

# Attuning to Children's Layered Life-Making Through Relational Learning and Assessment

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## Abstract

Interweaving my thinking with childhood stories of schooling, familial narratives, and experiences as a teacher alongside children, this article makes visible how my pedagogical approaches and desires for children to experience belonging shape my intentional work to recraft marginalizing curricula and assessment practices. In sharing my learning, unlearning, and continued growth, I endeavor to prompt a rethinking of how we, pre-service teachers, fellow educators, and school leaders, support children's life-making and wellbeing on school landscapes and offer approaches for all children to be centered as knowledge holders.

## Introduction

I am a daughter, sister, friend, colleague, learner; a monolingual individual of French-English ancestry, raised in an average socio-economic household, primarily by one parent, living as both a sister and supplementary guardian. As a recent graduate from the University of Alberta's Master of Education program, I am unlearning and growing in the area of Indigenous pedagogies and relational curriculum. I am an inquiry, project, and place-loving facilitator of the curiosities of Grade 4 children situated within a large city on lands known through colonization as Western Canada. I am a passionate advocate for multimodal forms of assessment. These stories shape and create my identity.

I reside in an awe-filled world colored by the laughter of children. Children tell me it is a safe and inclusive place of wonder. It is both a gift and a choice to live in this world. I am honored to come alongside children in a place where I walk with colleagues committed to the mantra of *every child, every day*. In this place, inquiry is celebrated, alternative assessment is promoted, and discursive curricula abandoned and instead overlapped to promote connection and understanding. It is a choice as I disregard hierarchical structures of teaching and commit instead to a facilitatory role. As Connelly and Clandinin (1988) stress, stories move us forward, take us back and dance around within; it is in the inquiry, our conversations, with situations, and with other stories, that we can come to re-tell our stories and to relive them (as cited in Swanson, 2014). Stories of schooling permeate my thinking about what it means to learn, belong, grow, and share knowledge. My stories, both within and outside of school places are

fluid and ever changing as they move with me through diverse landscapes. To understand who I am in any narrative sense as an individual, an educator, I must understand the threads of my interwoven ... stories. The [familial], social, institutional and cultural narratives that shape my personal and professional landscapes influence who I am and how I teach. (Chung, 2009, p. 134)

School stories flood my consciousness every time I sit alongside a child. I wonder who they are. Where are they in the process of identifying themselves? What do they want me to know and what are they withholding? What brings them happiness and, most importantly, do they feel safe here? I am compelled to ensure their experience with school is dissimilar to what my brother and I endured. The more I share, freed from the conformative pressure of fitting both dominant student and teacher molds, the more I come to realize this is the story of many in a facilitatory role.

Together, let's (re)craft the educational narrative and make schools safer, more inclusive and representative places.

## Invisibilities and Identities

Desks, booklets, tests, confusion, silence. This was, and still is, the education of many.

My experience with schooling was one defined by otherisms. Education as I knew it was production-line schooling (RSA Animate, 2010) wherein differences were stamped, squished, and molded out. Although I became chameleon-like, doing my best to blend and assimilate, there was little emotional learning because of a lack of heartfelt understanding and personal connection (Morcom, 2017). Subjects were ruled in isolated houses, and assessment perpetuated insiders and outsiders according to who could perform. School was an unsafe place, an almost always threatening environment ruled by competition and comparison.

Children live storied lives. The complexities of their identities are sometimes made clear and other times hidden, interconnected with a multitude of experiences which may include mental and physical health, learning diversities and home situations. Some stories are not visible, at least not immediately. Over time, I have grown to listen for these fragmented stories, stories of trauma, hardship, stress, and negative self-images: *invisibilities*.

I think of the journeys and pathways I walk as a teacher, learner, and someone simply coming alongside others. I wonder alongside Chambers (1999) as to what counts as knowledge and how what it meant to do well, on a school landscape, was so dissimilar to what it means to learn. Lessard (2010) states learning is observing, walking with people, re-teaching important and powerful ways of life, and attuning to the layered stories of others. I am guided by stories of place and connection—walking, leading, and learning, hand-in-hand, stories involving the people we bring along, both physically and spiritually, and stories of teachers coming into our lives in many ways.

