for educators to remain committed to the possibilities of transformation in the very structures that they must also critique (p. 18). Thus, hooks' notion of critical hope that centers teachers' capacities for creating actionable change is paramount to creating classrooms that promote equity literacy for all.

Gorski's (2014) equity literacy framework presents a means of understanding and describing equity work across domains through four key abilities: 1) to recognize, 2) to respond, 3) to redress, and 4) to sustain. For the author, all equity work must begin with the ability to recognize injustice around oneself and how it manifests within oneself. He explains that this recognition or awareness of injustice must be followed with a response, such as disrupting an Islamophobic comment instead of ignoring it. Significantly, he extends this to the concept of redress as a process that must follow the initial response. In other words, the step of redressing inequity is to work towards "the elimination of inequities in their classrooms, their schools and their communities" (Gorski, 2014). Perhaps the most important differentiating feature of this framework is found in its last category of "sustain." As Gorski notes, equity work is never easy—and rarely quick. Indeed, social justice scholars have spent decades pointing out that challenging oppressive structures and creating transformational change on a systemic level takes years of sustained effort (Kumashiro, 2000; Banks et al., 2005; Hackman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2010; Paris & Alim, 2017; Daftary & Sugrue, 2022). It requires the capacity to work within systems and institutions that are often broken and perpetuate marginalization within their structures. As this work is so frequently taken up by those who are themselves marginalized within these oppressive systems, the possibility of burnout, exhaustion, or simple demoralization is high (Kendrick, 2022; Mahatmya et al., 2022). Thus, the ability to engage in equity work in a way that is sustained is key to ensuring lasting change on a generational level.

Cultural Safety and Dialogic Pedagogy as Equity Practices

Cultural safety, a concept that originated in Indigenous healthcare education scholarship in Aotearora New Zealand (Ramsden, 1990), has had a significant impact on Canadian educational contexts. Cultural safety differs from previous frameworks of cultural or intercultural competence by prioritizing the need for those experiencing marginalization to feel secure to bring their whole selves into any environment, including those aspects of their identity that relate to their spirituality and culture (Ahmad, 2018). In the Canadian context, the notion of cultural safety is strongly applicable to Canadian Indigenous individuals and communities who experienced the opposite of safety when their spiritual and cultural ways of knowing were suppressed through the colonial institutionalized racist systems such as residential schools (MacLean et al., 2023). Thus, calls for cultural safety across the Canadian educational landscape are inseparable from the ongoing work of reconciliation in response to the TRC's Calls to Action. Extending the notion of cultural safety to include others who have experienced spiritual or religious marginalization highlights the imperative for educators to have the capacity to acknowledge religious diversity and to actively create conditions where religiously and spiritually diverse children feel safe to bring their whole selves into their classrooms. Thus, as identified by this study's participants, teacher educators' role of fostering cultural safety requires a sustained practice in building skills for dialogue that is central to their work to create equitable classrooms. Cultural safety can be seen as a bridge between the theoretical frameworks above and the pedagogical practices explored in this study's findings, particularly in the theme of dialogue as disruption.

Religious Literacy in Teacher Education

What Is Religious Literacy and Why It Matters in Teacher Education

While scholars differ regarding exact definitions, religious literacy has become an increasingly common term used for describing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to engage effectively with religious diversity (Moore, 2007). Religious literacy education is thus different from the more commonly known term of religious education, or RE in European contexts, which has been most commonly associated with education systems that retain denominational or confessional structures (Jackson & Everington, 2017). A confessional approach to teaching religion can be found in the many faith-based schools across Canada, including the many Catholic school districts, Jewish schools, and the growing numbers of Islamic schools (McDonough et al., 2013), wherein religion is taught from within the tradition. Religious literacy, in contrast, is focused on teaching for and within religiously pluralistic contexts. While some conceptions of religious literacy foreground the knowledge needed to engage effectively with religious diversity (Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2008), other more recent conceptions emphasize the need for religious literacy to encompass the skills and dispositions (Francis & Dinham, 2015; Seiple & Hoover, 2021; Walker et al, 2021; Ubani, 2025) required for navigating religious diversity. I employ the term critical religious literacy (CRL) to highlight the need to have a framework for engaging with religious diversity through a lens that includes an explicit consideration of how power operates on individual and structural levels (Reid, 2024).

For decades, scholars have noted that teacher education programs do not adequately provide future educators with formal education to navigate religious diversity in their K–12 classrooms (Subedi, 2006; Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2008; White, 2009), leaving them unprepared. In Canada, preservice teachers' exposure to religious literacy is often limited and depends greatly on a variety of factors, including which province or school district they are in (Guo 2015; Chan et al., 2019; Soules & Jafralie, 2021). Unless it is the teacher's subject specialty, the educator may complete their teacher education program without encountering the concept of religious literacy (Reid, 2024; Soules & Jafralie, 2021). This gap in CRL may leave K–12 teachers entering the field without the nuanced understanding of religious diversity needed to navigate the complex issues and political tensions that can lead to prejudice and conflict in the classroom (Marcus, 2017; Enstedt, 2022).

Religious Diversity and Teacher Preparedness

Considering religious diversity matters for teachers because of the already well-documented complexity they are dealing with in their current classrooms, impacting teacher well-being. In a recent CBC report, one Albertan teacher described "feeling like I'm drowning," a sentiment that is increasingly common among all teachers (Stolte, 2026). Thus, increasing complexity impacts student and teacher well-being, leading to greater rates of teacher attrition and burnout (Sulz et al., 2023; Kendrick, 2022), something that teacher education programs must take into account as they consider the kinds of skills and aptitudes preservice teachers need to thrive in their chosen profession. Scholars have pointed out that because religion and religious identities are often perceived as difficult, sensitive, or controversial topics, teachers

may consciously or unconsciously opt to avoid discussing these topics or only do so in a manner that they perceive as safe or controlled (Anderson et al., 2015; Guo, 2015; Damrow and Sweeney 2019; Ubani 2025).

Without the capacity to recognize the ways in which students' religious identities often have deep value to the individual, it is highly unlikely that teachers will be able to enact social justice goals, such as creating more inclusive and equitable classrooms, in a wholistic manner. Instead, teacher educators can recognize and respond to religious identities through teaching CRL (Reid, 2024). Particularly within a pluralistic North American context, studies have shown that preservice teachers often desire explicit instruction about the topic of religious literacy (Patrick & Chan, 2022; Soules & Jafralie, 2022). Thus, drawing on Gorski and Swalwell's (2023) equity literacy framework is helpful for the task of preparing preservice teachers to engage across belief systems by integrating all four equity literacy abilities. Freirian notions of critical dialogue and conscientization coupled with hook's vision for education as a relational, hopeful, and transformative practice provide the theoretical foundation for this work, while the notion of cultural safety offers a pathway for applied practice.

Methodology

Entering the Research

I chose to situate this study in a small liberal arts university in Western Canada in the small city where I was living at the time. As a PhD candidate who was also working as a sessional instructor at that same university, I already had some connections and familiarity with its faculty of education, which facilitated the research process. However, I also chose to undertake my study in that location for other, more complex reasons. Prior to my arrival to the Canadian Prairies, I had spent more than 20 years living in Montreal, Quebec, which is where I had started developing my initial ideas for this study. So, while I was very familiar with the kinds of tensions that existed regarding religious issues in public spaces in Quebec, I was initially surprised and disoriented as to how to proceed with my study when I found myself living in a small semi-rural city. I considered returning to Quebec to conduct my study, but I found myself intrigued by how different the tensions and issues surrounding religion and spirituality in the classroom were in this distinct landscape. Thus, I made the decision to undertake the larger study of which the study presented in this article is a part of in the educational context of semi-rural teacher education programs on the Canadian Prairies.

Positionality

My own positionality naturally impacted how and where I conducted this study. For, while I had spent most of my adult life living in the cosmopolitan city of Montreal, I am in fact a fourth-generation white settler-colonizer from the province of Alberta. Having left Western Canada for Montreal when I was only 22, my return to the Canadian Prairies in 2017 was the beginning of an unanticipated journey into my own process of reckoning with my own settler-colonizer roots and reconciliation with the Indigenous

communities of this land. Of course, this journey of reconciliation was also precipitated by the publication and responses to the findings and Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Given how the specific Calls to Action 63 to 65 directly implicate all levels of Canadian educational institutions, my own engagement with reconciliation and decolonization mirrored that of the larger educational landscape at the time. The city I had moved to was surrounded by several large reserves, so I was immediately struck by the substantial Indigenous presence throughout the community. I was fortunate to have the opportunity through various community events and initiatives to engage closely with different Indigenous groups and slowly begin the process of unlearning my own inherited colonial perspectives. This process is an ongoing part of my professional and personal lives.

Research Design

I chose to use an exploratory case study approach because it supports my goal of establishing dialogic examinations to allow for what Yin (2014) calls "a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 13). In this case, the phenomenon is two-fold: it explores how teacher educators a) view the aim of religious literacy and b) engage with religion as a part of their own or their students' identities within their lived experiences as teachers of teachers.

Participants and Recruitment

Five teacher educators in a faculty of education at one Canadian university were recruited as participants in this qualitative case study through a combination of convenience sampling and, to a lesser degree, the snowball technique (Patton, 2014). These interviews were conducted in person over a period of one academic semester. Participants were selected based on their experience with equity work and their willingness to and interest in discussing religion in educational contexts. Participant familiarity varied across the study, presenting layered ethical considerations. Three participants were known to me personally, while two were strangers who had been recommended to me by other participants. Following Garton and Copland's (2010) conception of the "acquaintance interview," I was aware of the risk of leveraging existing relationships to pressure participation, as well as Braun and Clarke's (2019) caution against incorporating information that is disclosed outside of the interview process. However, I was also aware of the benefits that familiarity can provide, such as facilitating rapport-building when discussing sensitive topics (Oakley, 1981).

The participants represented faculty at varying stages of their careers, from early career to nearing retirement. All participants were white, four were male, and three identified as Christian (see Table 1). Along with the one white Christian female participant, I had initially recruited an additional participant who was female, Christian, and Black. However, she removed herself from the study due to her heavy workload, a not uncommon reality for those scholars who experience marginalization (Mahatmya et al., 2022). While I was disappointed in the lack of racial and gender diversity among the remaining five participants, I realized that they were, in fact, representative of that faculty at the time, in which the majority of faculty members were white cisgendered heterosexual males.

Table 1

Participants

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Discipline/courses taught	Religious or spiritual background	Career stage
Helen	F	History	Christian	mid-career
James	M	Philosophy	Christian	end of career
Michael	M	Social studies/Literacy	Christian	beginning of career
David	M	Social studies	No religion	mid-career
Matthew	M	Social studies	No religion	mid-career

The teacher educator insights explored here were garnered through semi-structured interviews that emphasized the value of dialogic engagement and the importance of grounding knowledge in lived experience. Given the complexity and sensitivity of religious literacy in secular higher education, it was important to establish rapport and trust with participants by valuing them not simply as sources of data, but as those whose knowledge and experiences shed light on systemic patterns of inequity.

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews for their alignment with a constructivist epistemology, which views knowledge as socially constructed rather than objectively discovered (Roulston, 2010; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). This approach acknowledges the interview as a dialogic process shaped by the positionalities of both interviewer and participant, rather than a neutral method for extracting stable "data" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 586). At the same time, it is important to resist the assumption that qualitative interviews are inherently more ethical than other methods—a critique well established (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). Ethical complexities persist, including power asymmetries, the dynamics of interviewing known participants, and the interpretive authority of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this context, the asymmetrical relationship between myself as a novice researcher and the established tenure-track faculty participants undoubtedly had an impact on both how I interacted with participants and how I analyzed the data. While I attempted to mitigate any potential impacts through careful documentation and procedures and critical self-reflection, I acknowledge that participants may have "curated" their responses in an unconscious response to my positionality as a doctoral student, just as I may have engaged with these senior faculty members in a way that exposed my own tentativeness.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted in the faculty members' offices, which ensured privacy and a comfortable setting. I recorded the individual interviews using both a voice recorder and my own cell phone recorder and later transcribed the recordings using the software application Trint to do the initial transcription, which I then reviewed and cleaned by hand. The data were later analyzed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and coded in an iterative process using NVivo12, eventually creating the themes presented below. In line with my constructivist stance, I do not see these themes as having "emerged" from the data, but rather I agree with Braun and Clarke's (2013) understanding that "searching for patterns is not akin to an archaeologist digging to find hidden treasures buried within the data, pre-existing the process of searching for them. It's more akin to the process of sculpture" (p. 225). I engaged in member-checking via email both after the initial transcriptions were done and after the themes were constructed to ensure that participants had the opportunity to ensure that the data accurately reflected their contributions and to address any discrepancies or concerns they may have had with the data as presented. The participants did not request any changes to the work.

Findings

While the professors' insights and experiences varied considerably, there were repeated concerns about the role of religious literacy in the context of teacher education.

Theme 1: "Dismissed": Navigating Peer Silencing in Secular Institutions

> "One ex-colleague just called me unenlightened and laughed at my theology background." (James)

The quote above speaks to the feeling of being silenced and/or needing to self-censor one's religious or spiritual identity, as expressed by a number of participants, including James. As a Christian academic with a philosophy and theology academic background, he explained this was not one isolated incident but rather something that he had experienced in several different contexts, commenting on a frequent sense of being "dismissed" by peers. Helen noted a similar phenomenon with her preservice teacher students, stating, "There's a perception among students that many of their professors are hostile to their faith backgrounds . . . sort of radical empiricists, or Evangelical atheists." Given that a significant proportion of the students at this university belonged to tightly knit conservative Christian communities of various faiths, there seemed to be a clear perception by these faculty participants that many—and perhaps most—of their colleagues within the academic sphere placed little importance on recognizing this aspect of their students' identities.

Silencing and self-censorship extended beyond the confines of the university classrooms in the teacher education program to the practicum settings for preservice teachers. James, Michael, and Helen commented on how the preservice teachers they worked with engaged in a form of self-censorship regarding their religious or faith identities. There was a common perception that the preservice teachers experienced significant stress around how they would navigate religion and religious identities within

their own future classrooms. As Helen described, she was concerned that her students "are very anxious, they are self-censoring, they are very vulnerable . . . certainly religion comes up in the classroom as one area that they see as very potentially damaging."

James and Michael both expressed how they were often hesitant to disclose their own religious or spiritual identities or faith commitments. As Michael explained, "I don't always model religious sensibilities because people don't feel necessarily that personal religious confession is an open topic for debate and discussion." James agreed, commenting that when it comes to disclosing his own faith commitments, "It might come up near the conclusion of the course . . . but I never lead with that." This desire to keep their own religious identities private may seem common-sense within the context of a secular institution, but it raises questions about where religiously identified students may find representation and about the overall impact of such pervasive "silencing" or erasure of an aspect of one's identity in educational contexts.

Although not religious himself, David noted that "there are many people who have religious beliefs who work at the university . . . but it's very much private." This sentiment was echoed by James, who suggested that he was not as comfortable discussing his religious beliefs with his faculty peers as he was with those outside his own department, noting that "people in other departments . . . we talk about the importance [of beliefs] for helping us deal with everything from curriculum development to students in the classroom." James' statement highlights the extent to which his beliefs are valuable to him professionally, even if they are not easily expressed among his departmental colleagues. The pattern of keeping one's religious identity "hidden" and out of the public sphere was found repeated elsewhere in the institution.

Given that feeling silenced or the need to self-censure one's religious identity was reported not only by preservice teachers but also by those faculty responsible for teaching them, this supports the view that secular universities, including teacher education programs, may not be places where those identities are valued, welcomed, or even recognized.

Theme 2: Preservice Teacher Harms and Gaps

> "Our teachers are walking into classrooms where students of all faiths are represented . . . I don't know that they feel at all prepared."
> (Helen)

Helen's concern cuts to the heart of what emerged most clearly in the data, across interviews: that religious illiteracy poses real, practical harms to preservice teachers, and that teacher education programs are frequently ill-equipped to address it. This worry was not abstract; rather, it was grounded in what she observed daily in her students, many of whom, as she noted, "might know something about their own [tradition] but [are] not particularly understanding of others." For preservice teachers heading into diverse classrooms, this gap between their own religious knowledge and the communities they will serve is more than an inconvenience. It is a professional vulnerability.

This vulnerability became particularly visible during practicum placements in faith-based schools. Faculty participants described many preservice teachers in these placements as underprepared and

uncomfortable. The discomfort was not limited to those without a religious identity; it extended to those whose faith tradition did not align with the school community's tradition. In both cases, participants described students entering these placements as lacking foundational knowledge or pedagogical tools to navigate those contexts.

Matthew named the structural dimension of this gap directly: "It's really hard to prepare our students to teach a course in world religions . . . we don't have certification, we don't have a minor, we don't have a way of recognizing that within our current organizational structure." His frustration highlights something beyond individual comfort or preparedness: it signals a systemic absence. CRL is not simply underrepresented or not taught in our teacher education programs; it is frequently, in many respects, unrecognized within the institutional structure of teacher education. Matthew elaborated on what this looks like in practice: "There's a real resistance . . . our faculty never, or very rarely offers those courses . . . independent studies are the only way." The fact that independent study, conducted privately in a professor's office, is the primary available pathway to learn the skills and knowledge of CRL speaks volumes. It mirrors the broader pattern identified in Theme 1: that religion in the teacher education context is something most often dealt with in private, and rarely in the open, structured, institutionally sanctioned spaces where professional preparation happens.

Together, these accounts suggest that the harms preservice teachers experience are not incidental or treatable through individual efforts alone. They are, in fact, the predictable outcome of a system that has not yet begun to fully reckon with the wide spectrum of religious and spiritual diversity as a dimension of equity in our contemporary K–12 contexts.

Theme 3: Dialogue as Disruption

> "We have to deal with those questions. Is it possible for students to feel heated? Absolutely!" (Matthew)

For these faculty participants, dialogue was not incidental to their teaching; rather, it was the primary site of disruption.

Matthew described how he leaned into embracing difficult conversations in his classroom, commenting that "We have to deal with those questions . . . Is it possible for students to feel heated? Absolutely . . . My role is to be a facilitator of the discourse and offer the validity of other perspectives." His comments draw attention to the disruption students often feel when confronted with alternate perspectives in conversation that do not align with their own. This cognitive dissonance that is experienced by students in dialogue is echoed by James when he encourages his students to examine their own comments in dialogue carefully. He describes telling his students, "let's play with that . . . say my right-wing economic belief is inconsistent with this particular Christian belief which says I need to care for the poor . . . I don't say 'you're inconsistent.' I say, 'What do you do?'" Rather than confronting the student's inconsistency directly, James turns it back on them, using their own values as the starting point for examination. The question "What do you do?" isn't rhetorical; it invites the student to sit with genuine tension rather than resolve it prematurely. This move requires instructors who are willing to create spaces for students

to share their views, values, and beliefs with each other, including their deepest held religious beliefs. Creating this space must be modelled intentionally, as Matthew notes, "We try to model a culture of being willing to share and challenge . . . creating a context of dialogue." However, this is not a simple endeavor. Indeed, creating an educational community in which students have both the skills to engage in critical dialogue and a sense of cultural safety or trust that their views will be recognized and respected is a significant challenge. Matthew reflected on how teachers, "have such an interesting role of trying to arbitrate those values and discussions . . . it's incredibly difficult." Ultimately, teacher educators must provide the skills and opportunities to practice critical dialogue, and, crucially, they must model those same skills in their own classrooms.

Discussion

What these teacher educators described, in terms of the silencing and the powerful uses of dialogue, points toward a clear set of implications for how teacher education programs might begin to take CRL seriously as a dimension of equity. These implications are organized here around Gorski and Swalwell's equity literacy framework of recognize, respond, redress, and sustain. First, teacher education programs and all those who contribute to their practices and policies, must recognize that religious-based inequities exist in both our K–12 classrooms and our teacher education classrooms. Moreover, they should understand the nuanced ways these inequities are created and maintained, often through avoidance or silence. It is not enough to either hope that individual instructors will take on this challenging task with no support or to assume that faith is a personal matter that has little impact or place in our K–12 classrooms. Teacher educators must be willing to recognize the challenges and opportunities that come with educating for CRL as a part of teaching for equity and justice. Second, teacher education programs should provide their faculty with tools and support for helping faculty develop classroom practices that will equip their preservice teachers to respond critically with religious diversity and students with or without strong faith convictions. Examples of these responses could be to create structured dialogue circles, case study analysis and creation, or simulation development within the context of teacher education (Wright-Maley, 2018). However, as the participants from this study described, even if individual teacher educators have the skills, knowledge, and volition to engage with CRL in their classrooms, when there are no specific curricular requirements within the teacher education program for preservice teachers to be religiously literate, it is highly unlikely that it will happen in a sustained way. And with the increasing complexity of K–12 teachers' roles in today's classrooms, finding room in an already overly congested curriculum is a significant challenge (Patrick & Chan, 2022). Within the Canadian context, the provincially mandated K–12 program of studies (POS) largely determines what teacher education programs must cover. As several study participants noted, if religious literacy is not an explicit part of a POS, it is difficult to justify its inclusion within the existing program, particularly within the contemporary context in which many higher education institutions are facing significant financial pressure and uncertainty (Jack, 2025). But if teacher education programs hope to educate their teachers to be champions of equity and justice, they must begin to redress the gaps that exist within their own programs regarding all facets of diversity, including religious diversity.

Finally, while many faculties may have a small number of faculty members with specific research interests in equity and social justice to ensure critical religious literacy is part of their own individual courses, without a sustained, organized, and cohesive plan to ensure CRL is addressed on a program level, teacher education programs may ultimately fail to create lasting change. Indeed, the oft-used strategy of entrusting the important work of engaging with the "thorniest" topics for preservice teachers in areas of equity and social justice to one or two faculty members all too frequently results in a glaring gap when those members leave, or when the bulk of courses are taught by contingent faculty (Stewart et al., 2024). Two possible solutions for this absence are as follows: 1) Teacher education programs must audit their own curricula and programming to identify the gaps related to religious diversity and identities. While it may be unlikely that overloaded programs can afford the time or space to create an individual course on CRL, ensuring CRL is contained within the outcomes for equity-focused courses is a concrete and achievable goal; 2) Teacher education programs must create long-term professional development for all faculty to ensure this knowledge-building work is sustained. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that increasing capacity for CRL requires not only knowledge, but also skills in facilitating dialogue across differences. Yet as Matthew observed, creating such spaces requires more than pedagogical skills or tools—it demands that teacher educators "model a culture of being willing to share and challenge." This quote highlights what the participants returned to repeatedly: that dialogue across religious difference is only possible when students experience genuine cultural safety. Building this cultural safety, so that students feel recognized and respected rather than dismissed, cannot be addressed through one-off workshops (Patrick & Chan, 2022; Leung et al., 2024). Rather, it requires a sustained, program-level commitment that must be modelled by teacher educators before it can be practiced by preservice teachers.

As with any study, there are some recognized limitations in this research. First, there was an obvious homogeneity in the participants' backgrounds, as they were all white, heterosexual, and mostly male, reflecting the inequitable structures that persist in higher education in North America. That the participants were mostly Christian was also a limitation, although it is not unusual for those who choose to participate in a study about religion to have a religious background themselves. Third, the limited number of participants from this smaller semi-rural university context means that the relevance to larger urban institutions may be limited. Mostly, the limitations of the research design and participants point to the need for a larger scale study, ideally using mixed methods such as surveys along with interviews and focus groups to extend the impact of the findings.

The findings of this study contribute broadly to the field of teacher education, and specifically to teacher educator and preservice teacher identities, along with professional identity formation. The results of this study confirm other scholarship that draws attention to the impact of personal beliefs on professional identity formation for teachers (Subedi, 2006; Patrick & Chan, 2022), extending this to include religious beliefs and identities. Theoretically, this study contributes to social justice and critical pedagogy scholarship in the Freirean and hooksian traditions through applying Gorski's equity literacy framework to the domain of teacher education in a Canadian context. Additionally, this study contributes to the burgeoning field of religious literacy scholarship in addressing the complex ways religious identities and issues manifest in teacher education programs, ultimately assisting administrators and policy makers develop policies to create more fully equitable K–12 classrooms, schools, and school districts. Finally,

this study contributes to extending current educational curricular scholarship in demonstrating that for teacher education programs to be successful in equipping their preservice teachers with the skills to address all forms of discrimination and oppression in their future classrooms, social justice- and equity literacy-oriented programming cannot exclude religion as a facet of diversity.

Conclusion

These shared experiences offer an account of both the tensions and possibilities currently experienced by teacher educators whose work requires them to navigate the complexity of religious identities, preservice teacher education, and equity-based pedagogy. While small scale, the responses from these teacher educators nevertheless demonstrate important yet often overlooked perspectives on religious identities and issues in teacher education programs. This article makes the case that CRL is a crucial component for equity-focused teacher education not only for preservice teachers, but also for the teacher educators themselves. The narratives shared by these five educators illuminate how fostering the conditions for cultural safety in which students with religiously and spiritually diverse identities are recognized and respected is central to this work. Informed by Freire's critical pedagogy, hook's pedagogy as freedom, and Gorski's equity literacy framework, this study repositions religion not as a source of silencing or heated conflict in the classroom, but rather as a site of liberatory transformation.

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My PE, My Story: The Use of Vignettes to Understand Student Experiences of Pedagogical Innovation in PE

Ty Riddick and Douglas Gleddie

Abstract

Our study explores how middle school students experience pedagogical innovation in Physical Education (PE) through the implementation of the Meaningful Physical Education (Meaningful PE) framework. Using a case study design, students participated in eight units throughout the school year that explicitly prioritized meaningful experiences. Data from interviews, reflections, and journals were represented as portrait vignettes that were co-constructed with each student to capture authentic, individualized experiences. This approach highlights students' voices and the evolving meaning they attribute to physical education over time. Findings aim to inform educators' practice and advance research on meaningfulness and student engagement in physical education.

Introduction

> This year was a lot better than my last PE experience! At my old school, the teachers would just chuck a volleyball at us and tell us to go run around and do whatever. But when we stood around, we would get yelled at—the teachers weren't very good at their job. However, PE here is a lot different! It involves participation, and the units are usually fun for everyone and not just some random thing each day.
> (Lucy)

Our research seeks to provide an understanding of the way students experience pedagogical innovation in physical education (PE), through the use of vignettes. The innovation in this context refers to the implementation of the Meaningful Physical Education framework (Meaningful PE) (Fletcher et al., 2021). The framework prioritizes the meaningfulness of students' physical education experiences that may lead to continued participation in physical activity both inside and outside of school. While Meaningful PE has been an emerging area of research, much of its evidence resides in teachers' enactment of the approach. For example, Vasily et al. (2021) took an actor-oriented approach to understanding the implementation of the same innovation (Meaningful PE) through the lens of a teacher and pedagogical coach. However, a gap exists in understanding students' direct experiences within the sustained implementation of this framework over time. Through the use of portrait vignettes, this study explores how the Meaningful PE framework shapes the PE experiences of a specific group of middle school students. Additionally, the study may open new avenues for portrait vignettes as a presentation device for future research examining the way students experience pedagogical innovation.

Pedagogical Innovation: Meaningful Physical Education

The meaningfulness of a child's experience with physical activity has a strong impact on how they engage with movement throughout their lives (Ramer et al., 2021; Yungblut et al., 2012). However, it is often reported that students do not enjoy their PE experience and are unwilling to participate in PE beyond the compulsory years (Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2021; Ladwig et al., 2018). To better support the different needs and interests of students, there has been a growing movement toward adopting a range of innovative teaching approaches in physical education (Casey & Kirk, 2021; Vasily et al., 2021). Most often, this occurs in the form of model-based practices (MBP) (see Metzler, 2011). The advocacy for the use of MBPs is often proposed as a solution to the lack of inclusion and/or engagement experienced by some students in more traditional approaches to PE (Casey & Kirk, 2021). However, despite not being new, MBPs are often considered innovative, which Casey (2014) attributes to challenges of implementation. The Meaningful PE framework may be considered as one such innovation, as it has been designed to address the pressing issues of declining engagement in PE. However, as a framework without the rigorous guidelines or prescriptive steps often found in MBPs, Meaningful PE allows for more contextual flexibility in the way it is implemented.

To better understand what youth find meaningful in PE, Beni et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of over 50 peer-reviewed studies and identified six key features: fun, challenge, social interaction, personal relevance, motor competence, and joy/delight. These initial features, combined with the pedagogical principles of reflective and democratic practice (Fletcher & Ní Chróinín, 2021), form the basis of the Meaningful PE framework. Fletcher and Ní Chróinín (2021) describe a democratic classroom as one where "pupils are actively engaged, agentic, take ownership of their learning, and are willing and able to use their voices to advocate authentically for their own experiences and those of others" (p. 49). Reflection is the process through which individuals attribute meaningfulness (or lack thereof) to an experience (Arnold, 1979; Rintala, 2009). The goal of the framework is to guide teachers in their pedagogical decisions to help students form a meaningful connection to physical activity that inspires continued participation both in and out of school.

Current research has focused on teachers' understanding of Meaningful PE and the associated pedagogies (Beni et al., 2017, 2019, 2023; Howley et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2023). Recently, Harding-Kuriger et al. (2024) used group concept mapping with Grade 7–9 students in conceptualizing what is meaningful to them, but did not go into depth on how these ideas impacted the experience of students. Other studies have explored implementation challenges and isolated pedagogical strategies such as democratic approaches (Cardiff et al., 2023; Vasily et al., 2021). In the limited research that does highlight the experiences of students (often in specific units), students' experiences of these approaches are presented via themes through thematic analysis (Cardiff et al., 2023; Elnan, 2025). However, few studies have explicitly explored how the implementation of the Meaningful PE framework has impacted individual students' experiences across time. Nor has a research study presented the uniqueness of experience and given voice to the participating students through the use of vignettes.

Portrait Vignettes as a Presentation Device

> Can a researcher become a storyteller? Can storytelling become research? Is it enough just to share the story? Is the story the thing, or is it the telling? (Lewis, 2011, p. 506)

Faulkner and Squillante (2020) describe narrative as more than just voice, with details merely sequentially thrown on a page. Narratives bring personality, highs and lows, insecurities, expectations, and irritations onto the page. A narrative is a "shapely thing: organized, polished, curated, its events arranged so that they will reach us, move us, change us. Simply put, narrative is a story" (p. 1026). What to do, then, with the terms "narrative," "story," and "vignette"? Are they synonymous or nuanced? While each may have a common goal of resonating with readers or allowing them to walk in another's shoes (Bocher & Herrmann, 2020; Kiesinger, 1998), Clandinin and Connelly (1994) distinguish story as the phenomenon that is lived, and often what is to be studied, whereas the narrative is the description of the lived experience. Vignettes, on the other hand, are a form of evocative narrative that vividly describes and aims to capture specific moments of what has been lived, understood, and experienced (Ammann, 2018; Boon & Eloff, 2023; Kiesenger, 1998). Much of the literature related to vignettes positions them as tools to collect research data (Blodgett et al., 2011), where text may be used as a hypothetical stimulus that participants are asked to respond to for the purpose of creating data (Hughes & Huby, 2012; Yungblut et al., 2012). The construction of such vignettes is centered around existing literature and not necessarily the experience of participants, who, when presented with the vignette, may be asked what they would do or how it makes them feel (Barter & Renold, 2000; Hughes & Huby, 2012). We intentionally chose to focus on vignettes as a means to present research data in a way that participants, who may otherwise be voiceless, can be given a voice (Lewis, 2011).

Anzul et al. (1997) provide a useful characterization of the different ways vignettes may be used as presentation devices: a snapshot vignette provides a brief, vivid account of what has been observed in a given experience; a composite vignette describes a mix of different participants' experiences often united around a central theme; and a portrait describes an individual participant's experience based on empirically collected data (Ammann, 2018; Anzul et al., 1997). Composite vignettes have been the most prevalent form of vignette utilized to explore a variety of topics related to physical activity and sport (Crocker et al., 2021; McGannon & McMahon, 2022; Nunes et al., 2021; Yungblut et al., 2012). Yet, if the objective of vignettes is to centralize the experiences and voices of students while also making them accessible to those outside of the experience (Anzul et al., 1997; Spalding & Philips, 2007; Yungblut et al., 2012), then in relation to the research question, portrait vignettes are most conducive to understanding the unique ways in which students experience the proposed pedagogical innovation. In other areas, Dubuc et al. (2010) used portrait vignettes to understand the experiences of burnout in aspiring adolescent gymnasts, whereas Blodgett et al. (2011) used portrait vignettes as a narrative strategy to present the voices of Aboriginal community members. However, specific to PE, there is an absence of literature in which portrait-type vignettes, representing the singular experience of one individual, have been used as a way to present research data.

Methods

We approached our research through an interpretive/constructivist paradigm, acknowledging that "meaningfulness" is a subjective experience that is felt and often difficult to fully articulate (Metheny, 1968). Drawing on Dewey's (1938) concepts that experiences are both interactive and continuous, this study recognizes that an individual's understanding of reality is shaped by their interaction with their physical and social environment. As such, a case study approach (Merriam, 1998), with the intention of co-creating stories with students within the case, was employed to capture student participants' subjective realities. To recruit participants for the study, per school policy, the school's administrative staff sent a letter explaining the study to all parents in Ty's Grade 8 PE class (n = 21). As students are under the age of consent, parental permission, along with student assent, was required. At the date of closing, the administrative staff exported an Excel file of responses to Ty, listing the students who had consented to participate. Ty implemented Meaningful PE in each of the eight units taught throughout the school year. As Vasily et al. (2021) point out, there is often a gap between the intention of an innovation and the way it is enacted, and thus fidelity to the innovation is an important consideration to ensure that any claims made regarding the effectiveness are attributed correctly. In remaining faithful to the Meaningful PE framework, each unit emphasized engagement with the features through the development of a shared language and the use of personal reflection in relation to meaningfulness. Additionally, each unit also offered opportunities for students to direct and take ownership of their own learning and reflect upon their experience. Throughout the year, data were collected through two individual interviews (one at the end of each semester) and additional artifacts: two journal reflections, two questionnaires, three exit tickets, and each student's outdoor education logbook.

Boon and Eloff (2023) describe how vignettes aim to capture moments of significance. Tesch (1990) considers these as "meaning units": a piece of data that contains a single thought relating to a specific subject. After data collection was complete, Ty presented each student with a collection of their meaning units expressed through quotations, accompanied by the question, "If we were to tell a story about your experience of Meaningful PE this year, what moments would be important to include?" Students identified the units they would like included and, in some cases, ranked them in order of importance. Ty then created raw vignettes with an aim to portray each student's character and experiences (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). As Ammann (2018) suggests, in an effort to capture the "unvarnished reality" (p. 9) of an experience, care was taken to refrain from making interpretations, with Ty adding only contextual information to allow the vignette to be more comprehensible to the reader. Anzul et al. (1997) highlight that a challenge facing writers is the fear of misrepresenting the thoughts or feelings of participants. In a similar regard, Ammann (2018) describes the writer's struggle to constantly search for a word that might more accurately describe the experience. To alleviate this pressure, the students' own words were used as much as possible. For example, one student vignette (Jasmin) includes the statement, "some days, when something memorable happened, reflecting was a vibe." Although replacing the word "vibe" with another positively associated word might make the sentence more comprehensible to an academic audience, we felt it was important to leave the phrase as it was in order to maintain authenticity (Lister & McFarlane, 2021). As a measure of validation, the raw vignettes were then presented to each

student, with an opportunity for them to make any changes they felt made the vignette a more accurate representation. For example, when her vignette described something her teacher did as beneficial (based on her response to an interview question), the student (Kelly) noted that "beneficial" was not a word she would use, and suggested that it be changed to "good for me."

As Dewey (1938) describes, experiences are interactive; they are shaped through the interactions between people and the environment. There is a relationship between my experience of you and your experience of me in a given situation. As the students in the study were experiencing the pedagogical innovation, so was Ty. As Boon & Eloff (2023) write, both learners and researchers are affected by an experience. As such, below each vignette, Ty has included his own thoughts (in italicized text) with respect to the experience of each student. As mentioned, 14 students consented to participate in the study; selecting three for this paper was exceedingly difficult for Ty, as each story means something different to him. The three below were chosen for their diversity as well as their representation of the different ways students experience Meaningful PE.

Results

Vignette 1: Jasmin

> I think PE is a fun subject, especially when activities are with other people, but sometimes when we do activities where you can't hang out with your friends, and you're just by yourself, that can get lonely. My favorite part of PE is when you get to do things that you normally do by yourself, like dance, and instead do them with a team or a group.
>
> Overall, PE has been positive this year. I was able to participate in activities I'm interested in, build friendships, and feel like I belong. We've had a lot more choices this year. For example, instead of just doing volleyball games, we're actually doing practice and stuff, and you can choose what skills you want to work on or the level you want to play at. Being able to set goals for what I want to work on helps me feel more confident because I know the skill better. However, I would like even more choices to set my own challenges next year.
>
> We spent time reflecting on our experiences this year. Some days, when something memorable happened, reflecting was a vibe, but on other days, I didn't want to reflect when it was not a vibe. I found it challenging to think about what it is I find meaningful about certain activities; sometimes, there was nothing! Other times, it was hard to narrow it down to one main feature. I guess I consider myself an outdoorsy person, as these types of experiences were the ones that were most meaningful to me. Throughout the year, we sometimes took a break from our units to go outside when the weather was nice. One day, we went out to the playground, which I liked because it was nice to go out as if it were recess, like we were in elementary school again. On another day, we went on a walk in the ravine, and it was fun because my friend told stories while we walked. During the canoe trip, we went swimming, which was my favorite moment because I was with my friends. At first, the water was cold, but then I got warmer and felt happy when I was with my friends. I loved canoeing with Crystal because it was fun to talk to her and also learn a new skill with her. Because of the canoeing unit, I think I'm going to go canoeing in my own time with my family and friends.

I have known Jasmin for the past four school years. As PE classes at our school often occur during the same time block, I had observed her participating, but had never officially been her teacher until this year. My perception of her before this year was that perhaps she didn't always like PE, as she didn't appear the most engaged or willing to take on challenges. The first interview I had with her was eye-opening when she stated that during individual activities such as running or gymnastics (in the previous years, gymnastics routines were completed individually), she felt lonely. What I had mistaken as a lack of engagement was perhaps instead a lack of social connection during individual pursuits. To make PE meaningful for Jasmin, it was clear we needed to make it social. The democratic emphasis of the Meaningful PE framework afforded me opportunities to allow students choice to complete certain activities in groups or as individuals. Emphasizing social interaction, taking opportunities to go outside, in ways that were perhaps disconnected from the unit going on at the time, seemed to provide Jasmin a sense of novelty that she really connected with. Three months after completing the research process, although I am no longer teaching Jasmin, her engagement in Grade 9 PE seems to have continued, as I observed her taking on new challenges as she experienced field hockey and rugby for the first time. The inclusion of this vignette highlights that the way students experience pedagogical innovation is often deeply embedded within the social context. As Meaningful PE is something that is done with students, not to them, the approach needed to evolve in alignment with Jasmin's hopes and desires. The research process really allowed Jasmin to advocate for what it is she wanted in PE. Which, as we hope is salient in the vignette, involved ensuring social connectedness was prevalent for her in the units we pursued.

Vignette 2: Isla

> I have always enjoyed playing sports and coming to PE. I am confident in my skills and feel like I can do almost anything! This year in PE was pretty good, but there were definitely highs and lows. We started the year playing flag football, and I just love football. I don't know, there's just something about it. When I was growing up, my dad always watched football, so I've learned about it and been connected to it for like a very long time. However, at that time, the challenges with some of the boys in the class became apparent, as they wouldn't pass to me, were mean, and not very inclusive. I'm not the kind of girl who is into dance and volleyball, which sometimes made it hard to fit in during this class. For these reasons, I appreciated having the choices of parkour or dance during our Aesthetic Movement unit, and being able to choose the level I wish to play at, because I am a competitive person. I love competition, and it's hard for me to be very patient when I am doing sports. Opportunities like these really allowed me to express who I am. As the year progressed, I had a great time at Track & Field, which was very challenging and fun. The choices I had in class helped me discover that hurdles might be a hidden strength of mine, while also improving my javelin distance by five metres from last year!
>
> The canoe trip helped me change my thinking about a lot of the people in our classes because getting to know people better and seeing how different they are from how they are at school to how they are outdoors, and showing who they really are. While swimming, I felt free spirited and myself, it took me back to childhood when we swam a lot. We also spent time reflecting on our experiences this year, which I honestly found as a waste of time. I want to get right into playing! I don't really think about what I find meaningful about stuff. If I like the sport, I am going to play it! Although during our last unit, when I was encouraged to think about how I can be active in my community, it helped me realize that I didn't need to wait for my mom to pick me

> up from the rec center, but rather, there was a walking path back to the community, so I walked home for the first time.
>
> At the end of the year, we had some outdoor choices; almost all of the girls were playing grass volleyball, and the boys were over there playing soccer, having so much fun. I was like, "Oh, I want to go play soccer," but I didn't want to be the only girl, as they would call me a 'pick me' or 'try hard.' However, one of the boys invited me to play, and finally, they were inclusive! They passed me the ball, and when I scored a goal, they all high-fived me. It was really fun! I hope I have more days like that next year.

Much like Jasmin, I have known Isla for as long as I have been at this school, but I had not taught her before this year. I would characterize her as a strong athlete who seems to enjoy physical activity. What really stood out to me throughout this process is how Isla repeatedly referenced identity, or PE, allowing her to express "who she was" or finding out about "who others really were." As you've read in her vignette, Isla doesn't necessarily identify with many of the other girls in the grade. Often, whether it be in flag football, or parkour (when students chose between parkour, dance, or X-disc), it was not uncommon for Isla's choices to result in her being the lone girl amongst the boys in the grade. In reflection, I wonder if, without the democratic approaches and the ability to make choices in her learning, would Isla still have felt that PE allowed her to express her identity?

Understanding how to play with people who are outside your regular peer group is an important life skill for students to develop: for this group, this school year, it was a source of ongoing development. Even at the end of the year, when she really wanted to go play soccer, Isla still expressed worry that boys would call her a "pick me," which references an incident that occurred roughly eight months prior in October when the boys with whom Isla often chose to participate were not very inclusive. Fortunately, as you read, the situation during soccer turned out much better for her this time around. The inclusion of this vignette highlights the way students' experiences are influenced by the social environment and how PE can facilitate identity formation. In Isla's case, the inclusion she felt (finally) at the end of the year was not a matter of chance; rather, it was the product of continuous and intentional actions that aimed to develop and promote a more inclusive environment.

Vignette 3: Mike

> I'm an athlete, I enjoy sports, and do a ton of extracurriculars. However, at my previous school, the curriculum was pretty rigid, there was little to no flexibility, and because of that, I found it kinda of boring. Here at this school, it's a lot different. I have been given ways to have my voice heard. Here, I've been able to make choices about what I want to improve on. For instance, in basketball, I wrote I wanted to get better at dribbling, because I want to become a more shifty player, and I think that allowed me to spend my class time wisely, and that also allowed me to know what to work on. Even though I am the type who wants to do everything, choices of which events or stations I can go to are very valuable to me because I can look at what I'm good at, what I may need improvement in, and what I enjoy, maybe what I don't enjoy. Additionally, being given the choice of social or competitive groups—I think that's super important, because some days I just kind of want to relax, and some days I'm feeling it—I definitely want to have that decision.

> To me, competition and social interaction serve as significant factors, as they are motivators to try harder and become better as an athlete. To provide further context, I observed these "features" most prominently in the Trail Running & Cross Country unit, where I was able to compete with my friends as well as my peers, for the reason that the events were merely physical challenges where I could push myself out of my comfort zone. Also, I'm 50% Native, and Native people are very interested in sports because a lot of the sports just involve being outside, and being outside is so significant to Native culture. I felt like I really was able to feel that connection to nature this year. One day, we were running, and we literally saw a fox skitter across the trail—that was so cool.
>
> During our Outdoor Education trip, we also explored the Badlands. I felt free and happy because I was allowed to hike and push myself outside of my comfort zone, and I felt like I was learning in the moment, and I just discovered new rocks and plants.
>
> Lastly, our final unit of the year really changed my thinking about how I can be active in my community. This unit inspired me to understand different ways to get active, especially locally in my community. Now I understand all the different places on the map of my neighborhood where I could go and all the new things that I can explore, and it helps me to understand the significance of being active in and around my community through different ways, and in ways that we explored during the school year and the unit. Overall, I had a pretty positive experience this year, and with more opportunities to compete with my friends, Grade 9 will be even better.

Mike was a new student at the school this year. Very early on, I would have characterized Mike as someone who is going to be engaged in whatever it is that we do—he really loved being in PE and being with his newfound friends. To me, Mike represented many students I've had throughout my career—the ones who are eager to get to PE, to be active, and get away from sitting in the classroom all day. In the past, I might have thought that these students, like Mike, require little intervention or little support, allowing me to devote my attention to those more in need. However, in going through this process with Mike, I realized that it is a dangerous assumption to make, as Mike commented about the boredom of his previous school.

In one of his early reflections, Mike shared his Indigenous heritage and the significance the outdoors holds in his culture. This opened the door to new explorations by being more intentional in highlighting the connection to the outdoors. Our rural campus affords us many opportunities to be outside in all seasons, and whereas the conversations usually revolve around tactics or skills needed for the activity, this year we placed a great emphasis on the in-the-moment embodied experience of being in nature. For Mike in particular, this appears to have led to finding greater connection and relevancy in these activities. The inclusion of this vignette highlights how sometimes our observations of students can be misleading. In considering the implementation of a pedagogical innovation, it is important to consider "who" the innovation is for, which requires us to get to know our students beyond the surface level.

Discussion

The purpose of our research was to explore how students experience sustained implementation of Meaningful PE—a pedagogical innovation that prioritizes meaningfulness of student experiences in PE to facilitate deeper engagement in physical activity inside and outside of the classroom. We have found the co-construction of vignettes as a useful endeavor to explore how individual students experience the implementation of Meaningful PE over time, and how that may ebb and flow throughout the course of the year, and in different units of study. While there are 11 other student vignettes, not utilized for this paper, that will certainly provide further insight, the three included here highlight how the experience of the innovation is shaped through interaction with the context of the case. For Mike, we see the value he places on competition with his peers, while the natural landscape of the school's rural campus allows him to connect on a deeper level with his Indigenous culture. Like Mike, the connection to the outdoor campus was also important for Jasmin as she reminisced about recesses gone by. However, it was a lack of interaction with peers that was initially a barrier to her engagement. For Isla, it was a lack of positive and inclusive interactions that dampened her enthusiasm for PE at the beginning of the school year. However, as education is an act of making "continuous judgments about the why(s), what(s), and how(s) of education" (Quennerstedt, 2019, p. 611), being responsive to these situations helped facilitate more meaningful experiences throughout the school year—perhaps something that might be lost in other forms of data representation. While we often position meaningfulness as deeply personal (Arnold, 1979; Metheny, 1968), as evident in these examples, it can certainly be influenced by the people and places that surround the experience.