Today, all these years later, I come alongside children and work to disregard any previous labels. I choose to walk with them, not in front of them and inquire into their gifts and talents, their magic. As Lugones (1987)<sup>1</sup> asserts with loving perception, knowing others' *worlds* is part of knowing them, and knowing them is part of loving them. My goal is to come alongside with loving perception (Lugones) and to safely support children in their learning journeys. Each journey is unique as each child's identity-making is unique.

With a forward-looking lens, one focused on increased representation, I invite you to postulate and ideate on curriculum and assessment as these processes impact children, teachers, schools, and society. I hope that this rumination results in enlightenment, reinvigoration, and reimagination.

## Coming to This Place

Each school year I come alongside 24 or more students. I am privileged to have walked with children ranging in age from 5 to 12. I care about each child and their becoming long into the future. This has drawn me toward Greene's (1993) sense of the importance of children experiencing school as holding many opportunities

to [tell] the stories of what they are seeking, what they know and might not yet know, exchanging stories with others ... at once bringing something into being that is in-between ... [It] is not a matter of determining the frames ... learners must fit ... it is a question of releasing potential learners to order their lived experiences in divergent ways, to give them narrative form, to give them voice. (p. 218-219)



Fig. 1: Hallway stories.<sup>2</sup> Sitting in the hallway, coming alongside in a way that felt safe to the child in that moment, sharing a story while he hugged the teddy bear that was lovingly embroidered with his name.

Over time and place, I have grown to understand that it is my responsibility to listen to what children say (Paley, 1986) and what they don't. My hope is that through this kind of listening, "the silencing that takes place in ... classrooms ... [will] be stopped, as ... [well as] the blurring over of differences" (Greene, 1993, p. 219).

There are particular children whose stories continue to linger and hold pieces of my heart. I do not know their complexities in entirety; I probably never will. Although my understanding is fragmented, I have always felt we share a silent language. Wanting to be seen, to belong, while still being very unsure of who we are, as we did not fit within the grand narrative of *school*.

I see their faces.

*Theo. I recall the movement. The rocking back and forth, teaching with him on my lap. One hand on his back, trying to sooth him while the other operated the document camera. This was the only time he seemed somewhat comfortable in his own skin.*

*Although I never taught him, I would feel the tug on my jacket, and the simultaneous tug on my heart, every time Ethan, my friend, saw me. Ethan was in the process of learning how to navigate complex emotions due to a turbulent start to his childhood. I am thankful he became a part of our school family because in a more traditional setting, he likely would not have been granted the time necessary for regulation.*

*I would hear Morgan's guttural laugh outside at recess and want to cry as this was one of the few times he felt free enough to let go and just be.*

*And more recently, Teddy. A child whom we had no background information on. No records at all. This friend required consistent, minute-by-minute support since his mid-year arrival. His world was dominated by anger.*

*His parents insisted on extra love in exchange for the child's cooperation. If only they knew me.*

*The child, himself, always negotiated. A few short minutes without aggression in exchange for a reward.*

*Upon reflection, there was significant internal frustration on my part in questioning how a child with no documented complexities could require so much when others, those he came alongside, survived unthinkable experiences and quite literally had the scars to prove it. I worried knowing I was often ignoring and abandoning the other 23 children who also needed me.*

*Slowly, with help from loving school leaders, pieces of the visual that was Teddy started to form a whole.*

*This child never had what so many of the children in younger grades at our loving school-home were exposed to. He never learned to play and never learned different communicative tools. He desperately wanted these foundational experiences.*

*He was a much younger child trapped in a 10-year-old's body.*

These narratives are an interconnected web of lived experiences that have led us to this place together. And so I wonder what story was crafted for you, a loved one, or a child you know on a school landscape? Was it one of empowerment, drive for social justice, an understanding of self and varied ways to learn and showcase knowledge? Or was it a story of competition, singular definitions of success, and *othering*? What if you could not learn simply by listening? Were you or a child in your life encapsulated as a struggling learner, incapable, perhaps an at-risk student, someone in need of an assessment and a restrictive label that predicated your educational worth? Or were you simply a *learner* in need of multimodal forms of teaching and assessment?