Narrative representations, such as vignettes, attempt to combine a succession of events into a unified episode of thick description (Merriam, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1995). The process of data collection progressed throughout the year, which allowed for a flow of continuity—how one happening may connect to another. For example, we see examples of how students connect experiences in PE to desires for future participation, which is ultimately the goal of this innovation. Mike and Isla are better able to recognize opportunities to engage in physical activity within their local communities in response to the democratic and reflective approaches applied during the Active in My Community unit, whereas Jasmin expresses a desire to continue canoeing with family and friends in response to our Alternative Environments unit.

Stone (1997, as cited in Bochner & Hermann, 2020) describes how to find the story in the experience and make it accessible to the reader can be burdensome. Certainly, as a researcher, Ty felt the weight of trying to tell the story of each student as accurately as possible, while, as the students' teacher, he was also actively trying to ensure that the story was filled with meaningfulness. The co-construction of the vignette, having each student identify the quotes that best represented their experiences in PE, generally speaking, as well as in relation to the pedagogical principles of democratic and reflective practice, was essential to achieving accuracy.

Boon and Eloff (2023) describe the inter-experience of the research process: "Neither the child nor the vignette researcher remains unaffected by their experience" (p. 48). Several months removed from the study, Ty often reflects on how this process has changed him as a teacher and as a researcher. He finds himself challenging his own perceptions of the students he meets. While he has always valued relationships, he is now investing more time in establishing deeper relationships with each student. For the students who participated in the study, there seems to be a lasting connection—warm greetings, a "dap," invitations to upcoming events, etc.—perhaps a result of shared experiences co-creating their vignette and honoring their voice throughout the process. Bochner and Hermann (2020) describe how, when a story is told, it becomes constitutive of the storyteller's life (here, we position students as the storytellers): "The story not only depicts life; it also shapes it reflexively" (p. 292). As these participants have been encouraged to voice their experience, how has this process given meaning to the events in their story? By telling their story, has their understanding of themselves changed? These vignettes are, perhaps, not just a recounting of what happened in response to a pedagogical innovation, but a tool through which students can actively construct and express their own identity. In the search to prioritize meaningful experiences for students in PE, in what ways was the process of co-creating these vignettes meaningful?

As Ty welcomes a new group of students this fall, we wonder what stories might be told of their experiences. How will those stories be shaped by the physical and social environment? How might they inspire future participation in physical activity? How will the telling of those stories shape their identity? And, how will those stories shape Ty? Beyond accuracy, the quality of a vignette is often judged on its ability to resonate with the reader's own experiences (Bochner & Hermann, 2020) or, for teachers, perhaps the students they have experienced. We are hopeful these vignettes have done so for you.

Conclusion

Kretchmar (2000) describes how a meaningful experience moves us along; a meaningful life is a story—connecting "who we were, who we are now, and who we are becoming" (p. 5). We have found that vignettes have been a valuable tool to understand the way that students have been moved along through their experience of pedagogical innovation in PE. The process of co-constructing vignettes with students has allowed us to understand how innovations are situated contextually and, by placing students at the center of experience, how innovative approaches such as Meaningful PE may evolve in response to students' needs. In addition to the purpose outlined in this research, vignettes, such as these, may serve as a useful feedback tool and may be used as a source of professional dialogue in team meetings or workshops (Ammann, 2018). For those interested in similar approaches, consider how you might ask students to reflect on their experience utilizing elements of stories. For example, *what moment from this lesson was a storyworthy moment for you? Who are you as the character of the story? What are your superpowers? What moment from this unit represented the climax for you?* Artificial intelligence may also prove to be a useful tool for both teachers and students, used for compiling a collection of thoughts and events, then crafting them into stories that are representative of their experiences in a way that is less time-intensive and more accessible to practitioners. However

researchers and teachers choose to use vignettes, we are confident in the benefits of this reflective practice for both practitioners and participants.

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Beyond One-Size-Fits-All: Rethinking Spelling Instruction in Elementary Grades

Joshua Sektnan and Karen H. Larwin

Abstract

This study examined K–6 spelling instruction through surveys and interviews with 32 teachers (drawn from a pool of 168 eligible K–6 educators) in a western Pennsylvania district. Findings revealed a lack of formalized programs, overreliance on digital tools, and challenges in differentiating instruction. Effective practices included phonics-based and multisensory methods—both cornerstones of the Science of Reading—yet systemic barriers, such as inconsistent resources and limited professional development, hindered implementation. The study emphasizes the need for targeted training in explicit, systematic instruction to improve student outcomes. Implications include developing standardized assessments and robust professional learning. Future research should examine the long-term impacts of these strategies across diverse educational settings.

Introduction

Spelling instruction is not a uniform process and requires systematic and explicit teaching methods tailored to diverse student needs. Effective instruction depends on teachers having a strong understanding of the multiple components of spelling, including phonological, orthographic, and morphological elements (Moats, 2020). The Science of Reading—an established, evidence-based body of research—provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how systematic, explicit instruction supports spelling development and broader literacy outcomes. This literature review examines the historical development of spelling instruction, identifies effective instructional practices, explores strategies for training both novice and experienced teachers, and emphasizes the overall significance of spelling in literacy development.

Theoretical Framework for Spelling Instruction

Historians emphasize the central role of spelling instruction in English Language Arts (ELA), yet express concern over its declining emphasis in modern classrooms (Pan et al., 2021, p. 1525). Although society expects proficient spelling from educated individuals, many adults report difficulty in this area, and most state assessments do not directly evaluate spelling skills (Moats, 2005, p. 12).

To understand effective spelling instruction, it is important to examine the linguistic roots of English. The language developed from four primary sources: Anglo-Saxon, Norman French, Latin, and Greek. This combination contributes to English being one of the most irregular languages in terms of letter-to-sound

correspondence, a feature known as orthography (Devonshire & Fluck, 2010, p. 365; Kessler & Treiman, 2003, p. 268).

Research consistently supports the benefits of direct spelling instruction. Students who receive explicit instruction outperform peers who do not (Graham & Santangelo, 2014, p. 1704), and this instruction should begin as early as possible within reading curricula (Kim, 2022, p. 421). However, traditional assign and test approaches remain common, often relying on memorization with minimal instruction (Mann et al., 2010, p. 85). To improve outcomes, methods such as cover, copy, and compare, and the taped spelling intervention offer more engaging, evidence-based alternatives that promote repeated practice and immediate feedback (Mann et al., 2010, p. 90; Zannikos et al., 2018, pp. 304–320).

The success of spelling instruction also depends on teacher expertise. Professional development and mentoring are associated with stronger student outcomes (Carreker et al., 2010, p. 192), particularly when school leaders support collaboration and sustained growth (Roberson & Roberson, 2009, pp. 114–115; Atkinson & O'Connor, 2007, p. 16). Principals can further enhance literacy instruction through tiered professional development aligned with the science of reading (Bose, 2023, p. 51). Such professional learning should reintroduce and reinforce instructional practices that support authentic spelling development, including phonological awareness activities, word walls, and multisensory learning strategies beginning in the early grades.

Finally, effective spelling instruction must be systematic and explicit, integrating both orthographic and phonological knowledge (Cassar & Treiman, 1997, p. 67; Cassar et al., 2005, p. 666). While reading has received extensive research attention, spelling remains underexplored, indicating a need for more focused investigation (Calhoon et al., 2010, p. 146).

The History of Spelling Instruction

Historically, spelling instruction held a central role in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, particularly in the 20th century (Pan et al., 2021, p. 1525). With the rise of the printing press in the 16th century, spelling became a key indicator of literacy. In recent years, however, its perceived value has declined due to shifts in assessment practices, reliance on spellcheck, and the rise of informal digital communication (Pan et al., 2021, p. 1525). Spelling is often embedded within broader test domains such as composition or language proficiency, making its specific impact difficult to isolate (Moats, 2005, p. 12). Teachers also question its instructional value when improvements fail to transfer meaningfully to student writing (Fresch, 2007).

Although under-researched compared to reading, spelling outcomes are significantly shaped by home literacy, parental education, and early language development. These factors account for 66% of the variance in student scores (Calhoon et al., 2010, p. 146). A foundational framework, Gentry's (2000) developmental model, outlines five stages of spelling: precommunicative, semiphonetic, phonetic, transitional, and conventional. Bear and Templeton (1998, as cited in Gentry, 2000, p. 324) proposed a six-stage model, but Gentry critiqued its final stages as overly similar and difficult to distinguish.

English orthography is widely viewed as complex due to its many homophones and irregular sound-letter patterns (Kessler & Treiman, 2003, p. 268). Unlike transparent languages such as Finnish, where spelling closely matches pronunciation, English borrows heavily from other languages, retains original spellings, and often encodes nonphonemic information (Kessler & Treiman, 2003, pp. 269–270). Devonshire and Fluck (2010, p. 361) argue that spelling instruction should emphasize morphemes and etymology, which are essential to understanding meaning, rather than phonics alone. They note that orthographic transparency in languages such as Italian contributes to lower rates of dyslexia compared to English (p. 365).

The irregularity of English is largely rooted in its linguistic history. Moats (2005, p. 14) traces its development through four primary sources: Anglo-Saxon, Norman French, Latin, and Greek. Each layer introduced new spelling conventions that contribute to current inconsistencies. Anglo-Saxon provided many common words and irregular spellings, while Latin and Greek contributed academic and scientific vocabulary. The Norman French influence remains visible in legal and social terminology (Moats, 2005, p. 14).

Effective spelling instruction also incorporates related language skills such as grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and handwriting (Daffern et al., 2017). Foundational writing experiences, including name writing and oral vocabulary development, are predictive of future writing success, particularly in early childhood (Daffern et al., 2017).

Although some scholars claim spelling develops naturally through reading and writing, research indicates otherwise. Graham and Santangelo (2014, p. 1704) found that students receiving explicit spelling instruction made significantly stronger gains than peers who received no formal instruction. They concluded that greater instructional emphasis led to more pronounced improvement (p. 1704).

Effective Spelling Instruction

Pan et al. (2021) affirmed that “spelling still matters and should be taught explicitly” in the 21st century (p. 1523). They emphasized that spelling abilities do not develop without structured instruction. Puliatte and Ehri (2018) found that students made greater gains when teachers had knowledge of phonemic linguistic units, taught weekly lessons, used explicit strategies, and had several struggling spellers in class (p. 241). These units involve breaking words into spelling patterns and providing direct instruction with varied strategies to support all learners. Although a higher number of struggling spellers allows for focused growth, it may slow overall class progress, which reinforces the need to differentiate instruction (Puliatte & Ehri, 2018).

Kim (2022) emphasized that reading and spelling develop concurrently. Spelling assessments can identify issues such as letter reversals or vowel substitutions that may not appear in reading tests. Studying word structures enhances understanding of spelling patterns and phoneme-grapheme relationships.

Treiman and Bourassa (2000) noted that young children often expect word appearance to reflect meaning. For example, they may believe large objects like “bear” should be spelled with more letters. As children gain phonemic awareness, spelling development improves. Mann et al. (2010) criticized the assign-and-test method for its reliance on memorization and lack of individualization. Instead, they

advocated the "cover, copy, and compare" method, where students view a word, cover it, write it, and compare it with the original (p. 85). If incorrect, students repeat the process (Zannikos et al., 2018, p. 304). Zannikos et al. also described the taped spelling intervention, which uses audio prompts and timed writing followed by immediate correction. Although both interventions are effective, the cover, copy, and compare method is easier to implement and produces faster gains (Zannikos et al., 2018, p. 320).

Good et al. (2018) stressed the need for Tier I direct spelling instruction for all students, especially those with language impairments. These students benefit from twice-weekly lessons on letter-sound correspondence and orthographic patterns. Instruction should evolve from identifying letter sounds to practicing phonemic segmentation and blending (Good et al., 2018). Sayeski (2011) added that students with learning disabilities need frequent practice and feedback.

Wilson et al. (2015) encouraged collaboration with speech-language therapists, who can support orthographic knowledge through modeling, observation, and co-teaching. These specialists can help students articulate letter sounds and understand metalanguage, which is the ability to describe and analyze how language works. Daffern (2017) stated that comprehension of metalanguage improves both writing and spelling. Without effective instruction in these areas, students may struggle to retain essential language skills.

Miller et al. (2017) found that explicit spelling instruction leads to greater growth in reading and writing. Spelling is more complex than reading due to the greater number of correct phoneme-grapheme matches required. Kemper et al. (2012) highlighted the value of both implicit and explicit learning. While phonics lessons explicitly teach spelling rules, students also implicitly absorb grammar and reading structures. Effective instruction should be recursive and revisit prior concepts to reinforce retention.

The optimal amount of spelling instruction varies. Puranik et al. (2014) studied 21 kindergarten classrooms and found inconsistent time allocations even within the same school. Differences were linked to teacher beliefs, student needs, and curriculum constraints. While scheduling is important, instructional quality and repeated practice are more critical for lasting growth.

Tortorelli and Bruner (2022) examined differentiated instruction in seven school districts. Teachers were encouraged to administer the Words Their Way assessment at the start of the year to identify mastered and developing spelling patterns. When paired with baseline literacy data, this assessment supports targeted instruction (p. 390). Vines et al. (2020) noted that best practices in instruction can take many years to become widespread. They identified seven nonnegotiables for spelling instruction (pp. 714–720): teachers must possess linguistic knowledge, act as evaluators, differentiate instruction, establish routines, integrate authentic tasks, reflect critically, and embrace the messiness of learning. Spelling should be taught in isolation and across disciplines, and teachers must be willing to revise approaches when data show limited student growth.

Schrodt et al. (2020b) explored the role of mindset in spelling development through a 10-week intervention with kindergartners. Students were encouraged to be "brave spellers" through mini-lessons

that included connection, modeling, guided practice, and independent writing (p. 210). Words introduced in lessons were reinforced in centers and writing prompts, with targeted teacher feedback to build student confidence and mastery (p. 212).

Training Novice and Veteran Teachers

Spelling instruction requires knowledgeable and well-prepared teachers. Carreker et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of professional development for all general education, special education, and dyslexia teachers to strengthen their content knowledge (p. 190). In their study, teachers who completed 120 hours of professional development and one year of mentored instruction outperformed those who had not received the training (p. 192). However, not all participants were able to accurately count phonemes, syllables, and morphemes in target words, suggesting that training alone does not guarantee mastery (p. 193).

Professional development can take many forms, but it should be collaborative and inclusive across subject areas. This aligns with the belief that all teachers are literacy teachers (Steeg & Lambson, 2015). A comprehensive schoolwide professional development model includes five components: demonstration lessons, book study, "try its," case studies, and textbook or curriculum exploration (Steeg & Lambson, 2015, p. 475).

Demonstration lessons should be explicit, relevant to the training topic, and encourage teachers to consider how to apply the practices in their own classrooms. Book studies allow for deeper engagement with theory and practice. "Try its" provide opportunities for teachers to experiment with strategies and reflect on their implementation. Case studies focus on a single student, tracking progress and sharing findings in small groups. Finally, curriculum exploration allows teams to collaboratively investigate and implement new resources (Steeg & Lambson, 2015).

While these strategies are valuable, principals must also differentiate professional development to meet the varied needs of novice and experienced teachers. Administrators should consider each teacher's background, including prior training and experience, to design meaningful support systems. In Pennsylvania, teacher preparation programs began incorporating structured literacy around 2014 to better prepare educators to serve students with dyslexia and other reading challenges (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018; Wexler, 2019).

Role of Administration in Professional Development

Principals play a vital role in supporting novice teachers, who are still developing the ability to assess their performance and navigate relationships with students, families, colleagues, and curriculum expectations (Roberson & Roberson, 2009). While administrators often expect first-year teachers to exhibit professionalism, subject knowledge, classroom management, communication skills, a belief in student potential, and a desire to help students succeed (Roberson & Roberson, 2009, pp. 114–115), support must extend beyond these expectations.

Effective leadership involves identifying teachers' strengths, creating opportunities for reflection and observation, and ensuring novice educators have time to focus on strategies that promote student growth (Roberson & Roberson, 2009). Mentorship is essential in this process. Mentor teachers can gain new insights that enhance their own practice, but strong mentoring programs require distributed leadership and learning communities focused on reflective conversations (Hanson & Moir, 2008). All stakeholders must collaborate to foster growth and sustain open dialogue throughout the year (Atkinson & O'Connor, 2007).

To further support beginning teachers, professional development on the science of reading can be organized into three tiers of instructional leadership (Bose, 2023). Tier I, or universal support, builds on preservice knowledge and establishes a foundation through curriculum training, collaboration, and use of available resources. Tier II targets a smaller group of educators, typically 15% to 20% of the staff, and involves more specific interventions such as book studies, support groups, or roundtable discussions. Tier III provides individualized support through partnerships with literacy experts. These partnerships involve classroom observations, workshops, and conferences designed to address a teacher's specific growth areas (Bose, 2023). By strategically implementing these tiers of support, principals can ensure that novice teachers not only survive but thrive during their first years in the classroom.

Overall Importance of Effective Spelling Instruction

Although teachers often view spelling and reading as distinct, these skills develop in tandem and should be taught as interconnected components of literacy (Ehri, 2000). English poses unique challenges because it lacks a consistent one-to-one phoneme-grapheme correspondence (Booth, 1991). Over time, cultural and social influences have shaped English spelling, leading to irregularities that are not easily addressed through rote memorization (Booth, 1991). Despite this complexity, spelling instruction has largely remained stagnant and often relies on memorization rather than systematic teaching methods (Johnston, 2001).

Cassar et al. (2005) argued that all students benefit from structured instruction, particularly those with dyslexia. These learners require explicit guidance to build phonological awareness and spelling proficiency. Instruction should also include orthographic knowledge, which refers to recognizing spelling patterns and structures within words. Cassar and Treiman (1997) emphasized that targeted instruction in orthographic patterns is essential for long-term literacy development.

While spellcheck tools have become more common, they are not entirely reliable. Pan et al. (2021) reported that spellcheckers have an estimated accuracy rate of 80%, leaving writers responsible for correcting the remaining errors (p. 245). Pan et al. (2021) noted that many overlooked mistakes involve correctly spelled homophones used inappropriately, reinforcing the continued need for direct spelling instruction.

Methods

There is a lack of research investigating effective spelling instruction. This investigation will seek to fill the gap in the extant research by addressing the following research questions:

1) What instructional strategies do elementary teachers perceive as most effective or challenging when teaching spelling, and how do these influence student engagement and learning outcomes?
2) How do teachers assess student progress in spelling, and what tools or indicators do they rely on to evaluate effectiveness?
3) What resources and professional development opportunities do teachers use or need to support effective spelling instruction?
4) In what ways do cultural and linguistic diversity among students affect spelling instruction and student performance?
5) What barriers do teachers face in implementing district-provided ELA curricula for spelling instruction with fidelity?

This qualitative descriptive study employed an online survey followed by targeted interviews to explore current K–6 spelling instruction. Twelve open-ended research questions covered teacher background, instructional methods, assessment practices, perceived student challenges, resource use, professional development needs, cultural-linguistic considerations, and the influence of district curriculum fidelity on practice.

Participants and Setting

The survey was sent to all 168 full-time kindergarten–Grade-6 teachers in a suburban Pennsylvania district serving approximately 7,400 students across four elementary schools (2023–24). Eligibility required having taught spelling during the previous five years or holding a literacy position. Purposive sampling sought at least one respondent per grade level (target ≥ 28). Thirty-two teachers responded (response rate = 19%; 53% novice [≤ 5 years], 47% veteran [> 5 years]), providing balanced perspectives across grades.

Instrumentation

The investigator-developed instrument contained (a) demographic items (teaching experience, grade level) and (b) 12 open-ended prompts addressing effective and challenging spelling strategies, student engagement, assessment approaches, resource evaluation, and professional development needs. Items were reviewed by two literacy scholars for content validity and piloted with four teachers, leading to minor wording revisions for clarity. Selected survey respondents (n = 6) participated in 30-minute

semi-structured interviews to elaborate on survey themes. Items used for data collection are provided in the Appendix.

Procedures

After Institutional Review Board approval, a two-week pilot was conducted in September 2024. The final survey link was emailed to all eligible teachers in early October with two weekly reminders. Data collection ran October 1–31 (online survey) and November 1–30 (interviews). Participation was voluntary and anonymous; informed consent preceded both survey and interviews.

Data Analysis

Survey and interview narratives were imported into NVivo 14. Using inductive thematic analysis, two researchers independently coded responses, compared codebooks, and reconciled discrepancies to achieve ≥ 90% intercoder agreement. Themes were then organized by research-question category and contrasted across novice versus veteran teachers to identify convergent and divergent patterns. Trustworthiness was supported through member-checking with interviewees and an audit trail documenting coding decisions.

Results

Survey Participants

The survey included 32 teachers from four elementary schools within the same western Pennsylvania school district. On average, these teachers had 7.48 years of experience in K–6 settings. The survey included all grades from kindergarten through sixth grade, and the frequency of participants' years of experience and grade-level (s) taught is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency of Participants' Years of Experience and Grade Level(s) Taught

Years of Experience	Grade Level(s) Taught	Frequency
1-3 years	K, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th	6.67%
5-8 years	K, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th	6.67%
> 8 years	K, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th	86.67%

The following themes were developed from the survey items and follow-up interviews.

A lack of formal spelling programs: Across interviews and surveys, teachers repeatedly underscored the absence of a coherent, district-wide spelling curriculum. As Participant 18 observed, "In both districts I have taught in, there has not been a concrete spelling instructional method across grade levels." Without a common framework, educators rely on ad-hoc resources—often technology-based—which they fear do not provide systematic skill building. Participant 22 captured this concern: "When it comes to reading skills, writing, and phonics, teachers are finding other resources that they can incorporate that are more relevant and engaging for students."

Frustration with the status quo was palpable. "I find the fact that there is NO formal spelling program/instruction infuriating, especially living in the world of texting," stated Participant 1. Teachers also highlighted gaps in training and materials: "We need instruction on how to effectively teach spelling patterns and we need resources to support the teaching of these patterns," remarked Participant 22, while Participant 14 added, "Teachers are not well trained in our primary resource in ELA. Everyone is using different resources." Several respondents called for scheduled instructional time—Participant 1 pleaded, "Bring back a formal spelling program and give ELA teachers time to teach."

Effective spelling instruction methods: Despite curricular gaps, teachers identified practices that yield results, especially in early grades. Phonics emerged as foundational: Participant 11 asserted, "Phonics-based instruction works the best. It teaches the rules of spelling, and students can apply this to other words outside of their 'spelling list.'" Multisensory techniques further strengthen retention; Participant 21 noted, "I utilize multi-sensory instruction which integrates the spelling utilizing learned patterns." Practical tools ranged from sound circles and phoneme-grapheme mapping (Participant 27) to visual word walls and interactive games (Participant 2).

Explicit, developmentally aligned lessons were also crucial. "Explicit instruction is . . . individualized based on spelling development. Students need multiple exposures and practice with the word patterns in order to apply the spelling pattern in authentic situations," explained Participant 25. Small-group and whole-group guided writing extended practice opportunities (Participant 4). Collectively, these strategies illustrate that structured, hands-on, pattern-focused instruction can compensate—at least partially—for the lack of a formal program.

Challenges in spelling instruction: Teachers cited two persistent hurdles: differentiating for wide ability ranges and helping students retain irregular spellings. "The greatest challenge is there are many exceptions to the rule that words are spelled the way they sound," observed Participant 27. This complexity forces educators to juggle multiple word lists and supports (Participant 12). English's rule-exception dichotomy further complicates mastery: "The English language has so many rules and exceptions that it's difficult for students to . . . know when an exception is needed," said Participant 25.

Bad habits compound the issue. Participant 4 described students who repeatedly revert to misspellings—"thay" for "they," "coler" for "color"—even after targeted practice. Technology can both aid and hinder; spell-check dependence sometimes yields erroneous corrections (Participant 3). As Participant 2 summarized, "Remembering the spelling of words, especially irregular ones, can be challenging for many young learners."

Impact on student engagement: Hands-on, multisensory activities markedly increase motivation. "Activities that get students up and moving help to increase engagement, concentration, and retention," reported Participant 27. When tasks match individual developmental levels, frustration falls and interest rises; Participant 25 noted, "Students are more engaged . . . with words at their spelling development level. Otherwise, they are frustrated." Games, manipulatives, and movement-based tasks turn practice into play: "Some of the more multisensory activities and hands-on instruction keep students engaged and focused rather than just writing and studying words," explained Participant 20. Participant 2 concurred that such techniques "capture students' interest and make learning more enjoyable."

Assessment of spelling progress: Respondents use a spectrum of formative and summative tools. Weekly pattern-based tests coupled with dictation (Participant 12), lesson-ending concept mastery checks (Participant 21), and pre-/mid-/post-year inventories (Participant 25) offer periodic snapshots. Daily observation within phonics routines provides immediate feedback (Participant 19). Writing samples supply authentic evidence: "Analyzing students' writing for spelling accuracy provides insight into their ability to apply spelling skills in context," said Participant 2. Portfolios likewise reveal growth over time; Participant 25 emphasized that they "show progress and highlight areas needing improvement."

Professional development needs: Teachers unanimously called for ongoing, targeted training. "Professional development that helps teachers understand the importance of the connection between phonics instruction and spelling . . . decoding and encoding instruction occurring at the same time," urged Participant 19. Desired topics include advanced phonics, phonemic-awareness interventions (Participant 17), multisensory methods, and technology integration (Participant 2). Differentiation workshops were also requested: "Workshops on differentiated instruction can help teachers tailor their spelling lessons to meet the diverse needs of their students," said Participant 28. Technology training is another priority: "Training in the latest educational technology tools can provide new ways to engage students and track their progress," Participant 28 added.

Impact on literacy development: Teachers see spelling as a linchpin for reading and writing. Participant 2 emphasized that it "plays a crucial role . . . by reinforcing the relationship between letters and sounds, which enhances phonemic awareness and decoding skills." With deeper pattern knowledge, "they will be more successful in their reading and writing," explained Participant 12. Deficits ripple outward—"a deficit in spelling skills will affect the other areas," warned Participant 24—whereas strong instruction "can lead to improvements in reading skills, including word reading and reading comprehension," noted Participant 27.

Cultural and linguistic factors: Students who speak languages other than English face additional hurdles. "Students who speak a different language at home may face unique challenges, such as differences in phonetic patterns and orthographic rules between their home language and English," observed Participant 2. Participant 5 agreed: "Those whose first language has a different structure than English often find spelling more challenging." Dual-language learners juggle competing systems. "They may be learning two different languages," Participant 10 pointed out. Recognizing and addressing these factors is essential, as Participant 19 summarized: "For some students, their cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds could present challenges for their learning and performance in spelling."

Collectively, these themes illustrate the intertwined needs for a structured spelling curriculum, robust professional learning, and culturally responsive, multisensory instruction to ensure equitable literacy outcomes for all K–6 learners.

Discussion

This study revealed persistent challenges and promising strategies in K–6 spelling instruction through survey responses and analysis of existing research. Teachers consistently voiced the need for structured, research-based approaches that integrate phonics, multisensory techniques, and differentiated instruction. However, many struggle against inconsistent resources, insufficient professional development, and the demands of diverse student needs. A dominant finding was the widespread absence of formalized spelling programs. Teachers expressed frustration over the lack of cohesive instructional materials, which forces them to develop lessons independently. Participant 18 shared, "In both districts I have taught in, there has not been a concrete spelling instructional method across grade levels," while Participant 22 noted that teachers often seek outside resources to fill these gaps. This inconsistency results in variable instructional quality and inequitable learning experiences for students.

Teachers identified several effective instructional strategies, beginning with phonics-based instruction. Participant 11 stated, "Phonics-based instruction works the best. It teaches the rules of spelling, and students can apply this to other words outside of their 'spelling list.'" This approach aligns with research from Puliatte and Ehri (2018), who found that explicit instruction in linguistic units supports strong spelling outcomes. Multisensory strategies were also widely endorsed. Participant 21 explained, "I utilize multisensory instruction, which integrates the spelling utilizing learned patterns," reinforcing research from Cassar and Treiman (1997) that shows these techniques enhance engagement and retention. Differentiated instruction was another recurring theme. Participant 25 emphasized the importance of tailoring lessons to individual spelling development, though Participant 12 acknowledged, "Students are 'all over the place' with their knowledge of spelling," which complicates differentiation.

Technology emerged as both a tool and a challenge. While digital games and resources can boost engagement, many teachers cautioned that over-reliance on spellcheck has diminished students' independent spelling abilities. Participant 3 remarked, "Since we started having students type instead of write, they depend on spellcheck, and sometimes it does not give them the correct word." This concern is echoed by Pan et al. (2021), who found that technology often fails to cultivate deep orthographic

knowledge. Teachers also highlighted creative methods to foster student engagement. Participant 2 noted the benefit of "creating a visual word wall with high-frequency and thematic words," while Participant 28 emphasized that interactive instruction can improve retention and enjoyment. However, assessment practices varied significantly across classrooms. Participant 19 relied on daily observations during University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) routines, and while Participant 25 employed multiple assessments throughout the year, these methods require substantial effort and often lack consistency across settings.

Professional development was repeatedly cited as essential for equipping teachers with effective instructional tools. Teachers sought training in phonics, multisensory instruction, and strategies for differentiation. Participant 19 stressed the importance of linking phonics to spelling instruction, stating, "Professional development that helps teachers understand the importance of the connection between phonics instruction and spelling . . . is crucial." Participant 22 echoed this need, emphasizing the necessity of both instruction and resources to support teaching spelling patterns.

Overall, the findings reinforce the view that spelling is fundamental to literacy development. As Participant 12 explained, "Spelling impacts how children read. If they learn more patterns and understand how English works, they will be more successful in their reading and writing." This statement aligns with Graham and Santangelo (2014), who found that systematic instruction enhances decoding and writing skills. Multiple participants endorsed phonics-based instruction, a method supported by Puliatte and Ehri (2018) and Moats (2005) for its ability to build orthographic knowledge. Devonshire and Fluck (2010) emphasized that phonics instruction paired with morphological awareness creates a more robust understanding of English spelling structures. Multisensory approaches were also highly effective. Participant 19 described students being more engaged when hands-on methods aligned with their spelling level, reducing frustration and increasing retention. These findings are supported by Schrodt et al. (2020a), Good et al. (2018), and Graham and Santangelo (2014), who found that tactile and auditory components can be especially helpful for students with learning difficulties.

Despite these promising strategies, teachers reported challenges in addressing varied student needs. Participant 29 emphasized the importance of differentiated instruction and practice, echoing Vines et al. (2020), who argue that instruction must be tailored to individual strengths and weaknesses. Systemic barriers—such as inconsistent instructional materials—make it difficult to implement cohesive approaches. Participant 16 noted, "Systematic phonics instruction is necessary, but the inconsistency in resources across grade levels makes it difficult to maintain continuity." Technology, when used appropriately, can enhance engagement, but reliance on spellcheck undermines the development of spelling proficiency. Participant 26 shared, "The most effective spelling instruction methods are those that balance traditional approaches with technology." This sentiment reflects Pan et al. (2021) and Devonshire and Fluck (2010), who caution against allowing digital tools to substitute for explicit teaching.

Professional development remains a crucial area for improvement. Participant 24 stressed the need for training in phonics and multisensory methods, while Carreker et al. (2010) and Steeg and Lambson (2015) found that professional development coupled with mentoring significantly improves teacher

effectiveness. Vines et al. (2020) argued that training must address practical classroom barriers. Ultimately, this study affirms that effective spelling instruction—especially when grounded in evidence-based practices—is essential but under-supported. Teachers need consistent programs, better resources, and ongoing training to help all students develop as confident readers and writers. As Moats (2005) asserted, literacy success depends on integrating spelling, reading, and writing into a unified instructional approach.

The study's findings aligned with the theoretical framework by affirming the value of structured, research-based methods—particularly phonics and multisensory strategies. Participant 11 supported this, noting, "Phonics-based instruction works the best," while Participant 21's use of multisensory strategies reinforced the role of diverse learning modalities. These practices align with Graham and Santangelo (2014) and Moats (2005), who advocate for explicit instruction of phonemic and orthographic patterns. However, some gaps in the framework became evident. Participant 22 noted that teachers seek external resources due to limitations within their schools, indicating the need to incorporate systems-level theories such as Fullan's Change Theory (2007), which highlights the importance of aligning resources and professional learning with instructional goals. Another gap concerns technology. As noted above, Participant 26 highlighted the need to "balance traditional approaches with technology." Mishra and Koehler's (2006) TPACK framework, which stresses integrating technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge, could expand the framework to better reflect the nuanced role of technology. Professional development also warrants greater theoretical attention. Participant 28 emphasized the importance of "workshops on differentiated instruction," and the Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning (2022) provide a contemporary framework for designing evidence-based and classroom-relevant training.

There are several limitations to this study. Its single-district focus (Western Pennsylvania) restricts generalizability, as spelling instruction varies across geographic and institutional contexts. Participant 14 commented, "Teachers are not well-trained in our primary resource in ELA. Everyone is using different resources," illustrating the issue's localized nature. While this reflects variability within the district, it may not represent broader systemic trends. As Vines et al. (2020) observed, spreading best practices across districts can take decades. Additionally, while the sample included both veteran (47%) and novice (53%) teachers, the near-even split may limit conclusions specific to either experience group. The study yielded a 19% response rate, which introduces the potential for nonresponse bias. It is plausible that those who chose to participate were more engaged with spelling instruction than those who did not respond, potentially skewing the findings. Participant 12 noted that teacher preparation strategies are often misaligned with classroom expectations, suggesting that newer teachers might experience spelling instruction differently. The reliance on self-reported data introduces subjectivity. While Participant 16 highlighted the challenge of resource inconsistency, such responses may reflect personal frustrations and not always align with objective instructional effectiveness. Moats (2005) warned that even well-meaning educators may stray from evidence-based methods due to inadequate training.

Technology's impact on spelling instruction was noted but not systematically evaluated. Participant 19 pointed out that daily observations are used to monitor progress, but technology may distract from foundational practices. Pan et al. (2021) found that while digital tools may correct errors, they do not

support the deep learning required for orthographic development. Additionally, the study did not examine how linguistic and cultural diversity affects instruction. Participant 10 observed, "If students are coming from a home that has a second language, that definitely will impact their spelling." Devonshire and Fluck (2010) emphasized that tailored approaches are necessary for bilingual learners, a point not fully explored here. The study also did not incorporate family or community perspectives, which may further illuminate the influence of home environments on spelling development.

Time constraints and the lack of a dedicated spelling curriculum posed significant challenges. Participant 1 expressed, "Bring back a formal spelling program and give ELA teachers time to teach." These pressures often result in fragmented or rushed instruction. As Puranik et al. (2014) noted, time constraints frequently force spelling to take a back seat to other literacy goals. The absence of standardized assessments was also problematic. Participant 19 highlighted the use of informal assessments, while Participant 25 described using spelling inventories, yet neither approach offers consistency across classrooms. Calhoon et al. (2010) underscored the importance of standardized tools to evaluate instruction and support data-driven decision-making.

Professional development was another limitation. Teachers called for training that connects research with classroom realities, but many felt current offerings fell short. Participant 28 emphasized the value of workshops on differentiated instruction, yet reported that opportunities often lacked relevance or depth. This disconnect weakens teachers' ability to implement best practices consistently and confidently.

Future research should address these gaps by expanding studies to include multiple districts and broader geographic regions. Examining areas with established science-of-reading frameworks may yield valuable comparative insights. Research should also investigate the quality of district-provided ELA resources, particularly how well they support spelling instruction, differentiation, and English learners. Participant 14's observation that "everyone is using different resources" underscores the importance of evaluating curricular alignment with best practices. Standardized assessment development is also needed. As Participant 25 mentioned, using a combination of inventories and weekly checks can be effective at the classroom level but lacks scalability. Future research could support the creation of reliable tools to track spelling growth system-wide.

Professional development should remain a central research focus. Participant 17 noted, "More training in reading programs, phonics interventions, and phonemic awareness are great professional development opportunities," reinforcing the need for evidence-based, accessible training. Studies could explore which professional development models best support teacher learning and transfer into classroom practice. Districts already using successful models may offer lessons for scalability and sustainability. Longitudinal research can assess how professional development influences both teacher behavior and student outcomes over time. Additionally, future work should evaluate how technology can enhance spelling instruction without undermining foundational skills. Participant 28 recognized the motivational benefits of digital tools but stressed the importance of hands-on methods for student focus and retention. Finally, studies should examine the long-term effectiveness of tech-based tools in supporting deeper orthographic understanding.

This study underscores the critical role of spelling instruction in literacy development. While teachers identified effective practices such as phonics, multisensory techniques, and differentiation, systemic barriers—including inconsistent resources, limited training, and over-reliance on technology—continue to hinder progress. These findings reinforce the contemporary relevance of the science of reading, which emphasizes systematic, explicit instruction grounded in phonological awareness as a critical foundation for spelling proficiency. Future research must address these challenges through broader inquiry, improved resource analysis, assessment development, and targeted professional learning. By doing so, educators and policymakers can ensure all students receive high-quality spelling instruction, setting the foundation for strong reading and writing skills that lead to lifelong academic success.

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Appendix

Research Questions Provided via Microsoft Forms

1) How many years have you been teaching?
2) Which grade(s) have you taught?
3) What spelling instructional methods have you found effective in your classroom?
4) Which instructional strategies do you find the most challenging or rewarding when teaching spelling?
5) What are some common challenges students face when learning to spell?
6) How do different spelling instruction strategies impact student engagement?
7) How do you assess student progress in spelling?
8) What resources do you utilize for spelling instruction, and how do you evaluate the effectiveness?
9) What kind of professional development would benefit teachers with spelling instruction?
10) How do you believe spelling instruction impacts overall literacy development, including reading and writing skills?
11) How do cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students affect their learning and performance in spelling?
12) What challenges do teachers encounter when trying to implement the district-provided ELA curriculum with fidelity?



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Collaborative Action Research: Cultivating Communities of Inquiry Through School–University Partnerships

Deborah Toope, Marie-Christina Edwards, Darlene Barr, Nisha Langford, Emily Fultz, and Jessica Martin

Abstract

This article shares reflections from a collaborative action research (CAR) partnership between a regional university and a rural school in Canada. This partnership involved two university educators, two inservice teachers, and two preservice teachers, all of whom are positioned as knowers, learners, and change agents within this research. Specifically, we worked to center teachers' knowledge through our inquiry into culturally responsive and relevant literacy practices. We highlight some of the affordances of our learning through CAR, including the benefits of learning within a community of inquiry, knowledge generation, and strengthening teacher identities. We advocate for cultivating communities of inquiry through research partnerships.

Introduction

For decades, the role of professional learning during times of education reform has been a central focus in research, government initiatives, district policies, and school practices (Bredeson, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, 2006; Datnow, 2020; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves, 1994, 2005, 2021; Lieberman, 2007). Government reports, educational commissions, and various research studies have highlighted the need for greater collaboration and professional learning among teachers to effect the desired change in practice (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves, 2021). However, the kind of professional learning and its capacity to transform practice are contested (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2006; Sarason, 1990, 1998). Some studies have shown that certain kinds of professional learning negatively affect teachers' identities and lives, leaving them feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and depleted (Comber, 1997; Comber et al., 2004; Little, 2001; Smyth, 2001; Toope, 2008). In contrast, other forms of teacher learning have been found to empower and reinvigorate teachers (Comber et al., 2004; Toope, 2008). In addition, professional learning that positions teachers as researchers, knowers, and change agents can be transformative (Zeichner, 2003).

The literature suggests that action research can be a beneficial form of professional learning, transforming teachers' practice (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2024; McGrath et al., 2025; Zeichner, 2003). Action research reflects principles of adult learning such as valuing teachers' knowledge, embedded learning, collaborative inquiry, learning over time, and ongoing support within a community of practice (Bredeson, 2000; Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; DeLuca et al., 2014; Hargreaves, 1994, 2021; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014). Within action research, teachers are positioned as researchers capable of generating the knowledge they need for teaching and learning through inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle,

2001). Teacher research is viewed as a means of incorporating teacher knowledge into the educational knowledge base and as a more meaningful approach to teacher learning grounded in local contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Teacher research is endorsed as a way of "promoting change and reform in K–12 settings" (Roulston et al., 2005, p. 169). Also, in Canada, action research has been documented as a path for teacher learning (Clausen & Black, 2020). However, despite over three decades of growing evidence of the benefits of teacher research as an impactful professional learning path (Nichols & Cormack, 2017) for both inservice and preservice teachers, it remains a relatively uncommon practice, at least in rural Canada.

The literature describes a varied history between schools and universities as partners in research (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009). A focus over recent decades has centered on teachers as co-researchers and knowledge generators (Cramp & Khan, 2019). Swabey et al. (2022) outline several benefits for groups within these partnerships and describe the rich professional learning opportunities that arise from them. Additionally, Swabey et al. (2022) purport that one key benefit of partnerships is the generation of new pedagogical knowledge. School–university partnerships enhance learning for all actors, including, in this research, university educators, inservice teachers, preservice teachers, and school students. From a social justice lens, through shared inquiry, there is a shift in power and knowledge relations that fosters more democratic relationships between preservice and inservice teachers (Willegems et al., 2017).

Drawing on individual written reflections and conversations, we highlight some affordances of our learning through CAR, including the benefits of learning within a community of inquiry, the possibilities for generating local knowledge of practice, and the strengthening of our teacher identities.

Background and Context

This research involved a school–university partnership that brought together two university researchers, two teacher researchers, and two preservice teacher research assistants in a rural community in Canada from 2022 to 2023. This research is part of a larger ongoing CAR project that investigates responsive literacy practices in a rural classroom as primary students engage with making digital texts. A primary goal of this research was also to engage participating teachers in reflecting on their practice through collaborative inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). As educators working to foster inclusive spaces, we came together with a common desire to create local examples of inclusive literacies. Here we turn our attention to our own learning experiences with CAR. For this component of our research, we posed the question: What are the affordances of CAR as a professional learning path, and how does learning through collaborative inquiry inform our practice? Through reflective writing and critical conversations, we share our thoughts about learning within a collaborative inquiry community and what it has meant for our work as teachers in the process of *becoming* (Britzman, 2012). We discuss the benefits of school–university partnerships, the supports required to sustain learning over time, and what we have gained from our experiences.

This paper unfolds in four sections. First, we provide an overview of the literature informing this research. Next, we discuss the methods, data collection, and our data analysis process. We then present some findings from our analysis of individual reflections, highlighting three main themes that emerged from our data. We conclude by summarizing the mutually beneficial nature of school–university partnerships and the support required to sustain this over time.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspective

Sociocultural approaches consider learning a social process that occurs through interactions with others in "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998). A sociocultural view recognizes that authentic learning happens as teachers engage in practices within situated contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Sociocultural perspectives recognize that what one comes to know cannot be separated from one's lived experiences embedded within one's practice (Kelly, 2006; Schön, 1983). This draws attention to the affordances of learning within collaborative communities. Within this perspective, teachers have agency over their learning, and there is potential for knowledge production. Learning within our collaborative research community was shaped by our lived experiences within communities (Gee, 1991).

Conceptualizations of Teacher Learning and Knowledge

Numerous studies have examined teachers' learning within university programs and courses (Day et al., 2021). Studies on teacher learning sometimes focus on the benefits of partnerships and collaboration between university researchers and teacher researchers, either in preservice or graduate education programs (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009). Other studies take a historical look at professional development from a teacher-research or action-research perspective (Zeichner, 2003). Some research studies suggest that deficit approaches to teachers' learning position teachers as consumers of prepackaged scripted programs, rather than as capable producers of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Parr, 2004). Professional learning resulting from neoliberal reforms has been highly criticized in the literature for its adverse effects on teachers' identities and work (Zeichner, 2017).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, 2001, 2021) advocate for an alternative "inquiry as stance" approach to teacher learning. An "inquiry as stance" approach works across teachers' career span, from early to late career, where teachers continue to generate knowledge of practice in their local context (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2021). This approach to teacher learning positions teachers as knowledge producers rather than passive recipients of knowledge from elsewhere. Emphasis is placed on theory–practice relations and the co-construction of knowledge within communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Action Research as Professional Learning

Dewey (1981) emphasized that reflective thinking, not just experience, is essential for fostering deep learning and transforming practice. This means that in order to transform practice, careful consideration of knowledge must be considered in order to inform action. Schön (1983) introduced the ideas of "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action." Reflection-in-action refers to the kind of thinking that occurs during an activity, while reflection-on-action focuses on thinking back on an experience after it has happened. Both forms of reflection are significant for professional learning through inquiry and for enhancing practice.

Freire (2005) defines praxis as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (p. 126). It is through praxis that oppressed people can change and transform their practice. Praxis has also been defined as an "ongoing interdependent process in which reflection—including theoretical analysis—enlightens action, and in turn the transformed action changes our understanding of the object of our reflection" (Torres & Mercado, 2004, p. 60). In praxis theory, practice is understood as relational and interconnected. Teacher research can be a path to praxis and transformation in teacher education and learning (Torres & Mercado, 2004). New pedagogical knowledge comes from praxis through teachers' knowing, reflecting, and doing.

The transformative potential of teacher research on teachers' identities and professional practice has been well documented over the past three decades (Black, 2021; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Derakhshan & Nazari, 2024; Kitchen & Stevens, 2008; Nazari, 2021; Nichols & Cormack, 2017; Taylor, 2017; Van Katwijk et al., 2021). In fact, studies have shown how engagement in research repositions teachers as researchers, knowers, and change agents (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Comber, 2005).

When examining teachers' learning through CAR, it is essential to consider the various aspects that shape their professional identities (Goodnough, 2010, 2011). As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) point out, different understandings of how teachers learn and what counts as learning can result in significantly varied approaches to enhancing teachers' practice and identities. In contemporary times, teacher research "is not a tool that can be used by policy-makers or administrators to externally impose particular changes on teachers' practices" (Zeichner, 2003, p. 321). Instead, teacher research, as professional learning embedded in practice within an inquiry community, can generate knowledge and transform practices in local contexts through school–university partnerships.

Similarly, Burbank and Kauchak (2003) discuss a collaborative action research model of professional development that positions teachers as researchers. They suggest that in traditional models of professional development, teachers often had a "passive role" imposed upon them (p. 500). Instead, they indicate that collaborative action research can be an effective alternative, positioning teachers as "decision makers" and "knowledge producers" (p. 501). They report on the positive effects of collaborative action research that involved both preservice and inservice teachers. What is interesting in their study is that they found inservice teachers believed more strongly than preservice teachers in the potential of action research to improve their practice. CAR has been shown to positively impact teachers' identities (Goodnough, 2010, 2011).

School–University Partnerships

Research on school–university partnerships, particularly those focused on shared teacher learning, can be significantly beneficial (Burton & Greher, 2007; Hamilton & Margot, 2024). These partnerships have the potential to enhance professional learning opportunities for teacher educators, inservice teachers, and teacher candidates. Several conditions are necessary to ensure the success of a school–university partnership, including establishing trusting relationships, maintaining ongoing collaboration, and prioritizing professional learning (Burton & Greher, 2007; Swick et al., 2022).

School–university partnerships enable preservice, inservice, and university educators to engage in reciprocal peer mentoring (Boyer et al., 2004). Teacher candidates report feeling more confident and indicate that such partnerships help them develop deeper connections between theory and practice, enabling a stronger focus on students' learning (Fang & Ashley, 2004; Castle et al., 2006). Research also suggests that preservice teachers who have been involved in a partnership are more likely to remain in the teaching profession (Burton & Greher, 2007).