## Curricula

Through my own experiences, I knew education as transmission of knowledge was inapplicable and ineffectual because it lacked connection. As Greene (2013) asserts,

it [is] ... increasingly indefensible to structure knowledge monologically. We can no longer set aside the ideas of vantage point, dialogue, conversation. We cannot forget the "heteroglossia" Mikhail Bakhtin has pointed to: the existence of many voices, some contesting, some cohering, all demanding and deserving attention. (p. 212)

Curriculum has the power to shape, define, and derail the lives of children. When it is a singular narrative of success, as ruled by the dominion of factual knowledge, curriculum can imprison students. It not only defines them as other when they do not simply *get it*, but it takes away their being, their stories and experiences, and their unique insights and curiosities. Single stories of success, like these, perpetuate dangerous stories of incompleteness and require counter-stories to revise and challenge paradigms that allow for multi-layered identities (Eljaji, 2021).

A back-to-basics approach not only undermines professional authority and autonomy, but more worrisome, undermines possibilities for children. The function of education requires rethinking. As guided by Indigenous holistic teachings, education needs to address the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual (Morcom, 2017) needs of children. If we view this educational circle as a tire or wheel, and if we do not seek the broader functions of what we teach, we run the risk of flat tire education (Elder Bob Cardinal, personal communication, Summer 2021), education that does not move, and if the education is not moving, how can children possibly progress towards the ultimate goal of holistic learning?

In thinking of curriculum in a broader sense, I am inspired to think of it beyond the subjects that are included in a course of study in school (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Curriculum should involve all learning experiences; curriculum should not simply be a blueprint of achieving prescribed objectives (Egan, 1978). If we look at curriculum progressively and inclusively, taking into account learning outside of the classroom, perhaps it is better defined as guidelines for understanding and not *what* is learned.

Tafoya (1995) speaks to the importance of stories as teachers:

Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen. (as cited in Styres, 2010, p. 11–12)

Curriculum is often single-storied, when really it is far more complex and nonlinear. Curricular guidelines

do not smack of an intention to standardize in either the spirit or specifics of the document or in the way it is framed or phrased. For that, I am grateful. Yet, gratitude gives way to reticence if the unitarian spirit of seemingly transtheory/pedagogy/approaches (*everything is equal?*) causes us into a complacency or euphoria that won't lead us to further wrangling about principles and purposes. (Vinz, 1997, p. 138)

Our understanding and engagement needs to move, shift, shape, transform, and connect; curriculum is a verb, not a noun (C. Fabia, personal communication, July 21, 2021). It is more than outcomes, objectives to be completed and demonstrated. Curriculum is a course of life (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). It is fluid and interactive and can be lovingly supported through conversation, songs, movement, creations, stories, photos, artifacts, intergenerational teachings, and inquiries into lives. Curriculum is a connection to experience, people, and places and it lives beyond the pages of the program of studies.

I believe in interlapping teachings (Whelan & Huber, 1999, as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), interwoven work that defragments curriculum houses. My hope for the future of curriculum is an embodiment of concept-based teaching and learning, wherein the holistic wellbeing of all children is not only valued but prioritized. In de-emphasizing fact-based acquisition of knowledge and curriculum as a race (York, n.d.), we make schools increasingly safe spaces for all students to engage in mistake-making as necessary to the learning process.

If we shift curricular engagement from learning to understanding, we change the social organization and language of school. Objectives become more than knowledge, “they ... involve modes of thinking, or critical interpretations, emotional reactions, interests” (Tyler, 2017, p. 80). It is, as Noddings (2017) asserts,

not the subjects offered that make a curriculum ... but how those subjects are taught, how they connect to the personal interests and talents of the students who study them, and how skillfully they are laid out against the whole continuum of human experience. (p. 203)

I am reminded of what curriculum-making can be and can do. Curriculum-making can inspire joy, inquiry, wellness, and connection.

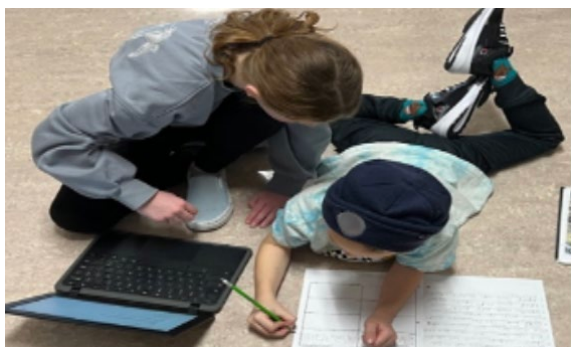


Fig. 2: Learning alongside a sibling. Learning is not limited to the four walls of a classroom; it takes place anywhere, even on the floor of the hallway.