School–university partnerships that focus on professional learning offer enhanced opportunities for all community members (Hamilton & Margot, 2024). Learning within partnerships is enhanced when systematic inquiry through action research is the learning path (Crocco et al., 2003; Levin & Rock, 2003). Also, through collaboration, partners come to value shared learning experiences, which are crucial in ensuring mutual benefit (Hamilton & Margot, 2024). Another mutual benefit is that universities can share their resources and expertise with schools and, in turn, schools can provide practical experiences for preservice teachers and teacher educators (Swick et al., 2022).

Studies have shown that school–university partnerships can positively impact student achievement in participating schools (Burton & Greher, 2007). Partnerships can provide students with access to university resources, as in our research with digital tablets. Further socioeconomic and educational disadvantages are often associated with regional or rural contexts (Corbett & Forsey, 2017).

Research Design

This study draws on the written self-reflections from six co-authors in this CAR project. This research is supported by funding from an Inter-University Research Network grant that provided release time for inservice teachers (approximately five days each) and pay for preservice teacher research assistants (approximately six to eight weeks). A qualitative research methodology, utilizing individual teacher reflections on their learning experiences through CAR, was employed to understand the perspectives and experiences of co-researchers learning within an inquiry community of practice. This involved analyzing both our written and verbal reflections of our individual and collective learning experiences. This approach can help us better understand the affordances of collaborative inquiry and gain insights into how to cultivate and support school–university partnerships.

Author Positionality

This study was a collaboration among two university teacher educators (Deborah and Marie-Christina), two in-service teachers (Darlene and Nisha), and two preservice teacher research assistants (Emily and Jessica), all of whom are authors of this paper. Our research team has diverse representation, comprising early-, mid-, and late-career teachers with distinct knowledge sets. Collectively, we bring together various perspectives of families experiencing poverty and lived experiences of being part of a minority group.

Deborah is an associate professor (literacy) with the faculty of education at a rural university in eastern Canada. She has been promoting teacher research as a form of professional learning for over two decades, facilitating teacher research programs through school–university partnerships. She brings extensive experience working in the public school system, having held various positions before transitioning full-time into academia, including classroom teacher, literacy specialist, principal, district program specialist, and director of schools.

Marie-Christina is an assistant professor in the faculty of education at the same university as Deborah. She has a wealth of experience with over 27 years in teaching and leadership roles in elementary and middle schools in both Canada and Australia. She is an advocate for Shanker Self-Reg, a framework for understanding and managing stress and energy flow, and cares deeply about the well-being of teachers and students.

Darlene is a late-career teacher with over 27 years of classroom teaching experience in rural Canada. Over the last 16 years, she has worked in P–2 classrooms as a teacher, math coach, literacy mentor, and technology integration mentor. She has completed a Master of Education degree and other professional learning certificates. She spent several years facilitating professional learning for other teachers. She has written a series of culturally relevant picture books depicting rural life for young readers.

Nisha is a mid-career teacher with 15 years of experience teaching in primary schools. She is currently a Kindergarten teacher at a rural school in eastern Canada. She holds a Master of Education degree in Curriculum Studies, with a focus on integrating technology. She has significant experience working with young children in the early grades and brings this knowledge to her research. She is passionate about learning and creating inclusive learning environments where all students can thrive.

Emily was a preservice teacher at the time of this study and was working as a research assistant on this project. She had already completed a Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology and was working on a Bachelor of Education. She had completed one language arts course with Deborah and was in the process of completing her second one. She had also completed a course from Marie-Christina on principles and practices. She had a keen interest in literacy learning and was excited about working on the project.

Jessica was a preservice teacher at the time of this study and was working as a research assistant on this project. She had completed her undergraduate degree in psychology with a focus on neuroscience and a minor in biology. At the time of this study, she was working on a Bachelor of Education degree. She had also completed one language arts course with Deborah and was in the process of completing her

second one. She had also completed a course from Maria-Christina on principles and practices. She enjoyed working with and learning from children and creating inclusive learning experiences.

Data Collection

Data for this paper emerged organically from an ongoing CAR focused on inclusive literacy practices, as the six of us engaged in a full-day planning session to prepare for a local conference presentation. As we analyzed classroom data and talked about our experiences, we began reflecting on our own learning. During our conversation, we documented key points in the minutes and in the notes section of our slides. We recorded our thoughts to share with other teachers and conference participants. Following our meeting, we each wrote individual reflections on the affordances of learning within a collaborative inquiry community. Within a week, we had each posted our individual reflections to a shared Google document. Together, the six individual reflections totaled 13 pages, with a word count of just under 3,600 words. These reflections, along with our subsequent conversations, served as the primary data for this paper.

Data Analysis

Working from a shared Google Doc, we individually read and commented on each other's reflections to begin our analysis of our self-reflections. Deborah and Marie-Christina reread each reflection with our research question in mind: What are the affordances of CAR as a professional learning path, and how does learning through collaborative inquiry inform our practice? They highlighted words and phrases that stood out and made notes in the margins. Then, we employed a general thematic analysis, identifying initial categories, color-coding them (green for community, blue for knowledge, yellow for identities), and grouping them into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Next, we identified and renamed themes, selecting three themes to discuss in this paper: learning within a collaborative inquiry community, relations with knowledge, and transforming teacher identities. Then we selected excerpts from our reflections and moved these under one of the corresponding themes. Taken together, they represent our collective story about the affordance of learning within a CAR community.

Findings

In this section, we discuss three significant themes that emerged from our analysis of individual reflections and conversations about our experiences learning through CAR: learning within a collaborative inquiry community, relations with knowledge, and transforming teacher identities in the process of *becoming*.

Learning Within a Collaborative Inquiry Community

Studies of professional learning and teacher research programs often lack clarity regarding the contexts and conditions under which teacher researchers conduct their inquiries. While the personal dimension of action research is essential and can lead to personal transformations, it is not sufficient to address larger social issues, such as "power and privilege in society," which are integrally connected to personal identity (Noffke, 1997, p. 329). Noffke (1997) argues that promoting the personal dimension of action

research in the absence of a political context can lead individuals to learn in isolation and may fail to address larger social issues that require collective agency to effect social change. From a social justice lens, and central to our CAR partnership, was a focus on privileging teachers' knowledge within the field of education. Teacher voices are often absent from scholarly work, curriculum development, policy decisions, and educational reform. To achieve this, we recognized that teachers, both preservice and inservice, require opportunities to develop trusting relationships over time, in which they feel comfortable expressing their concerns about regional demands, raising questions about their practice, and engaging in critical discussions with university partners that are essential for deeper learning. This kind of learning environment takes time to cultivate, especially given the inequities of power–knowledge dynamics among teacher educators, preservice teachers, and inservice teachers. Early-, mid-, and late-career teachers coming together with a common goal to improve literacy learning for all students through culturally relevant and responsive practices produced more egalitarian relationships and brought together different yet equally valued ways of knowing. This became evident in our reflections and conversations about our learning experiences through the CAR process.

As preservice teachers, Emily and Jessica reflected on their learning within an inquiry community and highlighted how this experience benefited them as early-career teachers. For example, throughout their time as research assistants, they participated in every research team meeting, worked alongside Darlene and Nisha in the classroom, posed research questions, generated classroom data, initiated and planned learning activities, participated in classroom events, made field notes, sat side-by-side with children, and shared stories about what they were noticing. In their reflections, they noted that CAR enabled them to "take an inquiry approach" and to learn to "observe" children's literacy learning. Being part of an inquiry community also informed their relations with children in the classroom. They talked about learning to listen, ask questions, and respond to students, and valuing "students' voices." They discussed the importance of networking and collaborating with experienced teachers. They shared the importance of "beginning with a question" and having time to "step back" and get "feedback." Importantly, they highlighted learning about the "processes of becoming a reflective practitioner." This included taking action based on ongoing data analysis. Another example that illuminates their learning is that they took the lead in designing and redesigning an observation checklist that outlines specific early reading and writing behaviors. They continued to revise and refine the list of indicators as they began noticing new behaviors.

As experienced mid- and late-career teachers, Darlene and Nisha valued and sought out opportunities for professional learning throughout their careers. They often discussed the difference between learning through CAR and other professional learning experiences they had. For example, they compared attending a half-day session offered by their region, where they sit and receive information about the latest curriculum changes, to learning that comes from their interactions with each other and children in their classroom. For them, learning through inquiry was ongoing, relational, embedded in their practice, and intimately connected to student learning. They noted how they felt supported within this community, which enabled them to gain new insights and "new ways of seeing and doing." They reflected on the impact of conversations that "build on each other's noticings," the power of receiving "near real-time feedback" from other co-researchers, and how they used this information to make changes to their

practice. For example, Darlene had written a series of culturally relevant informational books about rural life, and Nisha decided to use them in her classroom as well.

As teacher educators, Deborah and Marie-Christina reflected on the importance of making connections between theory and practice, inservice and preservice teachers, school and university classrooms, and ways of knowing, doing, and being teachers, who are always in a process of *becoming* (Britzman, 2012; Dall'Alba, 2009). Rather than being positioned as university experts, teacher educators adopted a stance as co-learners, co-researchers, and co-producers of knowledge. They noted a connection to classroom practice by being able to "pose critical questions" from a "position as co-learner" rather than as a so-called "expert." For example, during team meetings, we usually begin with each of us sharing updates on what is happening in our practice. Then we articulate our current wonderings about what we are noticing in the classroom data (photos, videos, interview transcripts of children, children's digital books). Being part of a teacher research community added credibility to their work with preservice teachers, providing local examples of literacy and learning from a local classroom. For example, Deborah used Darlene's book series in her literacy courses along with photos of children reading these texts from Nisha's Kindergarten classroom. As noted in their reflections, learning within an inquiry community also enables these teacher educators to gain a deeper understanding of the "complex, demanding, relational, and multifaceted" nature of teachers' work and to "critically examine" practice concerning work in schools.

Relations With Knowledge

Where does knowledge for teaching come from? How is this knowledge produced? Whose knowledge is valued? How does this shape teachers' identities? These are questions we continue to grapple with throughout our ongoing CAR project. Learning within a CAR community means that, as practitioners, we take the position as knowers, capable of generating the knowledge we need to inform practice through inquiry, while also thinking critically and making judgments about knowledge from elsewhere (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). This is different from the kind of knowledge teachers acquire through more traditional forms of professional learning, where teachers often receive information from "experts" outside their context. When teachers adopt an inquiry-based approach, their relationship with knowledge shifts. Rather than something to be implemented, it becomes a way of knowing, doing, and being that originates from within; it is knowledge that is local, situated, embedded, and intertwined with their values and those of others. Theory is not separate from practice; rather, theory is practice, and practice is theory. Within this phase of our project, we generated new knowledge about technologies, pedagogies, and literacies.

As teacher candidates and early-career teachers, Emily and Jessica are beginning to consider what they need to know in becoming literacy teachers for social justice. At the time of this study, they had already completed one degree and were working towards a second degree in elementary education. As research assistants, they learned to conduct close, intentional observations of students' learning. They documented their observations through field notes, photos, checklists, artifacts, and video recordings. They paid close attention to primary children's interactions with one another, technology, and other materials during digital bookmaking. They listened carefully to what students had to say during focus groups and individual interviews. They listened to audio recordings multiple times and transcribed their

conversations with young children. They inquired about the children's reading and writing preferences, topics of interest, and preferred learning methods. They attended research team meetings, listened to others, engaged in critical conversations, organized data, analyzed data, posed questions, shared ideas, and reflected on practice. These practices shaped *what* they know about literacy teaching and learning, how they know it, and whom they are becoming as teachers. From a pedagogical perspective, both preservice teachers reflected on the importance of students' agency. Emily said that CAR enabled her to "step back and learn from my students, encouraging student agency." Jessica wrote that she "gained better insight into how to provide opportunities for students to enact their agency." They also learned new technologies and how to navigate "the ins and outs of introducing iPads and Book Creator" while making connections to global competencies such as "essential graduation competencies (communication, collaboration, technological fluency, creativity, critical thinking, and citizenship)." They also noted gaining a deeper understanding of literacies across the curriculum. For example, after listening to children talk about their writing preferences, Jessica noted that "it became clear that students were interested in writing about a wide range of topics that pulled in many integrated subjects." Another example that illustrates this is how Emily and Jessica revised the observation writing checklist based on their conversations with children to include specific examples related to purpose and audience.

As mid- and late-career teachers, Darlene and Nisha still view themselves as *becoming* teachers and continually seek ways to improve their practice. Through their inquiries, they have become more confident in trusting their knowledge to inform their practice. They both highlighted how inquiry enabled them to make explicit connections between reflection and action. Nisha noted that CAR allowed her to "reflect on my planning process and use of explicit instruction in my practice." Darlene discussed how she now reflects on her "teaching practices daily" and has become comfortable making "immediate" changes to her lessons. They both reflected on using new content and pedagogical knowledge to improve their practice. For example, Darlene wrote that her inquiry "led to improvements in the way I plan, the methods I use for instruction, and the support that I offer my students." Nisha said, "I learned that what works well for one group of students may not always work for the next, and I need to be prepared to adapt my teaching." This is evident in the changes Nisha made to her guided and shared reading instruction. Based on new knowledge generated through inquiry, she confidently used this knowledge to change her practice by incorporating more culturally relevant informational texts that reflected their interests.

University teacher educators also generated new knowledge that they used to inform their work with preservice teachers. Marie-Christina said that "this research gave me a window into teaching and learning contexts and practices of primary teachers, allowing me to bring this into my university courses." Deborah noted that "it informs my teaching of inclusive literacies with preservice teachers" and "provides examples of how I am living my values in practice." Deborah reflected on how knowledge is generated when we "theorize our practice together, we contribute to the knowledge base in education" and reported how "being able to provide evidence and knowledge from their research inquiries is empowering." Marie-Christina pointed out that with CAR there is a connection "between the community members and diverse perspectives and knowledge brought to the table that sparked and enlivened conversations and learning." As an example, the knowledge generated through this CAR project continues to be shared with other inservice and preservice teachers, and continues to evolve.

Transforming Teacher Identities of *Becoming*

Teacher research can shape and transform teachers' identities in productive ways (Black, 2021; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Kitchen & Stevens, 2008; Nichols & Cormack, 2017; Van Katwijk et al., 2021). As discussed earlier, teacher research positions teachers as researchers, knowers, and change agents (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Comber, 2005).

Emily and Jessica are just beginning their careers and learning what kind of teachers they are becoming. Emily wrote about how being part of a CAR community was significant in shaping her "professional identity as an educator" and that she sees herself as a teacher and researcher. Being a researcher and adopting an inquiry-based approach to her practice will remain integral to her teacher identity. Emily also wrote about research as integral to her development as a teacher and how it will continue to shape her practice: "As I continue to grow as an educator, I will seek out opportunities to expand my experiences as a teacher researcher, which will simultaneously strengthen my teaching practices and benefit my learners." For both of these early-career teachers, being a researcher means talking with children and listening to what they have to say. It requires close observation and intentional action. It involves reflexivity and a desire to change in the interests of social good. Jessica alludes to the idea that inquiry repositions children as agents in their learning, enabling them to make informed decisions. For example, Emily wrote about seeing children with agency and valuing the expertise they bring to learning. She said that "many of our young learners know more than we do about navigating technology," and talked about continuing to learn from her students.

As practicing teachers with significant educational backgrounds (both with BEd and MEd degrees) and years of experience as primary teachers, Darlene and Nisha reported that their identities were also enhanced through CAR. Even with 27 years of experience, Darlene reflected on a shift in what she was noticing in her students and responded by making changes to her practice. She talked about being able to "carefully evaluate the function of the writing tools I was using and make improvements that better reflect the learning preferences of my students." She also underlined the importance of learning from her students, noting that through "close observation and listening to students, I learned that as teachers, what we offer students can evolve in response to their strengths and interests." Darlene noted how inquiry enabled her to change her practice. An example she provided in her reflection captures one of these changes. She wrote that "over the course of our research, I slowed down to notice that the vocabulary I used when introducing the characteristics of fiction and informational texts, was not as easy to take on as I thought, and I changed my practice based on this finding." Similarly, Nisha highlighted how inquiry caused her to rethink and change in response to students' learning. As an example, she reflected on how she was "able to try various teaching strategies, fostering an environment of experimentation and reflection with my students" and how feedback from co-researchers "helped me to gain further understanding of how they learn." She also noted that she learned "to be prepared to adapt" her teaching in response to students.

For teacher educators, this experience shaped their identities in different ways. As an "emerging" scholar, Marie-Christina talked about how her CAR experience informed her work as a researcher and teacher. She highlighted how it enabled a "deeper understanding of what it looks like and feels like to be a teacher in schools today" and how this supports her work with inservice teachers. She also said that this experience enhanced her "understanding of research processes." For example, she became familiar with processes of applying for ethics approval and obtaining informed consent from parents of children. Deborah shared how CAR enables her to live her values in practice and to continue working for social justice. For her, this "means addressing inequities, contradictions, and complexities" within her work as a teacher educator. For example, as a literacy educator, it is a way to raise awareness of inequitable literacy practices through one-size-fits-all resources and to advocate for more inclusive literacies by providing local examples of what is possible. She wrote that inquiry positions her as a learner "alongside both preservice and inservice teachers," and that this is a powerful way to generate knowledge about culturally relevant and responsive practices. Deborah views CAR as a means to transform her practice as an advocate for teachers' knowledge with both inservice and preservice teachers.

Discussion

Our reflections on the affordances of CAR illuminate some of the benefits of learning through collective inquiry and contribute to the field. Preservice teachers discussed the impact of CAR on their learning to teach, shaping their professional identities, adopting an inquiry stance towards practice, learning from students, and developing content knowledge through data collection and analysis. Inservice teachers shared ideas about a different approach to professional learning that is embedded in practice and responsive to students' learning. Teacher educators noted the depth of understanding of theory–practice relations, particularly how they are intertwined through inquiry and interconnected with knowing through lived experiences.

It is important to note that positive outcomes were mutually beneficial. Preservice teachers took on roles as research assistants, affording them a deeper understanding of teaching and learning through their school-based activities, including data collection and support for students with new technologies. University researchers gained insight into current practices in local classrooms and a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that inservice teachers face. In this research, university researchers also gained unique, regionally specific, and culturally responsive resources created by teacher researchers for use in their classrooms.

Financially, teachers benefited from release time to engage in critical dialogue and collaboration with colleagues from other schools and university teacher educators. Primary students benefited from access to digital tablets and other technologies for bookmaking. Preservice teachers were employed as research assistants and paid for their work and time on the project. Preservice teacher researchers, inservice teacher researchers, and university teacher researchers mutually benefited from learning from one another through engagement during site visits, interviews, data analysis sessions, and opportunities to

experiment with new pedagogies and technologies. This worked to enhance our content, as well as our pedagogical and technological knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

Collaborative action research has the potential to foster more egalitarian relationships, empower teacher agency, and enhance teachers' identities. Teacher research supports curriculum practice and repositions teachers as researchers, knowers, and change agents (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Comber, 2006). Rather than each person feeling alone, our interactions provided us with opportunities to listen, question, respond, and encourage one another. Our teacher research community brought our learning, knowing, and being together through a network of social practices (Wenger, 1998).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research suggesting that a much broader view of professional learning is needed to reignite teachers' passion for their work by enabling agency. Action research can be transformative and viewed as a way to bring about both personal and social change (Dusty, 2024). It shows what is possible when teachers have autonomy, ownership, and control over their learning and practice. In the current era of substantial literacy reforms, when it seems that training teachers to follow scripted, prepackaged programs developed elsewhere is becoming more common, it is more important than ever to support ongoing teacher learning through collaborative inquiry embedded in teachers' practice and responsive to students in local contexts. In this paper, we highlighted some of the affordances of our learning through collaborative action research. We have outlined some benefits and the potential for knowledge generation through local university–school partnerships to inform, enhance, and transform our practices as teachers in our local context. We have shown how CAR can serve to connect teachers' voices, generate local knowledge, and shape teachers' identities.

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School-Based Youth Participatory Action Research With English Learners: Art-Based Narratives for Change

Teresa Troyer, Sally Coons, and Rosalinda Godínez

Abstract

This paper examines how a high school English Language Arts classroom engaged multilingual learners of English in a School-Based Youth Participatory Action Research (SchYPAR) cycle integrating arts and narrative-based practices. Drawing on Freirean praxis and ethnographic observation, the study highlights how co-teaching supported critical literacy, agency, and dialogue. Findings reveal student and teacher transformations in relation to language, identity, and collaborative inquiry, illustrating implications for inclusive and critical pedagogies in multilingual contexts.

Introduction

In a suburban Midwestern high school where nearly one-third of students speak a language other than English at home, teachers and multilingual learners of English (MLEs) navigate daily intersections of language, identity, and belonging. Amid the pressures of standardized curricula and English-only accountability systems, the classroom becomes both a site of constraint and a space of possibility. This study emerges from that tension—where teachers seek new ways to center students' lived experiences and voices as legitimate sources of knowledge and change.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) offers a flexible yet supportive paradigm for cultivating student voice, agency, and critical literacy. In the context of second or additional language learning, the collaborative interactions integral to YPAR foster not only an integration of language and content objectives, but also what Freire (2005) described as praxis—the unity of reflection and action that moves learners from objects of instruction to subjects of transformation. Building on the "linguistic turn" in literacy studies (Bloome & Green, 2015), this approach situates language not merely as skill acquisition but as social action—"acting upon the world with others in an effort to understand and change it" (p. 28).

This project took shape within a School-Based Youth Participatory Action Research (SchYPAR) initiative, in which teachers and students engaged in collaborative inquiry around issues relevant to their school community. The work highlighted here focuses specifically on multilingual learners of English and explores how arts and narrative-based practices supported them in bridging language learning with social change. As both researcher and instructional coach, I (Teresa Troyer) collaborated with an English Language Arts teacher (Sally Coons) to co-design, implement, and study a SchYPAR cycle that foregrounded creativity, criticality, and student-led reflection.

The purpose of this study is to examine how multilingual learners of English engaged in an arts- and narrative-supported SchYPAR process that connected English language development with collective meaning-making and agency. By documenting this collaboration, the study seeks to illuminate how participatory inquiry can foster language learning, dialogue, and teacher reflection within linguistically diverse classrooms.

This inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

1) How do multilingual learners of English experience the process of School-Based Youth Participatory Action Research in an English Language Arts classroom?
2) In what ways do arts and narrative-based activities shape students' engagement, reflection, and sense of agency?
3) How do educators grow as reflective practitioners within the SchYPAR paradigm?

Literature Review

Youth Participatory Action Research

Malorni et al. (2022) define Participatory Action Research (PAR) as participants and researchers working together to critique and change a social problem through commitment to varied ways of knowing that address oppression across layers of ourselves, our research, and society. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) thus focuses on youth-led changes in the community (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). Drawing on several sources, Malorni et al. (2022) emphasize that YPAR recognizes youth "as a socially marginalized identity, positions young people as experts of their lived experience, and recognizes them as critical social change-makers. As such, YPAR is a powerful approach to research and action, whose process can positively transform individuals, organizations, and communities" (p. 1).

However, Call-Cummings et al. (2022) show that YPAR happening in the confines—or opportunities—of a school setting, what is known as *School-Based* Youth Participatory Action Research (SchYPAR), is not as well researched. Emerging scholarship, particularly through initiatives in Ohio led by the Center for Urban Education, is beginning to expand this field. This paper contributes to that growing body of research by examining how teachers enact YPAR as a justice-oriented practice within urban schools (Rahill et al., 2025; Godínez et al., 2025; Buckley-Marudas et al., 2024, 2025). Collectively, these studies illuminate a shared commitment to understanding and honoring teacher praxis as a core dimension of educational equity—positioning educators not simply as implementers of reform, but as knowledge producers and co-constructors of transformative civic learning in partnership with youth.

Drawing on Freire's praxis and *conscientização*, Call-Cummings et al. (2022) position SchYPAR as "an embodied and critical approach to intergenerational participatory inquiry" (p. 78), emphasizing that there is no either/or of student or teacher, but rather "entangled" (p. 77) ongoing participation. Though her work on languaging is in the context of socioeconomic class rather than MLE, Hicks (2005) notes that,

"in the field of education . . . the allure of the scientific has eclipsed the particular, the ethnographic" but, Hicks continues, moving productively among languaging spaces "has become a leading vision for what critical teaching might achieve . . . but in order for such changes in language and subjectivity to occur, [students] must first see a place in the classroom for the real as they know it" (p. 227). Deeply understanding how students were "reading the world" in multiple and questioning ways, the critical pedagogies that Freire (2018) practiced and taught are inseparable from the dialogue in which the "oppressed and the oppressor" must engage for liberating both and are intended to have an effect on social justice issues. Matusov (2018) categorizes this sort of dialogic pedagogy as instrumental—connected to material effects—in contrast with non-instrumental or ontological dialogic pedagogies that carry knowing or meaning-making as the intended outcomes.

Freirean Praxis and Dialogic Pedagogy

In enacting SchYPAR, I am concerned about *who* gets to experience non-instrumental pedagogy and the ethics of introducing this meaning-making purpose if the participants themselves are not trying to be "liberated" in the Freirean sense. Many high school MLEs might see education's purpose as practical, informed by their prior experiences and by their current priorities to work and support their families in myriad other ways. We can address this concern by leaning on Freire's ideas of *problematizing* our interactions with each other and the world while remembering Foucault's intimate linking of knowledge and power. Kamberelis and Dimitriades (2005) show how the transformative possibilities of Freire's beliefs could be constrained by Foucault's ideas that power is "not mediated by consciousness, representation or ideology because these things are already effects *of* power" (p. 46), meaning that practices are always situated not only within social contexts but within "larger, institutionally informed arrangements of power" (p. 47) that lead us to act in certain ways and not others—perhaps to see certain possibilities for change, and not others. We can negotiate this tension between theory and practice and work to broaden the possibilities for change by drawing MLEs into meaning-making through personal connections and then sustaining this meaning-making through an arts- and narrative-supported SchYPAR cycle in an English language learning classroom.

This study positions SchYPAR as a pedagogical framework through which teachers and multilingual learners negotiate these tensions between agency and constraint. Following Call-Cummings et al. (2022), SchYPAR is understood as "an embodied and critical approach to intergenerational participatory inquiry" (p. 78) in which teachers and students learn *with* and *from* each other. The classroom thus becomes a dialogic site where language learning, identity development, and collective meaning-making intertwine.

Arts-Based Research and Narrative Inquiry in YPAR

To extend this dialogic and critical framework, this study draws on arts-based research (ABR) as both methodology and epistemology. Rooted in Barone and Eisner (2012) and Leavy (2015), ABR treats artistic and narrative expression—such as storytelling, collage, and illustration—as legitimate forms of inquiry that honor the emotional and embodied dimensions of meaning-making, particularly for participants whose voices are often constrained by linguistic or academic norms.

For multilingual learners of English, arts-based approaches create multimodal pathways for participation and agency. Through image, gesture, and color, students communicate complex experiences that may exceed the limits of English fluency. These creative processes align with Gutiérrez and Rogoff's (2003) idea of third space, where home and school languages and cultures intersect in generative ways. When integrated with YPAR, the arts shift research from data collection to co-creation of meaning. As Clover and Stalker (2007) note, the arts "open up the political imagination" (p. 35) by enabling participants to see—and act upon—the world differently. In this study, practices such as community mapping, visual journaling, and graphic storytelling were not decorative additions but central pedagogical acts—spaces where reflection, dialogue, and transformation unfolded.

In synthesizing Freirean praxis, Foucault's insights on power, and arts-based inquiry, this framework positions education as a co-creative act of world-making. The arts, like language, function as both pedagogy and praxis. The iterative and shared actions and reflections in this study bring to life Mascolo's (2009) re-thinking of "learner-centered approaches" that argues the teacher/student dichotomy is false in both theory and practice and that participants are necessarily intertwined in sociocultural structured action, learning through language-mediated activities designed by a more expert teacher that yield guided participation, not merely a mechanical use of dialogue and interaction among students and teachers.

Methods and Data Collection

This study employed an arts-based, ethnographic approach to School-Based Youth Participatory Action Research (SchYPAR) with multilingual learners of English (MLEs) in a Midwestern high school English Language Arts classroom. Grounded in Freirean praxis and critical pedagogy, the research design emphasized collaboration, reflection, and artistic expression as interconnected forms of inquiry. The project unfolded over 12 co-taught class sessions in spring 2025, followed by a reflective interview and document review.

The SchYPAR work described here represents a layering of direct instruction with students, reflections on the experience by students and by the teachers as a form of professional development, and, finally, an encompassing layer of study by the researcher on the work from an ethnographic perspective. Given this foundation in the importance of ethnography, data generation, in contrast to collection, is described by Agar (2013) where

> on the ground floor of any project, the researcher and the researched make "data" together in those intersubjective spaces. "Data" is just a name for what is understood and recorded from a researcher's point of view. . . . The trick is getting the translation between the two right so that the language of the human social science has some correspondence with the intentionality and lived experience of the human research subjects in their social world. (p. 94)

Data generated in this study were constructed in a suburban, Midwestern U.S. high school context with MLE students.

Research Setting and Participants

The student participants in this study were enrolled in the second course (early intermediate) of a five-level English Language Arts for MLEs system that met for a daily 105-minute block. The course targets state language arts and English language proficiency standards and bears one English and one elective high school credit. Students had arrived within the past year and a half from six countries and spoke five languages. The classroom teacher was new to U.S. high school teaching, but had nearly ten years of experience teaching elementary and university learners in the U.S. and high school and university learners internationally. The teacher openly shared her hesitancy to try SchYPAR, but also her willingness to trust the process with a colleague accompanying her along the way. I, the researcher/instructional coach in this situation, am also a certified English and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) educator and have more experience in leading participatory action research, though this was my first time studying the process. The corpus of data includes field notes, images, student artifacts, teacher artifacts, audio recordings of some class sessions, and audio recordings of student and teacher interviews. Jottings and classroom audio were gathered during the class sessions and field notes were crafted from these soon after each session.

Demographics

The school demographics are as follows: students with a language in addition to English in the home comprise 29% of the school, with 13% currently designated as English Learners (EL) and 14% former English Learners. Self-reported responses to "race" during enrollment show 9% Black, 20% Hispanic, 10% Asian, 50% White and 7% multiracial for the school. For the 214 EL-designated students, the school employs two full-time bilingual aides, 4.5 full-time TESOL certified teachers, and an additional 1.5 full-time equivalent positions shared across content areas to support the new arrivals among those 214 students. This 33:1 student to teacher (not including bilingual aides) ratio is well below the state recommended 50:1 ratio (weighted for English language levels). The number of teachers does not automatically equal comparable and high-quality teaching and learning across the courses, but the potential resources are in place in terms of staff, routines, and curricular materials.

Teacher-Researcher

Both the classroom teacher, Sally Coons, and the coach/researcher, Teresa Troyer, in this study participated in the SchYPAR Action Team as part of a federal grant-funded initiative led by Cleveland State University, Ohio. Informed by their learning in this space, the coach and teacher met prior to launching the work to plan the pedagogical design, mapping the overview of the four parts of the inquiry cycle and creating a shared document for daily lesson goals and teaching tools such as slides and handouts. The learning objectives were focused on State ELA standards for research and argument with English language proficiency standards integrated into the learning and products, as is the usual approach for sheltered ELA courses. The unit was rooted in an anchor text, the graphic novel *Undocumented*, by Duncan Tonatiuhm, which chronicles the workers' fight for fair pay despite challenges due to immigration status, and a digital notebook was used to hold students' formative and summative products,

a technique the coach often employs. From the perspective of the student experience, participants worked in groups and were in the same multilingual, teacher-selected group from day one. Students knew from the outset that their goal was to present their research and recommendations to school administrators in English.

The Process of SchYPAR with Multilingual Learners of English

Sally and Teresa were truly co-teaching throughout the lessons, though Teresa led the ongoing planning in between class sessions and Sally generally led the class time based on the shared plan and checked with Teresa often during the delivery or asked her to lead or navigate when the next instructional move wasn't clear. Very soon, this murkiness often became the norm. We quickly realized that the students would benefit from seeing the materials designed for YPAR in general education settings through their multilingual English learning lens. We introduced YPAR in general through examples and videos of community changemakers, but the photos of food pantries and volunteering at homes for the elderly added to the slides did not resonate with the lived experiences of the students in the room. We pivoted to incorporate community asset mapping, an approach borrowed from Teresa's familiarity with community development, that grounds participants in identifying assets that already exist to envision future changes. In practice, this looked like a quickly sketched sample "city" built from shapes on a Google Slide and concentric circles labeled *me*, *family*, *school*, *community*, etc. The community maps that the students produced, however, took on many shapes, colors, and forms in response to the questions of "who do you talk to when you need help?" though one student did question why they were drawing. This simple mismatch with what high school work usually looked like in the student's home country helped us, conspirators almost at this point, to understand that we were poised on an arts-based approach ready to emerge.

As we introduced each new part of the cycle, we augmented SchYPAR materials from the Action Team resources in several ways, all bound together by visual and arts-based ideas. The digital notebook was color coded for each part of the inquiry process, and we added slides for student reflection as well as templates to guide students toward the final presentation. We updated handouts with graphic organizers and examples for each section and then printed on corresponding colored paper. We supported potential responses to guiding questions about issue identification with sentence stems, and we found ways to crack open closed-ended "solutions" with so what/now what scenarios that turned quickly generated fixes or far-too-broad issues into actionable research questions to explore. From there, the five groups of four students each delved deeply into their different research questions and design. In this layer of direct instruction through SchYPAR, students' data generation took the form of working in pairs to interview non-MLE students in the large cafeteria study hall using the modified survey tool we developed to allow for yes/no questions and a "why?" follow-up that supported English learners in gathering quantitative and qualitative data while feeling prepared to receive responses.

The students energetically presented findings to administrators, but first we intentionally extended the preparation for this by explicitly connecting to State speaking standards for English language proficiency and the model of performance-based assessments, engaging students in two practice rounds of presenting

to peers while peers used a standards-aligned rubric to give immediate feedback. Similarly, we found that the unit could not simply end with the presentations, but extended once again to revisit the students' community assets maps and ask the students to choose one story of when they had been a changemaker in their community. Students then told these stories in graphic form using digital tools and dialogue bubbles. Stories were published digitally and in hard copy in a classroom book that mirrored the layout of *Undocumented*.

Learnings

In my own ethnographic study of this particular experience, as an active participant observer (Spradley, 1980) and co-teacher, I was constantly making choices about what to include, how to organize, what to look for and see, when to ask for more, and so on. Thus, the data analysis was ever-happening. I began organizing around themes emerging from interviews with students and my co-teacher, finding evidence of personal and deep connections across the unique layers of our shared work within a SchYPAR cycle. Findings reveal student and teacher transformations in relation to language, identity, and collaborative inquiry, illustrating implications for inclusive and critical pedagogies in multilingual contexts. Students moved beyond mere task completion that often comes with being a student to becoming driven by a question important to them. Sally found freedom in the supportive structure of SchYPAR, both for personal reflection and for more personalized, timely interactions with students. Teresa put into practice a deeply held but not always visible belief in the need to pull out of people what is already there, honoring Freire's (2005) fight against imposition in favor of liberation through shared praxis.

Students Becoming Researchers

Students Learned to Be More Comfortable in Reflecting

Coding from the students' interviews, recorded in English or Spanish (see Appendix A) per student preference, I noticed that students shared many comparisons from their home country schooling to the current setting more than reflecting on the "taking up" of the SchYPAR work. Most interesting to me, there were multiple references across student focus groups (see Appendix B) to situations of stress and support in both academic and daily living contexts in the countries from which students had journeyed. I began to see an emphasis among this particular group of multilingual learners of English on the importance of the financial and daily living support they appreciate about U.S. schools as compared to the need to arrange transportation and lunch, for example, on their own in their home country. Students also emphasized the amount of work, the high stakes testing, and the competition among students in their home countries in contrast to kinder teachers, more leniency in student behavior, and more time in school to complete assignments in their U.S. experience. Though students did not directly reflect on the SchYPAR experience as I had hoped, their comfort in reflecting, in working together, and in setting forth their own findings to adults in positions of power showed their growth as learners and agents of change through this process.

Data Type	Instances (coding for U.S., home country, stress/ support in both academic and daily life)
Individual student interview - in Spanish	AJ: ...as an immigrant you can excel. They **support** you with anything you need, **even giving** you jobs if you want to work, help, or belong to a community. All of that. (In Mexico) There's a lot of **pressure** on me from both parents and teachers, and also from other things that make it different: here in the United States, **they give you** food, they give you a car, they give you school supplies. ...because i**n Mexico they are competitive**, so we always had to **do things alone** because we competed for grades.
Student focus group interview -males, in English	SY : There (home country) we have books or subjects like history, English, science and computer and also theory and language books. And then **we read from the books and they give us homework.** SY: If we have **a test practice**... First he reads the questions and I answer them and then I read the questions and he answers them. SY: One thing is different from Afghanistan to the United States... each class we have the owner, student - **they control the students** MH: (in home country) **No phone** like I see no phones.(more strict)

Fig. 1: Excerpt from student focus group interviews near the end of the project

Students Learned to "Read the Word and the World" More Critically

Though the interviews did not capture reflections on the inquiry cycle, students were becoming researchers through the support of the SchYPAR process and the opportunities to interact through arts and narrative. When the idea carried in the word "changemaker" did not launch us into issue identification, the marker-to-paper practice of drawing community asset maps and thinking in terms of "helpers" moved us toward an understanding of the process we were entering. We deepened this understanding by reading short biographies of well-known changemakers connected to students' cultural backgrounds, such as Malala Yousafzai and Cesar Chavez, leveraging district-approved resources at a level of English that was challenging yet comprehensible.



Fig. 2: Community assets maps

Similarly, students could quickly generate issues that they could see themselves sharing with administrators, but just as quickly proposed their preferred solution for the concern. Color-coding examples of closed questions versus research questions helped the students position themselves as researchers—curious to explore through asking more questions and more stakeholders. Data collection and analysis added a layer of purpose, as well as protection, to the final group presentations as students were now responsible for representing what they found, not for sharing just their own opinions, which could be uncomfortable, nor just a synthesis of articles disconnected from their experiences as is so often the product of a research assignment. Students had hours of experience interacting with each other and with their questions and data to share intensely with school administrators—real learning to share with a real audience for a real reason.

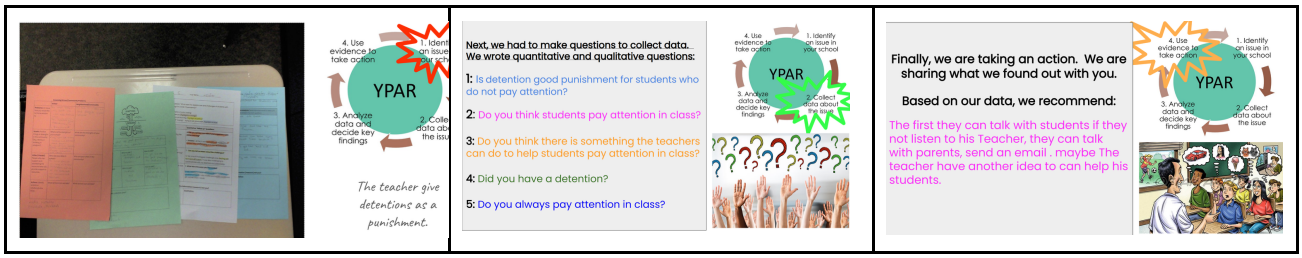


Fig. 3: Group-based final presentations in digital notebooks

Students Learned to Be More Confident in Learning and Leading

As noted earlier, the process did not feel complete after the final presentations, so we extended by coming full circle to the initial asset maps and the connections students made to being helpers among their friends, families, and communities. Students took this opportunity to tell stories of fairness, values, change, and belonging through a medium that again encouraged creativity within a paradigm, in this case a comic storyboard template.

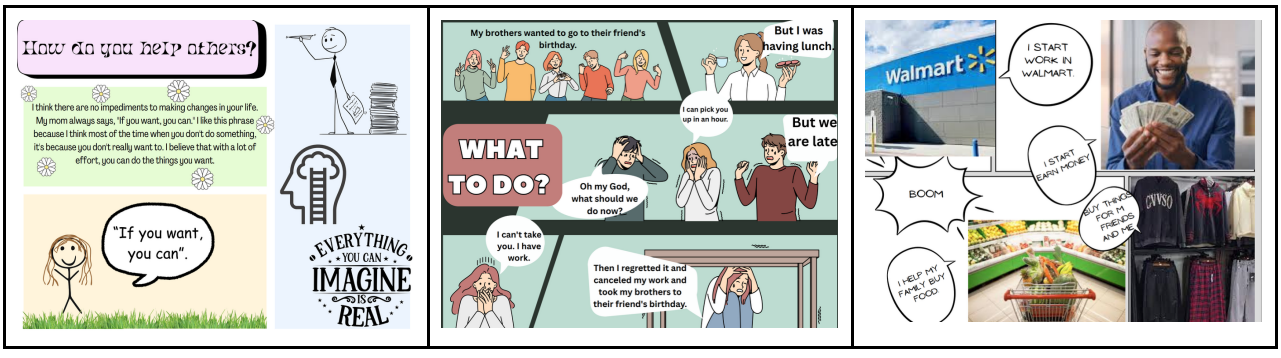


Fig. 4: Student comics narrating how they are changemakers

Finally, students had an opportunity to reflect in writing on a graphic organizer on what they liked about the various stages of our SchYPAR activities and what they would like to do next time. While all responses were neutral to positive, showing that students enjoyed practicing English verbally in their groups, hearing different ideas, and having a chance to build confidence, one student in particular flipped over the paper to make room for ideas for next time: to have more people in each group, but not only to work in class, but to present

to all classes in the school and involve them in learning how to do presentations to students, teachers, and administrators. Students not only negotiated their identities as multilingual learners and researchers by expressing complex ideas visually and collaboratively within our shared experience, but saw themselves as potential leaders in the school through the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they had grown through this process.

Teacher Risk-Taking

Teachers Learned to Be Looser and Messier

From the interview with the classroom teacher, themes emerged around comfort/discomfort, relationships, and support and control/loosening (see Appendices C and D). The teacher was always eager to reflect together, and her thinking evolved quickly and constantly over the course of the collaboration and even during the interview (see Appendix E). I opened the interview by continuing a conversation that the teacher had initiated at the beginning of class, recalling a book study (Elena Aguilar's *Onward*) in which she read about different ways that teachers are creative. I encouraged this connection to new learning, which is effective because it springs from the teacher's experience, and, as Horton (1990) shows, "you can get all your ideas across just by asking questions and at the same time you help people to grow and not form a dependency on you" (p. 147).

This opening interaction led to the reflective metaphor the teacher established of being an artistic creator and understanding the orderliness that can come from messiness and the creativity that can flourish within rules and from breaking rules once learned. Throughout the interview, the teacher also worked through a frequently recurring metaphor of a manicured lawn, a forest, and a sort of in-between curation of a Japanese garden. A natural connection to her prior teaching experience in Japan, the garden metaphor seems to bridge the rigidity of the lawn and the feared chaos of the untouched forest, just as our dialogue was bridging the prior experience of the teacher and the more speculative "what happens when" approach of the researcher. This metaphor also worked to support the teacher in bridging from the very rigid, controlled, knowledge acquisition approach to English teaching she had experienced—and been expected to perform—in Japan to a more critical inquiry stance in both the U.S. multilingual class in general and in this action research inquiry in particular.

Time	Speaker	Line	Transcript
0:16:03	R	58	So I'm recording again, would you see...I know we've talked about changes we've seen in the students.
	R	59	Would you see like action research as being a unique way to do it or are there- is it more of -that there's some kind of a structure and then figuring out how to work, how to be creative within that, that structure, that middle space that you talked about with the gardens because you mentioned the haiku and how?...
	R	60	To me, that seemed to kind of work in the same way that - just they're maybe on a shorter time scale than the action research. So the question is have you seen the kids' dispositions or approaches or thinking change? In either the action research or the haiku or these things you've tried lately that were kind of different.
0:16:52	T	61	I think it's the latter, I think action research is a type of activity that students can't do alone, but it has the structure.
	T	62	It falls under the umbrella of the Japanese garden approach, which we should trademark absolutely.

Fig. 5: Excerpt from extended interview with teacher near the end of the project

Also, the metaphor helped connect the teacher's own trajectory to becoming a teacher, which had not been a typical path for U.S. teachers, looking back to how she was educated formally and compliantly in high school and forward to who she might want to continue to become as a teacher. During later instances in this co-teaching experience, the teacher clearly took the lead when the instruction was not working for the students and was comfortable figuring out the next move together and in the immediate with the coach/researcher, making changes in real time.

Pedagogical Transformation

Teachers Learned to Name the Power of Questioning and Listening

Prior to the collaboration described in this study, Sally and Teresa had engaged in the previous semester with the same class in critical, multimodal literacies projects in a hybrid format with teachers and students in Brazil. In that case, Teresa had set the stage and helped plan, but Sally had enacted the projects that resulted in digital biographies to share with international peers. A few weeks before the experience described here, Sally had been hesitant to engage in a poetry study with the same class, but had been pleasantly surprised at how interested the students had been; she shared that she had let them lead, in the sense of continuing the poetry work until they felt it was complete. Though Sally stated in the interview after the SchYPAR inquiry, "I'm so grateful that you taught this with me, because I would not have the courage, or I wouldn't have, yeah, the trust in myself and in the process to try it" (line 38), likely she would have grown into other wonderings and experiments *with* her students without the presence of a co-teacher, but the reflections afforded such an intimately shared experience.

In my own reflections on our trajectory over the course of the year leading to the SchYPAR cycle and then through the cycle, I see that I too was finding new ways of knowing and being. Though I had been working in leadership roles with teachers for two decades and specifically been called an instructional coach for the past five, I still squirmed at that word and at the nonchalant way people more expert than me used terms like "coaching cycles." Now I was experiencing what Horton and Freire, borrowing from poet Antonio Machado, describe as making the road by walking. By walking together, I could see a way to encourage the visionary that was already present, and to influence enduring shifts in classroom practices, melding our stated paradigm of collaborating through youth participatory action research with Souto-Manning's (2014) stance that "If we are to engage in positive social change, we must start by listening to and analyzing the everyday stories people tell" (p.177).

Implications/Conclusions

As we closed the official inquiry cycle with the presentations to administrators on the day before spring break, I also felt more confident knowing that important learning had happened across the layers of inquiry. In response to the challenges of implementing YPAR in schools and in an additional language learning context, it was clear that students became quickly invested in generating real possibilities when connected to the inquiry, to each other and to the larger student body through arts- and narrative-based approaches. For educators, the SchYPAR paradigm provided a supportive process for collaborating, testing new ideas, and reflecting and connecting in deeply personal and professionally inspiring ways. Though this cycle had closed, many more questions arose: Would the relationships the students and teachers had forged and improved remain strong? Would the sometimes disengaged students who had, often surprisingly, shown leadership in this context be drawn to do so in future classroom experiences? Would the teachers maintain a reflective practitioner stance throughout future choices? From my perspective of reflecting on this experience as a researcher, how would this work look different with different teachers? How could I continue to see with others what de Sousa Santos (2007) describes as the non-uniform scales and durations (p. 71) of knowledges, resisting a "should be" and seeing instead that

> learning certain forms of knowledge may involve forgetting others and . . . becoming ignorant of them. In other words, in the ecology of knowledges, ignorance is not necessarily the original state or starting point. It may be a point of arrival. It may be the result of the forgetting or unlearning implicit in the reciprocal learning process. (p. 69)

How could another layer of investigation on this work make visible different aspects of the work? For example, if I turn my lens more toward the dialogic interactions in the classroom among students and students/teachers, what would become visible—and necessary—in both language and content learning and in connection to participatory action research? If I turn our lenses toward the students' uptake of SchYPAR, what will become visible in the interaction of the paradigm with their lived experiences and in their choices of research problems, further complicated by the fact that they worked in *assigned* groups? How can all of these open questions be enhanced by the addition—or foundation—of arts- and narrative-based understandings? How will this experience inform future arts- and narrative-based choices when planning starts from, rather than reacts to, these important scaffolds?