Fig. 3: Posing at a Share Fair. Students across grade levels embrace in support of inquiry projects that derived from a week-long field experience.

Curriculum can

provoke persons to reach past themselves and to become. We want to see [children] in their multiplicity linking arms, becoming recognized. We want them in their ongoing quests for what it means to be human, to be free to move. We want them—and we want to enable them—to exist. (Greene, 1993, p. 220)



Fig. 4: Math cookies.  
Making multiplication, division and the grouping of objects more tangible and delicious by baking cookies.



Fig. 5: Indoor gardening.  
Little Green Thumbs vegetables grown in our classroom.



Fig. 6: Vermicomposting.  
Waste in our world is not simply a topic of study, it is an action plan for environmental consciousness.

Curriculum-making has the potential to awaken children to not only fight indifference and depersonalization (Greene, 1993) but allow them to craft their own narrative, telling the stories of who they are as learners and to be supported in their journey to discovery.



Fig. 7: Inquiry in action. A crane-truck designed and created by students.



Fig. 8: Outdoor learning adventures. Time spent outdoors, reading, sketch-noting and engaging in sit-spot observations.

## Inquiry

Education is continually reshaped through inquiry into lives. I avoid hierarchical practices of standing at the front of the room and sitting at a desk. I work to provide multi-entry access to education through differentiation so all children feel they can safely engage in learning. From here, children lead the way; my original plan fades and a richer, more complex tapestry of knowledge, knowing, and doing is co-composed. We pause, shift, revisit, reshape, and sometimes stop. When children have particular inquiries, we honor them and make space for them to wonder further.

Elder Bob Cardinal reminds us, look to the child, they will lead the way (B. Cardinal, personal communication, July 7, 2021).

We walk over these little yellow bumps every time we are about to utilize light rail transit, however, let's pause and ruminate. Do we know the name of these tactile blocks? Do we know their story?



Fig. 9: An inquiry-driven project. Tenji Blocks, as created by a child.

These Japanese braille-like blocks were created by Seiichi Tenji to support an unsighted friend. A 6-year-old taught me this. This learning was presented to myself and other adults in the community as part of an inquiry project that 72 Grade 1 children engaged with. It was one of many inquiry-based, community-driven, extended field experiences I was fortunate to be a part of. Children's potential, as evidenced, is not limited by age, diagnoses, or learning type. Children co-create their learning experience, they define learning and knowledge themselves.

The teachings of children, as some of our most profound educators (Minde, 2021), cannot be underestimated or diminished. Unfortunately, as Sleeter and Stillman (2017) argue,

although ... documents occasionally suggest use of project- and literature-based teaching, the prescriptiveness of the standards, limited availability of instructional time, and adoption of a mandatory scripted ... program steers teachers towards a back-to-basics curriculum. In the top-down curriculum-making structure ... teachers and students have little recognized power. (p. 292)

This is evidenced with the new curriculum. As former Premier Jason Kenney shared, this curriculum "represents ... a shift away from the failure of so-called inquiry" (Kanygin & Marks, 2021, para. 6). Yet, contrary to this statement, the primary image on the Government of Alberta's website that depicts the new curricular mandates is of children learning outdoors with sketchbooks in hand. The constant contradiction of educational priorities, an encouragement of diversity and inclusion coupled with overarching curricula and assessment tools that reinforce singular notions of success, is frustrating for educators and discouraging for children. It is educational puppetry.



## Assessment

*What does it mean to showcase knowledge?*

*What does it mean to succeed?*

*Why is success defined in singularity?*

*As I reflect upon past experiences with assessment,*

*I recall a dominion of paper and pencil,*

*Disconnected practices of schooling,*

*Isolated subject houses.*

*One way to know and one way to present knowledge.*

*Disconnection continued as learning at school and home varied.*

*At home, learning was experiential, a sensory wonder of manipulation, conversation and visual engagement, and learning occurred through teaching in my role as both a secondary parent and sibling.*

*In school, learning was isolated to auditory proficiency, the ability to quickly hear, internalize and regurgitate information.*

*But is this knowing?*

*Moving through conformative school environments and not finding a sense of belonging, was the catalyst for wanting to become a teacher.*

*"Take chances, make mistakes, get messy" (Book Riot, n.d.). Where was this teacher?!*

Assessment requires a revolution. How can we differentiate instruction and assessment at the classroom level, actively support diversity but not use differentiated processes and more inclusive views of success to rectify the educational inequality associated with standardized assessments? If we are questioning fixed and standardized curricula as negatively impacting children, we must similarly challenge assessment practices that perpetuate a one-size-fits-all-model.