In the layer of direct instruction using SchYPAR among multilingual learners of English, combining language standards with content standards enhances the teaching and learning achieved through this inherently student-driven, questioning, and action-oriented paradigm. Looking through the lens of making input and output comprehensible, especially for students operating in a language that they are fairly new to, requires teachers to negotiate meaning-making in the sense of both culturally sustaining recognitions and in practical terms of resources and activities. Teachers must be willing to see how language is shaping reality, in theory and in practice, to responsively interact with students and shift for shared knowledge production across complex levels of understanding. The challenges are even greater and more exciting in terms of results when meaning-making happens across levels of language proficiency—when students early in their language learning journeys are not relegated to shallow depths of knowledge. The ideas for comprehensibility and supported production presented here just begin to scratch the surface of the possibilities for learning through SchYPAR with MLEs. Connecting to students' identities and strengths early in the process and sustaining participation through continued arts- and narrative-based visuals, activities, and interactions ensures an inclusive entry point not only for MLEs as community change agents, but for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers as critical, reflective practitioners, committed to "reading the world" in as many ways as possible.

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Appendix A

Coding of Student Interview, Translated from Spanish

T3.4.student.interview.translated.coded_Troyer (Researcher = R; Student = S)

Time	Speaker	Line	Utterance	InVivo	Emotion	Concept	Personal notes
0:14:42	R	1	Please tell me where you're from, what language you speak, and how long you've been in the States.				
0:14:53	S	2	My name is, my name is AJ				
0:15:01	S	3	I come from the state of Oaxaca, in the country of Mexico and my first language is Spanish. I have been in the United States for 1 year and four months.			comparison potential between school systems	
0:15:19	R	4	So I'm going to talk a little about school in general. What do you like about school? It could be anything.				
0:15:32	S	5	Well, I like that, well, one of the				
0:15:36	S	6	One of the courses they offer is.. the benefits they offer so that as an immigrant you can excel. They support you with anything you need, even giving you jobs if you want to work, help, or belong to a community. All of that.	excel, support		immigrants can excel in US; needs are met	AJ is enrolled in a cosmetology program at the career tech school also- a huge feat as a beginner EL
0:16:03	R	7	Super, very good.				
	R	8	Are there…are several parts that you don't like… it could be behavior, courses or anything that you don't like here.				
0:16:24	S	9	…the topic we were finally discussing about… going in the bathroom and it smells really bad of cigarettes.	bathroom smells bad; smoking	discomfort in US- physical		AJ and her group focused on this question for their action research
0:16:31	R	10	Good				
0:16:32	S	11	…but almost like discomfort, I don't have it here, everything is fine.	fine	no discomfort in US in schooling		
0:16:40	R	12	How is it different -here and in schools in Mexico?				
0:16:44	S	13	It's much quieter here because.				

Time	Speaker	Line	Utterance	InVivo	Emotion	Concept	Personal notes
	S	14	Here you have much more freedom. They're stricter in Mexico, and at the same time, I know they get you through your assignments very quickly. There in Mexico, they teach you everything and you understand, but they give you a lot of homework. They smother you with homework so you can do it. (alone)	smother	overwhelmed	freedom in US schools; stricter in Mexico	AJ notes the academic stress in MX several times in terms of amount of work and surprise tests
0:17:08	S	15	To excel - that work would be like that of an adult - as if you were two people. There's a lot of pressure on me from both parents and teachers, and also from other things that make it different: here in the United States they give you food, they give you a car, they give you school supplies.	excel; pressure; here they give you	MX-stress - academic and from other things (life needs)	US - needs met	Aj notes several times the way "wrap around" needs are met better in the US school/society
	S	16	And Mexico, no, in Mexico, to go to school				
	S	17	If it is possible to walk, you walk. You return by yourself. You bring your food from home, and if you don't have money?	by yourself			
	S	18	And if you eat well, you can buy hot food every day.				
0:17:38	S	19	In Mexico if they say tomorrow you need this, you have to figure out a way to get it or you will be in trouble.	figure it out	MX - stress- life needs	MX- needs not met	
	S	20	Here they give you a computer, a laptop, a phone and in Mexico it is not allowed.	here they give you			
0:18:17	R	21	Thank you. It seems to me like they're looking for a mountain of homework. What's learning like? Can you tell me how it is for the students? The teacher talks and you listen and write, or you guys work in groups, how?				
0:18:49	S	22	It's different if you continue after elementary school. When you are little, they still give you support, but when you're already in high school like.	support		younger grades are better supported in Mexico	AJ recognizes the difference at different ages; she came to US in high school

Time	Speaker	Line	Utterance	InVivo	Emotion	Concept	Personal notes
	S	23	It's like the teacher is talking, talking, talking, talking and you have to pay attention and take notes because in the end they come to you with surprise tests.	surprise test	MX- stress-academic		
	S	24	Yes, yes, next week there will be exams on such a day, but they just tell you and at the end they tell you to hand in everything you wrote down during the whole year that they were teaching.	exams	MX- stress-academic		
0:19:31	S	25	For us, there's no classroom rotation, but rather who rotates. It's the teachers in those same classrooms, but who rotates? It's the teachers, and the students stay there until they leave.	teachers rotate		sameness	
0:19:52	R	26	Are you with the same students?				
0:19:58	S	27	Another thing is that when you finish your classes, you clean the furniture, you clean your table, and at the end of the year if you damage something, you pay for it.	clean/damage	MX- stress-life needs		
0:20:07	R	28	Very different from here.. So we focused here on this project and it's different that we do many projects where we work together, or rather in groups.				
	R	29	Do you like working in a Group like this or not? How does it work?	groups			
0:20:27	S	30	I'm still not quite getting used to it, because.				
	S	31	Personally, my mom never let me do work in groups, because in Mexico they are competitive, so we always had to do things alone because we competed for grades.	alone	MX- stress-academic	competition. alone	AJ influenced by her mom - in terms of school work also
	S	32	I also have a hard time working in a group here, because you don't have the same thoughts, you don't speak the same language, you don't get along, or you have	complications	frustration	US stress.- academic discomfort in groups	Groups could pull you down. when you are in a place that is already difficult to have needs met

Time	Speaker	Line	Utterance	InVivo	Emotion	Concept	Personal notes
			complications. It's like a huge clash, or, for example, you get frustrated, because he's not doing anything and you've done everything.				
	S	33	Personally, I wasn't allowed to be with a group around my work. Yes, we did have groups sometimes, but it was just that you chose who you wanted to be with. You chose like this - depending on who normally got together - the	not allowed to work in groups; choose groups		family steers choices	
	S	34	More, more, more hard-working, smarter people were because you could do a job quickly and deliver it on time. And you'd get used to it.				
0:21:50	R	35	Wow, very interesting and good information for me to know.				
	R	36	Do you have a different type of learning? So, how do you identify a problem and do research? I don't know what research is called (in Spanish)				
	R	37	Research (remembers the word) is like that and then we present it to the directors.				
0:22:11	S	38	For example, we didn't have the same setup as here. We had to do all of our homework at home for the next day. You didn't have time to do homework in school.	homework	MX- stress-academic	no time; busy with schoolwork	AJ - again - so much schoolwork outside of school
0:22:44	R	39	Yes, is there something you want to tell me that I haven't asked.				
0:22:50	S	40	No, the assignments didn't cover everything. In Mexico, they give you everything at once and cut us off for certain periods of time. That's why when I arrived here, I already understood everything they're teaching me.	already understood	confusion? frustration?		Sounds like a lot of self-learning/ responsibility
	S	41	And what happens is that.				

Time	Speaker	Line	Utterance	InVivo	Emotion	Concept	Personal notes
	S	42	Other learning methods come into play here. For example, if I developed certain methods, I would do the work with those methods, and the teachers (in the U.S,) didn't know what they were, or they did know what they were, but since they barely used them, they found them difficult. The methods for her seemed easier to me. I had to work on them because they seemed so elongated - since you quickly master them (in Mexico) super fast, fast, fast, and they don't want that..	methods.; elongated methods	confusion? frustration?	mismatch between US and MX (math) methods	AJ recognizes the different ways of solving math problems, specifically, that teachers in the US don't know or don't encourage.
	S	43	Or they will teach you as a team and summarize it.				
	S	44	Because sometimes they gave us equations that were all complete, and they taught us how to summarize them like this, to summarize, to work it out in your mind quickly. The teachers here want to see all of your work.	work quickly; in your mind	frustration	mismatch between US and MX (math) methods	The US methods seem tedious when you already know how to solve quickly in your head
	R	45	Ah, very interesting I imagine it is.				
0:24:11	R	46	Frustrating that you know so much. And also, due to the language you can't tell or explain the difference, huh?			mismatch	AJ is in a sheltered math class - meaning all students are ELs; the focus is on language AND math - thus the math may seem to move more slowly (too slowly?) Is the assumption of the US teacher that AJ does not know math?
	R	47	Thank you so much for your thoughts.				

Appendix B

Topics Emerging Across Student Interviews

Date	Data Type	Instances (coding for U.S., home country, stress/support in both academic and daily life)
3.4.25	Individual student interview – in Spanish	AJ: …as an immigrant you can excel. They **support** you with anything you need, **even giving** you jobs if you want to work, help, or belong to a community. All of that. (In Mexico) There's a lot of **pressure** on me from both parents and teachers, and also from other things that make it different: here in the United States, **they give you** food, they give you a car, they give you school supplies. …because i**n Mexico they are competitive**, so we always had to **do things alone** because we competed for grades.
3.4.25	Student focus group interview -males, in English	SY: There (home country) we have books or subjects like history, English, science and computer and also theory and language books. And then **we read from the books and they give us homework.** SY: If we have **a test practice**… First he reads the questions and I answer them and then I read the questions and he answers them. SY: One thing is different from Afghanistan to the United States… each class we have the owner, student - **they control the students** MH: (in home country) **No phone** like I see no phones.(more strict)
3.4.25	Student focus group interview -females, in English	HA: Here school is so **shorter** and so **good** and class is so **easy** than Turkey and the **teachers is so good kind.** HA: One semester(in home country) it has four **test** and the semester second is same for total is 8 tests we have but **so hard** ZY: It's Afghanistan- it **doesn't have lunch**. HA: Ohh (in the US) **it has a bus**. Good…

Appendix C

Frequency of Codes in Teacher Interview and Discussion

Code	Topic	FN_4.4.25 Teacher interview	FN_10.4.25 Consultant
		Instances of InVivo or related Concept or Emotion Coding	
thinking, light bulb, etc.	Reflective practices	5	2
messy/messiness	Letting learning happen	5	1
Micromanage, control	Not wanting to be rigid	5	1
let go/looser	Finding ways to let go	13	1
Japanese garden	Metaphor for pedagogy	4	
artist	Metaphor for pedagogy	1* more in full interview	
forest/lawn	Metaphor for pedagogy	9	
relationships w/colleagues	Time well invested	2	
I could spend time… getting to know students better	Efficacy of learning for students	4	2
old/new	Reflective practices	1	
grateful; you showed… I wouldn't have…	Appreciation for mentoring/coaching and reflection together	3	1

Appendix D

Field Note 10.4.24

Date: April 10, 2025	**Participants:** Classroom teacher, researcher, consultant for SchYPAR
Place: District main office, conference room	**Researcher:** Troyer
Time: 9:30-11:30 am (Focus 10:15-10:45 am)	**FN Type:** Reflective Log (after jottings)

Focus: This session was the site of a monthly meeting for the EL student team that is participating in the state level SchYPAR (School Based Youth Participatory Action Research) through the OSU Student Leadership Research Collaborative.

One of the advisors for the EL team is the classroom teacher (T1) in this study. Two of the students on the EL Team are in T1's class. Also present were the other EL team advisor (not involved in this discussion for field notes), the researcher (T2) and a consultant from the state SchYPAR Team (part of a federal grant with OSU and The Center for Urban Education at Cleveland State University).

T2 and the consultant took this opportunity to talk with T1 who is also participating in the state SchYPAR Project that meets monthly on Saturday mornings - the consultant's work and that of T1 overlap.

The group reflected on the recently completed action research cycle in T1's classroom.

Key: T1= classroom teacher; T2 = researcher; C= Consultant

Jottings	Researcher Reflections	Codes
T2 shares various artifacts on the computer (from the corpus T2 has organized) as the group talks through the project. C was not involved in the classroom work, but typically visits or at least discusses projects with the SchYPAR participants	As we spoke, T1 and T2 saw many ways/remembered ways they can improve the tools for next time. **Reflecting** with appropriate thinking partners is a helpful practice. C shared a river metaphor/drawing activity for reflection that she uses with principals – connects to both a better way to help students reflect on the activities, value the creativity of the work, and can be used in many reflection contexts.	Reflection (IV)
T1 -comments on the initial asset mapping activity (drawing the community helpers) - that students asked her why we were drawing - implying that it wasn't work or learning	This is one of a few instances in which T1 shared that students were noticing that the YPAR way of working was **different** from what they had done to date.	Different (IV) Why? (Concept)
T1 - comments that when she "painted herself into a corner" at any time during the cycle, T2 would say, "here's a hallway"	T1 had excellent **metaphors** for the shared work – and continuous **self-reflection** on the pedagogical learning- also many compliments for T2 – who is also the instructional coach/lead teacher in the school setting	Metaphors (IV) Reflection (IV) Appreciation (Emotion/concept)
T1 comments that her big takeaway was **"let it be messy"**	This is fully corroborated in the T1 interview – and was a point T1 had struggled with all year – feeling a need to micromanage but also not wanting to do so	messy (IV) Not micromanage (IV) Looser (emotion)
T1 comment on how the SchYPAR work helped her **get to know the students** so much better	The final comic strip and other artifacts- especially images- spurred this comment. Students who were seen as "behavior problems" earlier appear in images as comfortable and engaged.	Get to know students (IV) Relationships (emotion/concept)

Appendix E

Teacher Interview Transcript

Audio file Teacher interview 2.m4a
4.4.2025; 1:15-1:45pm; back of the classroom while students work on projects in groups
Key to transcript
R= Researcher
T= classroom teacher
Near the end of the day on Day 12 (final lessons) of a School Based Youth Participatory Action Research co-taught unit
20 high school students; 5 languages, early intermediate English levels; tied to ELA and ELP standards in argument and research

Time	Speaker	Line	Transcript
0:00:17	R	1	Thank you. OK. So we already talked a little bit about background, so I'm much more excited to dig into the idea of the metaphors that you're using for the learning that you've been experiencing and if they apply to the kids too with this.
0:00:35	T	2	This is a new insight, only an hour ago, so this is not fully formed, but what I was saying before, and then I'll tell you what I realized over lunch, but what I've seen before is, well I read something about different types or ways that teachers are creative.
0:01:07	T	3	because when we hear creative we think about the visual, but it can be an engineer type, but they're creating something, or someone who likes to tinker with existing systems.
0:01:19	T	4	Another type is the artist type that is comfortable with things being messy and learning being messy, teaching being messy.
0:01:34	T	5	That was a lightbulb moment for me because I realized that that's all holding me back or that can help me through the thinking that I can let go of that to me, or at least a pure clean cut and clear cut - clean and straightforward. Then it can allow for messiness in the classroom. Order can come from messiness. Yeah.
0:02:00	T	6	Then I was thinking about, well, maybe I'll have to get back to it. But I was thinking about the Japanese. Ohh just comparing it to Yeah, the forest and the manicured lawn. Yeah.so.

Time	Speaker	Line	Transcript
0:02:12	T	7	So a forest, if you put a forest next to make your lawn, you could say it's messy, but you could also say it's nature being allowed to do what it does, what it needs to do, and make your lawn. It is nature, but it's nature.
0:02:21	T	8	Right. It's been structured. So it's like, my friend was in a Japanese garden. They're made of nature, but they represent nature. They aren't nature. So I'm interested to see what they represent.
0:03:06	T	9	Away. So maybe it's possibly a middle ground because in the teaching setting, we're not just showing up in just letting anything. We're bringing some order. The order that we bring lends itself to natural expression.
0:03:27	T	10	Or a connection with our nature. And so we're not going as far as the landscape. Once you see that, it could even be made of plastic because it's so controlled that Japanese garden it represents.
0:03:52	R	11	It does. Yeah, that's fascinating. There. So there was a movement for a while about teachers and student-centered learning, right. And I think there was a misconception that that meant they just do whatever. Like there is a facilitator in the background. And one of my favorites
0:04:10	R	12	authors about this emphasizes that the teacher, like you, need an expert in the room and that there does have to be a goal and a guidance at the same time that there's still this interaction like that we've talked about in our classes on Freire that you've got to have this. You're both learning at the same time, but there does have to be an expert.
0:04:32	T	13	Right, right. Right, maybe you know. They say the stage on the stage of… The I can't remember the other one.
0:04:42	R	14	I forget the other ones, yeah.
0:04:44	T	15	The landscape lawn, maybe the Japanese Garden- guide on the side. We're allowing nature to be-- what we're doing is in line with nature, representing it, but it's also structured enough.
0:05:12	R	16	Yeah, that there is this model or goal, right? And in this case it's nature versus like a chemically manipulated, in my opinion, you know, terrible lawn.
0:05:25	R	17	So, OK, so then I'm wondering back to the artist idea. Part of my background is in art history too. And so thinking of - like you have to… is it better… do you need to
0:05:34	R	18	kind of master certain approaches and processes and ways of doing art before you become the Jackson Pollock and you're just throwing paint at the wall? Like, did he need to have a basis in accepted methods to be able to be free to do the other?
0:05:59	R	19	So I'm wondering how that compares to your teaching journey in particular.

Time	Speaker	Line	Transcript
0:06:04	T	20	That's fascinating to think about because what that makes me think about is that I didn't plan to become a teacher. I studied German, and I just wanted to live in Germany. And so I got a Fulbright to be an English teaching assistant.
	T	21	I'll figure out what to do in Germany. I don't know.
	T	22	And then, I started to think this is what I should be doing. I should be in school and be teaching.
	T	23	So while that helped with teaching… I got practical teaching experience before training. And so that has been really interesting. In some ways, I feel like I've said that this is gonna be a unique experience where I am just using my common sense and experience in the classroom and what worked and what didn't work. But then I went to Japan
	T	24	And I taught for two years in Japan with that. And then I went to get my masters. So it was cool.
0:07:29	T	25	I read all the theory behind everything and then I had all this experience in my mind about it. That's **why-** the source. That's why. Yeah. So then after that, I went back to Japan. So I had this 6 or seven years before my formal education.
0:08:15	T	26	So while I do think there is value in learning, learning the rules before you break them or before you change or explore, what comes to mind is I felt like in my program there were a lot of professors who said what do you guys think, and I really craved them to tell me.
0:08:47	T	27	Not so that I could just listen to them And just do whatever they say. But just so I had a strong foundation. And then from that foundation - that's what I wanted with my degree, and of course I got some of that, but I wanted more of it.
	T	28	Of that, I wanted more of it. And I think that informs how I teach, but I'm still.
0:09:12	T	29	And I think that informs how I teach, but I'm still making sense of what to do because of my experience. I think you really crave knowing what are the things that you have to do
	T	30	And then on top of the strong foundation can put creativity or you can you can…the rules are a little bit different, you have more flexibility in this situation.
0:09:31	T	31	This is the English for school. This is the English for last week. That's one thing I really love about and am fascinated by teaching students, English learners, English in an English speaking country. They are picking up so much and not coming in with textbook English, but that doesn't make sense to an English speaker.
0:10:07	R	32	Yeah, that I've had that experience too.

Time	Speaker	Line	Transcript
0:10:09	R	33	That you also knew it was a more controlled environment. You knew what the students had already learned in book 1 and book 2, whereas here Swiss cheese is the best metaphor I have for like, they're going to be holes and not. But you just don't know where those are going to be. Yeah.
0:10:28	T	34	And they are coming from all over the world. And even if they're coming from the same place, they can have a completely different experience. And in Japan, they also have very centralized education systems. So they have two different textbooks.
	T	35	And then you use this one or this one. And either way, they're very similar. So in the entire country of Japan, based on their generation and the location, I know exactly what English they know, what they struggle with. And also, yeah, what English is like for Japanese speakers to learn.
0:11:06	T	36	For us here, you have to leave more room for controlled chaos. You have 20 students and you have 20 different… (a student interrupts for a second)
0:11:22	R	37	So how do you think inserting this project or working in this way has… Has it shifted anything you've been doing so far this year, has it changed students' experience?
0:11:37	T	38	A few things come to mind. One is, well, like what we're talking about. And that's why I'm so grateful that you taught this with me, because I would not have the courage, or I wouldn't have, yeah, the trust in myself and in the process to try it and I think I would
0:12:07	T	39	So you showed me that thing. How it can proceed and then also even just today. So the students are all working independently, but they're sitting with their groups that they worked in. I was able to go sit down with several students and teach them what they needed to learn, and this is what people are talking about when they talk about that. So one student needs to learn how to use quotations. So we covered it. One student needed help, then she told me her story, so I helped her lay it out.
	T	40	And you're here. (to researcher- noting that there are two teachers in the classroom)
0:12:50	T	41	I was able to help individually, and I'm still uncomfortable. The old me - I really want everyone to be quiet and listen while I explain quotations as many times as necessary and keep practicing until everybody understands 100%.
0:13:11	T	42	The new developing me is the student with the quotations. Will he remember that more because I taught it in a practical situation? You needed it. I taught it. He used it.
	T	43	But then I'm uncomfortable.
0:13:27	R	44	Yeah
0:13:31	T	45	Oh yeah.

Time	Speaker	Line	Transcript
0:13:33	R	46	Yeah. No, that's very interesting. But it wouldn't have stuck perhaps with the student that needed just even the order of how the comic screen worked. I noticed that in a few kids whose language works the opposite way from English, that they used a different directionality, and you were - I noticed that that was the first thing I noticed when I walked in today. You were doing that.
	R	47	Without me here, you were sitting with a student individually and laughing and like that was just a great atmosphere.
013:48	T	48	Just a great atmosphere. Yeah. Yeah, I think that's a really good point. And I think that's because that isn't. That's because we did this and it's so. This is a Friday afternoon. We're over here talking and they're doing fine, even though we weren't.
0:14:23	T	49	I don't want to be so rigid
	T	50	And we're in a perfectly landscaped lawn and
	___	51	[interruption from student asking a question]
0:14:30	R	52	We talked about how you were working with kids before, right when I came in.
0:14:54	T	53	Yeah, we did those. They got used to working. Oh, allowing for a little bit of… I think they're not fully focused in attention, I mean, they're working a little bit.
0:15:13	T	54	It's like teaching me it's ok to loosen the reins.
	T	55	As an adult, I would be upset if I'm concentrating on a professional development session. I want to be able to talk to my colleagues.
	T	56	And even if it's off topic, you're building relationships so that when you're on topic…
	_____	57	[interruption from student asking a question]
0:16:03	R	58	So I'm recording again, would you see… I know we've talked about changes we've seen in the students.
	R	59	Would you see like action research as being a unique way to do it or are there- is it more of - that there's some kind of a structure and then figuring out how to work, how to be creative within that, that structure, that middle space that you talked about with the gardens because you mentioned the haiku and how? …
	R	60	To me, that seemed to kind of work in the same way that - just they're maybe on a shorter time scale than the action research. So the question is have you seen the kids' dispositions or approaches or thinking change? In either the action research or the haiku or these things you've tried lately that were kind of different.

Time	Speaker	Line	Transcript
0:16:52	T	61	I think it's the latter, I think action research is a type of activity that students can't do alone, but it has
	T	62	It falls under the umbrella of the Japanese garden approach, which we should trademark absolutely.
0:17:08	T	63	Because it, yeah, I think I hadn't even thought about it. That was like, WHOO, we did a poetry unit and we did the Action Research unit, and had a few days for students- there were many students who were absent for Eid. So we did haiku because it was a short, you know, three day unit. And then we were coming back to research to finish it up.
0:17:33	T	64	I was able to…
0:17:43	T	65	I was able to loosen my grip of control in that too, and that, and I think that came from the action research projects. But I think it is an example of the Japanese garden here
0:17:55	T	66	Here's the other thing: not having complete control over what exactly I have some students like explaining where they realize they can be creative with English. Changing the number of syllables going from I am to I'm, For example, and then. That's them playing with the language and manipulating the language in a way that it's really, you know, not a worksheet.
0:18:20	R	67	Right. You're going to practice conjunctions or whatever. Yeah, right.
0:18:24	T	68	But then that student's going to learn that more than another student who would learn honestly what a syllable is - how to count a syllable.
0:18:37	R	69	Is there anything you'd like to share that you didn't say?
0:18:41	T	70	Well, thank you for this interview because it was a really good way. I had a lot of things come together for me through your questions.
	T	71	And I'm going to be thinking about the Japanese garden.
0:18:45	R	72	It's a perfect metaphor.
0:18:50	T	73	My friend works full time in a Japanese garden and she loves it.
	T	74	Thank you.



Teresa Troyer is a doctoral student at Ohio State University specializing in language, education, and society. She is also a licensed K–12 teacher with 30 years of experience working with multilingual learners of English from elementary to university professors in local, national, and international contexts including China, Honduras, Indonesia, Turkey, and Slovakia. She is currently working full-time as the administrator for the English Learner Program in a large urban district, and she serves as a co-coordinator of Teachers Across Borders' hybrid professional learning courses with colleagues in Brazil and Colombia.



Sally Coons is an educator with 15 years of experience working with English learners in Germany, Japan, and the United States, ranging from kindergarten through the university level. She started her career as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in Germany and then taught English as a foreign language in Japan in elementary and middle schools and universities. Upon returning to the U.S., she coordinated the English-language program at Honda Research and Development before transitioning to U.S. public schools, where she currently teaches high school English learners in the Midwest.



Rosalinda Godínez is a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Urban Education at Cleveland State University, Ohio. Her research explores Participatory Action Research (PAR), community education, and decolonial feminist approaches to teacher learning. She collaborates with educators and students to design arts-based and land-based projects that connect critical inquiry with community transformation. Drawing from her experience as a bilingual educator and researcher, her work centers on students' voices, cultural knowledge, and creativity as catalysts for equity and school improvement.

Effective Literacy Instruction for English Learners with Learning Disabilities

Mireille Ukeye

Abstract

As the number of English learners with learning disabilities continues to grow in U.S. public schools, educators are tasked with finding effective ways to support both language and literacy development. This article presents an instructional approach designed to meet the unique needs of this student population by combining current research with practical, language-focused teaching strategies. The approach highlights key areas such as academic vocabulary, syntactic awareness, explicit spelling instruction, and culturally sustaining practices. It also offers guidance on assessment, progress monitoring, and implementation, with classroom tools and real-world examples to help educators apply these strategies in their everyday teaching.

Context

English learners now make up more than 10% of the student population in U.S. public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), and an increasing number are also identified with learning disabilities. These students face unique and layered challenges at the intersection of language acquisition and learning difficulties. Yet, too often, their instructional needs go unmet due to gaps in teacher preparation, a lack of linguistically responsive materials, and persistent misconceptions about how language development and disability interact (August et al., 2014; Lesaux et al., 2014).

In response, this article introduces a comprehensive, research-informed instructional approach designed specifically to support literacy development for English learners (ELs) with learning disabilities (LDs). This approach distinguishes between three interrelated but distinct systems of learning: oral language development, which includes vocabulary and syntax acquired through interaction; literacy development, which includes explicit instruction in decoding, word recognition, and spelling; and comprehension, which reflects the integration of language and reading processes once students have access to written text. Maintaining these distinctions ensures that instruction is aligned with the developmental needs of English learners with learning disabilities. This article therefore urges educators to move beyond a "one-size-fits-all" pedagogy to instead create inclusive, language-rich, and culturally affirming classrooms to support the complex needs of students with learning challenges.

Foundational Concepts: Language Development and Learning Disabilities

Oral language development and literacy development represent related but distinct systems that develop through different mechanisms. Oral language develops through meaningful interaction and exposure, while literacy development requires explicit and systematic instruction in skills such as decoding and word recognition. While academic language proficiency requires consistent, scaffolded, and explicit instruction over time, students with LDs may struggle with areas such as phonological processing, working memory, and processing speed, factors that make mastering academic language even more difficult (Graham & Santangelo, 2014). For English learners with learning disabilities, instruction must be designed with an understanding that language development and reading development follow separate but interconnected pathways, rather than a single integrated system.

An additive bilingual approach offers a powerful foundation by building on students' home language skills rather than replacing them. Research shows that cross-linguistic transfer, where knowledge of phonology, syntax, and morphology in one language supports the development of these skills in another, can enhance English literacy outcomes (Petersen & Gillam, 2015). Equally important is the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which not only affirms students' identities but also fosters engagement and motivation by validating their linguistic and cultural experiences (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Academic Vocabulary Development

Academic vocabulary plays a central role in helping students access grade-level texts and engage meaningfully in classroom discussions. For ELs with LDs, acquiring this vocabulary can be particularly challenging due to limited exposure, language gaps, and processing difficulties (Lesaux et al., 2014). As a result, instruction must be intentional, explicit, and embedded across the curriculum.

Effective vocabulary instruction begins before students encounter new terms in context. Pre-teaching words using visuals, real-life examples, and bilingual supports can help bridge understanding. Bilingual word walls, for instance, can display key terms alongside images and definitions in both English and students' home languages, supporting cross-linguistic connections (Colón-Muñiz et al., 2022). Embedding vocabulary instruction into content areas ensures multiple exposures to the same words, increasing the likelihood of retention. Activities like sentence-building games, drawing, and peer discussions also provide opportunities for active, meaningful engagement.

Interactive Strategies

Active engagement is equally essential. Sentence-building games, peer discussions, and drawing activities provide multiple modalities for learning new vocabulary. For example, in a sixth-grade science class, Ms. Ortiz introduces terms like "habitat," "predator," and "adaptation" using bilingual flashcards and visuals. Students then draw representations and compose sentences in both languages, reinforcing meaning while affirming bilingual identities.

Table 1 outlines a variety of strategies for teaching academic vocabulary, including pre-teaching with visuals and using bilingual supports. Each strategy is paired with a brief explanation and classroom example to support implementation.

Table 1

Academic Vocabulary Instructional Strategies for ELs with LDs

Strategy	**Example**
Pre-teaching Vocabulary: Introducing target words with visuals and context	Using pictures for "habitat," "predator"
Bilingual Word Walls: Displaying words with definitions in English and L1	Posting vocabulary in both English and Spanish
Embedding Vocabulary Across Subjects: Integrating words in multiple content areas	Using "adaptation" in science and social studies
Interactive Reinforcement: Engaging students in games and sentence construction	Vocabulary charades or sentence-building activities

Syntactic Awareness Instruction

While syntactic knowledge can support comprehension of written text, its primary instructional role is in developing language structure rather than teaching reading acquisition. For English learners with learning disabilities, mastering syntax can be particularly challenging. Limited exposure to academic English, combined with cognitive difficulties such as reduced working memory capacity, can make it difficult for students to process and produce grammatically complex language (Goodrich et al., 2021; Tong et al., 2011, 2013).

Explicit and Scaffolded Instruction

To support syntactic development, instruction must be explicit, visual, and highly scaffolded. One effective approach involves guiding students through both sentence construction and deconstruction. Sentence-combining activities, for instance, help students build more complex sentences from simpler ones, promoting a deeper understanding of grammar and structure (Hall et al., 2017). Visual tools like color-coded sentence strips can make abstract grammatical concepts more concrete by highlighting sentence parts such as subjects, verbs, and modifiers in different colors. Teachers can also model syntactic thinking using think-aloud strategies, helping students grasp how sentences are formed and why structure matters. Sentence frames offer additional support by providing students with partially completed sentences that they can build upon as they gain confidence.

For example, in Mr. Singh's classroom, these strategies come to life. He uses colored sentence strips to visually distinguish between different sentence parts, such as the subject (green), verb (blue), and modifiers (orange). Students start with a simple sentence like "The dog ran" and expand it into more complex forms, such as "The large brown dog ran quickly through the field." This kind of structured practice helps students build syntactic knowledge while also working on their expressive language.

Table 2 illustrates a sample color-coded sentence strip used in the classroom. By breaking down sentences into visually distinct parts, students can better understand and manipulate sentence structure, supporting both comprehension and written expression.

Table 2

Color-Coded Sentence Strip Example

Subject (Blue)	**Verb (Green)**	**Object (Yellow)**	**Modifier (Orange)**
The dog	ran	through the field	quickly

Scaffolded Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension reflects the interaction between language comprehension and word recognition processes once students are able to access printed text. For English learners with learning disabilities, challenges in comprehension often emerge when language demands and word-level reading skills are not yet fully developed. Language skills such as vocabulary and syntax support comprehension, while decoding and word recognition are prerequisite skills that allow students to access written text fluently. Comprehension difficulties are compounded by dense texts, abstract concepts, and unfamiliar academic language. For ELs with LDs, these challenges are intensified by cognitive barriers such as limited working memory, reduced processing speed, and gaps in background knowledge. Effective literacy instruction must therefore include deliberate, scaffolded strategies that explicitly teach students how to extract, synthesize, and apply meaning from text.

Once students have developed sufficient word recognition skills, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies can support their ability to construct meaning from text. These strategies support meaning-making during reading but do not replace the need for explicit instruction in decoding and word recognition skills. For instance, during a science lesson on ecosystems, a teacher might model a think-aloud to identify the main idea and supporting details, then guide students through the same process with scaffolded prompts. Sentence stems and graphic organizers help ELs articulate comprehension while practicing syntactic structures simultaneously, reinforcing multiple pillars of this instructional approach.

Graphic organizers support comprehension by making relationships among ideas more visible during instruction and discussion. These tools are most effective when used to support understanding of language and content rather than as standalone literacy instruction. Story maps, concept webs, compare-and-contrast charts, and cause-and-effect diagrams are particularly effective for ELs with LDs. For example, in a sixth-grade lesson on early civilizations, students could complete a cause-and-effect chart linking historical events and outcomes, while integrating key vocabulary in English and their home language. Visual supports align with the emphasis on explicit vocabulary instruction, syntactic awareness, and culturally sustaining practices by providing multiple entry points for understanding.

Reciprocal Teaching and Peer Interaction

Reciprocal teaching can be used as a scaffolded discussion strategy to support comprehension of text once students have access to word-level reading, while also strengthening oral language development through structured academic dialogue. Students take turns leading discussions to summarize, clarify, question, and predict text content. Teachers scaffold participation using sentence frames, visual prompts, and bilingual supports. For instance, a sentence frame such as "The main idea of this paragraph is ——— because ———" helps students express comprehension in grammatically accurate forms while reinforcing academic vocabulary. Peer interaction also encourages collaboration, confidence, and authentic language use, aligning with culturally sustaining principles by validating diverse perspectives.

Integration of Background Knowledge and Culturally Relevant Content

Connecting texts to students' prior knowledge and cultural experiences supports comprehension and motivation. ELs with LDs often bring rich linguistic and experiential knowledge in their home languages, which can scaffold understanding of academic content. Teachers can pre-teach key concepts in students' home languages, select texts reflecting students' lived experiences, or engage students in discussions linking content to family and community knowledge. For example, when reading a story about migration, students may draw on their personal or familial experiences to make inferences, identify main ideas, and connect vocabulary to meaningful contexts. This reinforces multiple pillars of this approach, including culturally sustaining pedagogy and academic vocabulary development.

Cumulative Practice and Feedback

Comprehension skills require repeated, cumulative practice with ongoing feedback. Teachers should design activities that gradually increase in complexity, allowing students to practice summarizing paragraphs, sections, and entire texts. Feedback should be targeted and constructive, focusing on vocabulary use, syntactic accuracy, and idea integration. Digital tools with text-to-speech, highlighting, and interactive questioning can further scaffold comprehension, ensuring reading remains accessible, engaging, and meaningful for ELs with LDs.

Explicit Spelling Instruction

Spelling is more than just memorizing words. Spelling reflects students' knowledge of orthographic patterns and supports written expression through accurate encoding of words. For English learners with learning disabilities, spelling can be especially challenging due to difficulties with phonological processing, limited vocabulary exposure, and inconsistent orthographic knowledge (Graham & Santangelo, 2014). To address these needs, spelling instruction must be explicit, systematic, and multisensory.

Effective instruction begins with a strong focus on letter-sound relationships and common phonics patterns. As students progress, instruction should also incorporate morphological elements, such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes, to build deeper word knowledge and improve spelling flexibility (Huang et al., 2022). Multisensory techniques are particularly helpful for ELs with LDs, as they activate multiple learning

pathways. For example, students may trace letters while saying the sounds aloud or use magnetic tiles to physically construct words. These activities strengthen students' understanding of how written words are structured through phonological and orthographic patterns. Spelling instruction supports written language development and is distinct from the instruction of decoding skills used in early reading acquisition.

Embedding spelling instruction within reading and writing tasks allows students to apply their skills in meaningful contexts, reinforcing learning and improving transfer. For example, in Ms. Nguyen's resource room, students use color-coded syllable tiles to build words, helping them visualize syllable boundaries and morphemes. They also engage in word-sorting tasks that group words by spelling patterns, which strengthens both orthographic and phonological awareness. These instructional strategies not only help with spelling accuracy but also support broader literacy growth.

Table 3 presents a range of multisensory spelling activities, each designed to reinforce phonics, spelling patterns, and morphological understanding in ways that are both engaging and effective for diverse learners.

Table 3

Multisensory Spelling Activities for ELs with LDs

Activity	**Description**	**Benefit**
Letter Tracing	Students trace letters while saying sounds	Reinforces phoneme-grapheme connections
Magnetic Letter Tiles	Students construct words with movable letters	Supports kinesthetic and visual learning
Word Sorting	Students categorize words by spelling patterns	Enhances orthographic awareness and pattern recognition
Morphological Analysis	Students break words into prefixes, roots, and suffixes	Builds decoding skills and vocabulary knowledge

Scaffolded Writing Approaches

Writing provides students with opportunities to apply language knowledge, including vocabulary and syntax, while also developing transcription skills such as spelling and sentence construction. However, writing is a complex task, demanding simultaneous coordination of linguistic knowledge, orthographic awareness, and executive functioning skills. Effective writing instruction must therefore be structured, explicit, and responsive to students' cognitive and linguistic needs, directly building on the pillars of vocabulary, syntax, spelling, and culturally sustaining practices. Structured scaffolding supports ELs with LDs in producing coherent, organized writing. Instruction should guide students through manageable

steps, including prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Prewriting strategies, such as storyboards, graphic organizers, or concept maps, help students plan their ideas visually before generating text. For example, in a fourth-grade social studies unit, students might use a cause-and-effect chart to plan a paragraph explaining the effects of colonization. Visual planning tools reduce cognitive load and support students' application of syntax, vocabulary, and morphological knowledge.

Sentence frames and model texts provide important support for students who struggle with generating complex sentences independently. Frames such as "I believe —— because ——" guide students in structuring arguments while practicing syntax and academic vocabulary. Multisensory methods support transcription skills in writing by engaging visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities during the encoding of language into print. Writing instruction involves both language formulation skills and transcription skills, which develop through different instructional processes.

Revision instruction is critical for developing higher-level writing skills. Teachers can model editing for clarity, coherence, grammar, and vocabulary use, gradually shifting responsibility to students. Peer review, guided by clear rubrics and sentence stems, reinforces language conventions, metacognition, and collaborative learning. For instance, students might exchange narratives and provide feedback on sentence variety, vocabulary use, and logical connections. Regular revision practices help students refine writing while integrating comprehension, vocabulary, and syntactic skills.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is rooted in the belief that students' cultural and linguistic identities should not only be acknowledged but actively affirmed and sustained in the classroom (Paris & Alim, 2017). This approach is especially vital for English learners with learning disabilities, who often face marginalization on both linguistic and academic fronts. When students see their identities reflected in their learning environments, they are more likely to feel valued, engaged, and empowered (California Department of Education, 2022).

Implementing culturally sustaining practices involves intentionally selecting texts and materials that reflect students' backgrounds, lived experiences, and languages. It also includes creating space for multilingual expression through activities like writing, storytelling, and presentations. Encouraging students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires helps build self-efficacy and fosters a sense of belonging (Santibañez & Gándara, 2018). Beyond the classroom, strong family engagement through bilingual communication, culturally relevant events, and home-school partnerships reinforces the value of students' home languages and strengthens their support networks.

For example, in Ms. Rivera's bilingual literature unit, students explore folktales from their home cultures alongside English-language versions. They create bilingual, illustrated storybooks that celebrate their heritage; the storybooks are later shared with families during a showcase event. These experiences not only support literacy development but also affirm students' cultural identities and promote meaningful community involvement.

Assessment and Progress Monitoring

Assessing ELs with LDs requires a nuanced approach that accounts for both linguistic diversity and cognitive profiles. Traditional assessment methods often fail to capture the full range of students' abilities, leading to inaccurate conclusions and missed opportunities for support (Petersen & Gillam, 2015). To ensure assessments are fair, informative, and instructionally useful, educators must use a variety of tools and strategies tailored to students' unique needs.

Dynamic assessment offers one such avenue by focusing on students' capacity to learn when provided with scaffolding, rather than relying solely on static test scores. This method reveals how students respond to feedback and instruction, offering insight into their learning potential (DeLuca et al., 2017). Curriculum-based measures (CBMs) provide regular data on academic progress and can be adapted through linguistic supports such as simplified directions, visual aids, or extended time. Qualitative data, including observational notes, language samples, and student self-reflections, add valuable context to inform instruction and track growth over time.

For example, in Ms. Chavez's classroom, assessment is integrated into instruction. She uses adapted reading passages designed to assess word recognition as, for English learners, fluency measures should be interpreted as indicators of word recognition efficiency rather than general language proficiency. In addition, she holds brief one-on-one conferences where students explain their strategies and reflect on their learning. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data allows her to tailor small-group instruction based on students' evolving needs.

Table 4 summarizes assessment tools and strategies appropriate for ELs with LDs, along with recommended accommodations that improve accessibility, accuracy, and instructional relevance.

Table 4

Assessment Tools and Accommodations for ELs with LDs

Assessment	**Accommodations**
Dynamic Assessment: Measures learning potential through mediated tasks	Scaffolding and prompting during tasks
Curriculum-Based Measures: Frequent monitoring of academic skills	Simplified instructions and extra time
Language Samples: Analysis of spontaneous oral or written language	Collect samples in both English and L1
Observational Notes: Teacher-recorded observations of student behavior	Use checklists and anecdotal records

Classroom Implementation and Instructional Tools

Putting this approach into practice requires thoughtful planning, collaboration, and the use of accessible tools that address the diverse needs of English learners with learning disabilities. One key component is strong collaboration between general and special education teachers, often through co-teaching models that allow for differentiated instruction and the sharing of expertise. Structured classroom routines and learning centers provide consistency and create a supportive learning environment where students know what to expect and how to engage. A range of instructional tools can be used to support literacy development in meaningful, student-centered ways. Interactive bilingual word walls and anchor charts serve as ongoing references to reinforce language and content. Personal dictionaries encourage independence, while sentence stems help students construct more complex written responses. Reading guides and graphic organizers support comprehension by breaking down tasks and promoting strategy use.

In Ms. Delgado's fourth-grade classroom, co-teaching is paired with instructional centers that are organized to target language development and literacy skills separately, including vocabulary development activities, syntax-focused tasks, and structured writing practice. This separation ensures that language development activities are not conflated with foundational literacy instruction, such as decoding and spelling. Students rotate through the centers, receiving targeted support based on their individual needs. This structure not only allows for differentiated instruction but also keeps students engaged and actively involved in their learning.

Building Teacher Capacity and Professional Collaboration

Successful literacy instruction for English learners with learning disabilities depends not only on research-based approaches but also on the knowledge, skills, and collaboration of educators. Teachers often face significant challenges in addressing the intersecting needs of ELs with LDs, including gaps in preservice preparation, limited experience with linguistically responsive strategies, and uncertainty about adapting instruction for diverse learners (August et al., 2014). Building teacher capacity through professional learning and collaborative practices is therefore essential to ensure the pillars of effective instruction are consistently implemented.

Targeted Professional Development

Professional development for teachers should integrate evidence-based strategies for supporting both language development and learning disabilities. Workshops can focus on explicit instruction in academic vocabulary, syntactic awareness, and multisensory spelling, while also modeling culturally sustaining practices. Hands-on training using real classroom materials, including bilingual word walls, sentence frames, and graphic organizers, allows teachers to practice strategies in context. Ongoing coaching and mentoring reinforce these skills, helping teachers adapt approaches to meet the specific needs of their students. Collaboration between general education, special education, and bilingual specialists is critical. Co-teaching models, professional learning communities, and joint lesson planning create opportunities

for shared expertise and collective problem-solving. In these models, teachers jointly analyze student data, design tiered instructional supports, and implement interventions aligned with the approach. Collaboration ensures that instructional practices are consistent, responsive, and informed by multiple perspectives, ultimately benefiting students' learning experiences.

Data-Informed Collaboration

Effective collaboration is strengthened by shared use of assessment data. Educators can collectively examine curriculum-based measures, dynamic assessment results, and observational data to identify patterns in student performance and adjust instruction accordingly. For example, teams might notice that several ELs with LDs are struggling with sentence complexity. Together, they can plan small-group syntax instruction, scaffolded writing exercises, and targeted vocabulary reinforcement across subjects. For example, in Ms. Torres's fourth-grade classroom, co-teaching occurs between the general education teacher and a special education teacher. Weekly planning meetings allow them to review student progress, refine interventions, and coordinate the use of bilingual resources. Professional development sessions introduce new strategies for syntactic instruction and explicit spelling, which teachers practice and later adapt to their students' learning profiles. This collaborative model ensures that all students receive consistent, evidence-based support while fostering teacher confidence and expertise.

Conclusion

English learners with learning disabilities thrive in classrooms that are structured, language-rich, and culturally responsive. The instructional approach presented in this article integrates current research and culturally sustaining pedagogy into essential pillars that guide educators in delivering equitable, effective literacy instruction. Supporting ELs with LDs is a collective responsibility. It requires all educators, regardless of role, to maintain high expectations, build inclusive learning environments, and implement practices that affirm students' identities and experiences. By applying the strategies outlined in this article, schools can create learning environments where all students have the opportunity to grow, succeed, and see themselves reflected in their education. Through intentional, collaborative efforts, we can ensure that literacy development for ELs with LDs is not only achievable but empowering, laying the groundwork for academic achievement and lifelong learning.

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