We require educational practice that moves away from teaching-to-the-test and instead need practice embedded in relationality. The ability to learn and demonstrate knowledge cannot be solely determined from tests. Our system requires an educational rethinking, one where children's ability to formulate their own goals, work cooperatively, serve the community, cultivate personal talents, and engage in their own assessment is both valued and prioritized (Eisner, 2017).

In engaging with multiple modes of assessment, in questioning high-stakes tests, and in arguing for differentiated standardized examinations, we allow more children to be seen, heard, and valued, we co-create inclusive systems of education, and we make school and all learning environments increasingly safe spaces to discover oneself as a learner. As Couture and Cheng (2000) assert, we reconstruct the singular narrative of assessment that only paints one picture of the school system and student ability.

Traditional, Western forms of assessment are a *performance*, a powerful identity-shaping tool. At the classroom level, I have subsequently reshaped what it is, with how it is engaged, and what is conveyed through it. Similar to the shift I described above, from curriculum to curriculum-making, I have also moved from assessment to assessment-making. It is as Cardinal et al. (2023) describe, “a holistic process shaped by desires to sustain and grow a child’s, youth’s, or adult learner’s ongoing educative/healthy life-making within, between, across family, community, and schooling places” (p. 1). I am in relation with assessment as *pimosayta*,<sup>3</sup> coming alongside and learning to walk together, and *pimatisiwin*,<sup>4</sup> walking in a good way (Cardinal et al., 2019). I honor voice and choice in curriculum-making and assessment-making, nurturing every child with the hope of releasing limitless possibility. This freeing from one-size-fits-all assessment constraints, however, is an ongoing professional tension, as provincially mandated evaluations continue to jeopardize definitions of both child and teacher success.

Assessment, like teachers and learners, comes in many ways. We shift from monolithic assessment, and instead engage with multimodal assessment when we use a combination of observations, videos, anecdotal notes, self and peer feedback, projects, portfolios, and kitchen table conferences,<sup>5</sup> which I describe in more detail below. In sitting alongside children, individually and in small groups, in the classroom, around the school and outside on the land next to a nearby creek, I come to know them as people making their identities, their lives and together we share secret learning stories.<sup>6</sup> A significant part of our assessment-making story is providing feedback. I continually edit and revise students’ written work. This is something children have come to expect. They repeatedly hand me unfinished drafts in search of guidance and revisions. They are authors and I, and occasionally their peers, are their editors. Draft. Edit. Converse. Repeat. This written engagement, like our assessment practices, is cyclical; it is moving, shifting, growing.

Projects in our class take many forms. Sometimes, they are guided by a theme or topic of study, such as simple machines. Students plan, design, and execute their creations, but they choose how to represent their form. They are architects. They have the guidelines, but are free to design it in their own vision. Other times, projects are guided by experience, such as a community walk or field visit.



Fig. 10: Inquiry school representations. Grade 1 projects following a week-long inquiry experience

Students work either individually or in small groups, research something of interest, make a visual representation, and showcase it in a manner of their choosing, in a way that gives them autonomy. For example, presentations can include videos, slideshows, speeches, pamphlets, poetry, or plaques.

Although we have used digital portfolios for many years, physical ones are something new. At the onset of the year, we researched the term, what they could mean, and their use outside of classroom spaces. We then, very simply, labeled hanging folders and co-constructed expectations. Together we determined they would be places to gather learning artifacts, pieces of writing, artwork, notes, feedback, small items, etc. What was most interesting about this collective determination was a question of being “done.” This led to an important examination of product vs. process, which helped further our co-construction and led us to the decision that items would arrive in multiple forms, some added by children and others by facilitators. We revisited our portfolios at celebrations of learning but have yet to unpack them in their entirety and examine where we were as compared to now. I look forward to this visual and tactile learning annal.

Finally, our favorite type of assessment comes in the form of kitchen-table conferences. A few years ago I dragged my childhood kitchen table out of my mother’s garage. Caked in dust and dirt, I worked to remove the layers so I could once again see the table we gathered at all of my childhood. On one side of the table there is a hidden drawer. Inside I found a slew of objects, broken crayons, a times-table pencil case, little scribbled notes; a time capsule of bits and pieces of my life living alongside my mother and brother. This table now resides in our classroom. Like it once was, it is home to science experiments, family discussions, conflict resolution, baking, drawing, and visiting. It is here where we come together and work through complex curriculum-making over and over again, using varied manipulatives, until we can find an access point and begin to make sense of our understandings. Sometimes I take notes.

Other times, I am simply present, a learner along with children. It is at this table where I feel we are the most uninhibited, free-to-learn versions of ourselves.



Fig. 11: Kitchen-table conferences. Students use playdough and manipulatives to visualize multiplication and division as a grouping of objects prior to making “math cookies.”

My intent in sharing these multimodal assessment processes is to illuminate the numerous possibilities that exist beyond pencil and paper tests. I hope it prompts an un-knowing (Vinz, 1997) of assessment forms and purposes. I hope, as Vinz suggests, that you can look beyond what is clear and what is known with relation to assessment, as you are invited to see more, see differently.

### A Forward-Looking Story

Schools are places that should not *school* or view children’s unique ways of knowing and doing as alternative. They can no longer be a place of belonging solely for the educationally athletic, the elite. Instead, school landscapes are places where learning is honored in multiplicity and lovingly supported through the interweaving of natural curiosities with curricular guidelines. They are places where assessment is centered around helping children come to know themselves as learners, and more holistically, as humans alongside “All Our Relations” (see Cardinal et al, 2019).

I have the agency to reshape assessment practices and evoke change within a school culture envisioned through relational pedagogy and with leaders who support risk-taking. They trust the deep knowing that comes from my living alongside children, families, and colleagues. This is both a gift and a privilege that has supported my movement away from traditional engagement with curricula and assessment to ways

that honor children's varied emotional, social, physical, and academic needs. This shift in engagement began in our classroom and is having a reverberating effect both within our school and across the division. I stand with loving and encouraging professors who have now become friends as we come alongside professionals at all division levels, I, II, III and IV, to examine assessment possibilities. It is across these safe spaces of conversation that assessment counter-stories (Eljaji, 2021) can be shared. We acknowledge the ever-present demand for standardization but, together, co-construct pathways that honor children's layered life making.

I hope this re-examination of curricula, inquiry, and assessment encourages continued growth, has a shaping influence, allows an increasing number of children to showcase their many gifts, and reinforces convictions in our roles as facilitators. Thank you for being a part of this change and creating increasingly safe spaces for all children.

## Notes

1. Traveling to others' worlds with an attitude of playfulness, moving beyond arrogant perception, acknowledging plurality of selves, allows you to know someone, as Lugones explains.
2. I have come alongside the children described and pictured in this article over many years, at more than one school. Children's identities have been protected through the use of pseudonyms in this reflection. Their faces have been blurred in addition to photographs cropped. Furthermore, their anonymity is honored as neither the school nor the division I work for are named.
3. My knowledge of *pimosayta* comes from Anishinaabe scholar Mary Young's work and was lovingly shared with me by Drs. Janice Huber and Trudy Cardinal while participating in the course Assessment as Pimosayta at the University of Alberta in the Winter of 2022.
4. My understanding of *pimatisiwin*, engaging in a good life, being well, being a good person, comes again from the learning experiences as part of Assessment as Pimosayta, thanks to Dr. Young's (2003) doctoral thesis, *Pimatisiwin: Walking in a Good Way—A Narrative Inquiry into Language as Identity*.
5. Kitchen-table conferences are where students and I sit alongside one another and engage in discussions to ensure comprehension, utilize differentiated manipulatives to make number-sense concepts more accessible, and plan and execute inquiry based projects. This table reinforces the statement on our wall: "This is our classroom family." In our class, and especially while sitting around this table, we disregard all comparative and competitive practices and instead come together in support of varied learning processes.
6. Secret learning stories are encapsulated views that individuals impose on themselves as a result of limited, rigid and/or marginalizing experiences with education, experiences that predicate negative views of self and ableness. These stories are rarely shared with peers and often are only discussed with a caring adult that children have known for an extended period of time.

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